

A Quest for Environmental Justice for Roma in Thessaloniki: The Case of the Tsairia Settlement

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Abstract

This article explores the complex relationship between environmental justice and antigypsyism, taking the Tsairia Romani settlement in Thessaloniki as its case. The author, a human rights lawyer, has represented the residents of Tsairia in their efforts to protect themselves from forced evictions, shedding light on the challenges faced by the Romani community due to their marginalised status rooted in antigypsyism. The Tsairia case is examined in detail, highlighting issues like limited access to essential services, unregulated waste disposal, and the use of collective criminality to justify forced evictions. The Tsairia case illustrates how antigypsyism perpetuates environmental injustices by using alleged environmental crimes as justification for coerced relocations. This is a unique case-study that lies at the crossroads of where environmental injustices are perpetrated under the guise of environmental protection. Furthermore, it highlights instances of institutional antigypsyism, in which it is claimed that Roma will not be harmed by evictions because they are nomadic. The article underscores the role of community-based advocacy and legal efforts that enable some families to endure in Tsairia. In summary, the Tsairia case exemplifies the intersection of antigypsyism and environmental injustice, trapping residents in a cycle of exclusion, marginalization, and poverty. It emphasises the exploitation of anti-Romani rhetoric for political gain, worsening environmental injustices and undermining the principles of democracy.

Keywords

- Antigypsyism
- Environmental justice
- Evictions
- Greece
- Roma

Introduction

In August 2019, the author led a delegation of international experts to Thessaloniki, Greece. The delegation's members were tasked with exchanging good practices and visiting Romani communities. Upon their arrival in the Tsairia settlement, the delegation encountered many distressed Romani residents. Known for their resilience in the face of adversity – and having endured over 30 years of dire living conditions – these residents, on this particular day, were overwhelmed with despair and faced the imminent loss of their homes and livelihoods.

A senior Romani woman's heartfelt plea, "Where are you? You have forgotten us!" succinctly epitomized a recurring pattern of initiatives by governmental and non-governmental entities marked by promises and subsequent disappointment. The residents expressed their immediate concern: the looming threat of eviction.

A new municipal mayor had attributed various illicit activities to the Romani community, even suggesting the construction of a wall to isolate them (Voria 2019a). Simultaneously, a community movement emerged in response to alleged environmental violations by Romani residents (Voria 2019b). The movement began innocently enough with an idea to protect the local area from environmental degradation due to an illegal factory salvaging metal; however, this initiative was later hijacked by far-right and extremist groups to collectively accuse Roma of environmental crimes, which then escalated into ugly Neo-Nazi rhetoric (Kouzinopoulos 2019a, 2019b).

Filčák's *Living Beyond the Pale* (2012) highlights an Eastern Slovak perspective which views Romani settlements as beyond normal legal and environmental standards, leading to environmental injustices. This raises questions about how environmental factors influence Roma during their settlement selection and how they respond to limited access to basic services such as water sources. In many cases, Romani communities are located in isolated rural settlements, on the outskirts of towns and villages, or in urban ghettos, and they receive neither regular nor irregular public environmental services as emphasized in a European Environmental Bureau report, *Pushed to the Wastelands*, which categorizes environmental racism into endangerment, isolation, and marginalization (Heidegger and Wiese 2020, 22). This article assesses their applicability to the Tsairia case.

Environmental Injustices and Roma Settlements in Greece

Romani communities in Greece face dire living conditions, segregation, and frequent forced evictions. Environmental injustices – like the well-documented case of Aspropyrgos in the run-up to the 2004 Athens Olympic Games (Global Atlas of Environmental Justice n.d.) – threaten the well-being of residents near landfill sites.

The Greek National Roma Contact Point identified 462 Roma living areas in Greece with varying infrastructure levels (types I, II, and III) (Tsiakalos 2023, 95–96).

These vary according to the typology of settlement:

- **Type I:** self-made huts or shacks lacking basic infrastructure facilities like electricity, tap water, and sewage systems, as well as access to public transport and waste disposal services. Usually, these are in isolated and/or environmentally hazardous areas, such as next to municipal or industrial waste dumps.
- **Type II:** mixed housing (shacks and prefabricated houses) with some basic infrastructure including electricity, tap water, and sewage systems, which are often used on a permanent basis, usually in the vicinity of a built-up area.
- **Type III:** often impoverished urban neighbourhoods with houses, apartments, and prefabricated houses.

Most Roma live in substandard housing with limited access to basic amenities. Geographic isolation and socio-spatial segregation worsen their marginalization. In 2021, Greece's Statistical Agency revealed significant deficits in infrastructure within Romani settlements, with various essentials lacking.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) recommends – in line with §§ 6 and 17 of ECRI's General Policy Recommendation No. 13 on combating antigypsyism and discrimination against Roma – that Greek authorities ensure that Roma are not evicted illegally without proper notice or opportunity for rehousing in decent accommodation and, in this context, enjoy effective access to adequate legal aid (ECRI 2022, 25).

Forceful evictions not only result in fines and criminal charges but also contribute to social exclusion and criminal records for its victims, significantly hindering employment prospects and societal integration. Beyond the direct act of eviction, whether via legal means or not, additional indirect methods are employed such as continuous prosecutions and fines for offenses like electricity theft, illegal occupation, and unauthorized construction. An absence of mechanisms to enforce social housing policies calibrated to the situation of Roma living in marginalized and excluded areas, together with not holding local authorities to account, breach the European Social Charter as seen in collective complaints against Greece (International Centre for the Legal Protection of Human Rights 2008; ERRC 2003).

Specifically, forced evictions without the provision of alternative accommodation, alongside discrimination in housing access, have prompted two collective complaints before the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) under the European Social Charter, as well as two decisions by the United Nations Human Rights Committee.^[1] These bodies concluded that the evictions of Roma violated established standards. Presently, the case study analysed in this paper is pending before the European Court for Human Rights and is led by the author of this article. The Court, after initially issuing an interim measure in 2023, later prolonged it indefinitely, suspending the eviction of Romani residents due to the municipality's insistence

1 *Georgopoulos and Others v. Greece*, Communication No. 1799/2008, views adopted on 29 July 2010; *Cultural Association of Greek Gypsies Originating in Halkida and Suburbs 'I Elpida' and Mr. Stylianos Kalamiotis v. Greece*, Communication No. 2242/2013, views adopted on 3 November 2016.

on eviction without providing alternative accommodation. This ruling is exceptionally rare, since interim measures are typically designed to address matters for a limited and short period (Tsiakalos 2023, 96–97). Additionally, according to the ECSR, Greece violates Article 31 of the revised Charter by failing to provide adequate and permanent housing for the Romani population. The government has not addressed adequately the severe shortage of permanent dwellings, forcing many Roma to live in degraded camps lacking essential services like electricity, sanitation, and water. Additionally, temporary camp sites are scarce, and forced evictions occur without suitable alternatives, further destabilizing communities. Although initiatives have been established, their implementation has been slow and ineffective, resulting in ongoing substandard living conditions. Reports from various organizations confirm that despite some governmental efforts, Roma's living standards remain unacceptable, highlighting Greece's non-compliance with the Charter's requirements to protect housing rights and ensure adequate living conditions (Conclusions 2019 – Greece – Article 31-1 2019/def/GRC/31/1/EN). Instead of Roma who live in these conditions being protected, tens of thousands of Romani residents face criminal liability nationwide due to their dire living conditions stemming from authorities' failure to provide suitable housing, public services, and utilities. In essence, environmental racism flips them from victims to alleged perpetrators.

The Tsairia Settlement

Nestled alongside the Thermaic Gulf, the informal settlement of Tsairia is situated near Thessaloniki's airport and rests under the jurisdiction of the municipalities of Thermaikos and Thermi. Despite its isolation from the urban fabric, the Romani community has called Tsairia its home for over three decades. According to the 2015 Operational Action Plan for Roma Social Inclusion of the Central Macedonia Region, the Tsairia settlement lies near city limits yet is disconnected from its urban infrastructure. The land parcels housing the huts and shacks are owned by the University of Macedonia and originally were designated for expansion, a plan that has since been abandoned by the university, with efforts now underway to return the space to municipal ownership. Additionally, the area has been earmarked for sale by the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund S.A. Romani communities have inhabited this area for nearly 30 years. Despite ongoing efforts to find a durable resolution to the conflict, the housing issue remains unresolved. This impermanence has led to frequent changes in the population and the temporary nature of housing construction. Roma selected this location for settlement according to their accounts. Transportation to and from the settlement is primarily by car, public transport, or on foot.

It is essential to note that Romani residents have consistently expressed their willingness to relocate to better living conditions closer to the city. However, forced evictions, without assurances of alternative accommodation and support, could worsen the situation for the remaining 30 families.

According to Kuletz (1998), when development projects emerge in central urban areas, Romani communities often face displacement due to rising property values and pressure from developers. This process disrupts their social networks and access to essential services, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization. This is illustrated clearly in the context of the Tsairia settlement.

This issue is linked to the New Special Spatial Plan for Thessaloniki's coast, which aims to revitalize the coastal region of Thermaikos and develop it into a key marine recreation zone for Thessaloniki. A study indicates that the planned development activities focus on the Tsairia settlement area, necessitating the relocation of its Romani residents (Kouskouni 2020). Additionally, Tsairia is strategically located at the centre of an ongoing development plan for a neighbouring technology park, as reported by local news sources (*Metrosport* 2019). The park's environmental impact assessment reinforces the notion that the removal and relocation of the Romani community is an inherent and necessary component of this development initiative (Eurotec 2021). As the study notes:

Within the Direct Impact Zone, no conflicts over land use are found, since most of it remains unstructured and unused, while no nuisance or pollution facilities are found. However, an arbitrary [G]ypsy camp in the centre of the Alexander Innovation Zone could be perceived as 'unwanted use', not so much because of the arbitrary settlement (given that the surrounding area consists of wasteland and farmland), but because of frequent delinquency and environmental pollution (uncontrolled burning of vehicles and tires, among others, the odours and smoke of which are a nuisance to neighbouring residential areas of P.E., and the uncontrolled dumping of construction waste, rubble, and so on); this has created conditions that exacerbate social pressures and conflicts, with the final recipient of the local community's complaints being the municipality of Thermaikos and the police. Therefore, in the context of a more general consideration and targeting of this Special Urban Plan, the removal/relocation of the said [G]ypsy population to another location and the consolidation of their current position is considered self-evident (Author's own translation).

Tsairia lacks essential infrastructure like sewage and water supply networks. Residents once pumped water from a source located 200 meters away, but it was sealed during the pandemic according to Romani residents. This forced residents to carry water in containers, leading to fines for curfew violations during a strict Covid-19 quarantine and lockdown. Additionally, no waste bins are present and no waste is collected, posing a public health risk as confirmed by the regional government (Ministry of Digital Governance 2015, 83) and a 2020 County Court ruling (Parallaxi n.d.).^[2]

In 2019, the settlement's access road has worsened, hampering regular vehicle movement and exacerbating flooding. Sadly, a child's tragic death occurred in 2020 when they fell from a truck (*News247* 2022). Despite persistent requests for road repairs, no action has been taken.

While most children attend school, their education is greatly affected by their living conditions. The absence of a school bus service forces children to walk long distances. A video that was produced within the framework of the ENVIROM Network, developed by the Dendropotamos Roma Women's Association, and funded by a grant of general support from the Open Society Foundations, together with the UNICEF Office in Greece, demonstrates these struggles (UNICEF Greece 2023).

² The objection of the residents of the Romani settlement in Tchsairia of Peria was accepted. Any eviction without being accompanied by a relocation measure is illegal.



Figure 1. Substandard housing at Tsairia, Thessaloniki, Greece by Georgios Tsiakalos, 22 September 2022

Environmental injustice in Tsairia is compounded by the continuous illegal dumping of solid waste near the Romani settlement. This area serves as an unregulated disposal site for construction waste and discarded appliances, often originating from non-Romani individuals and even companies (BestCity 2023).

This location also serves as an unauthorized site for salvaging metals and other materials, damaging the local ecosystem and multiplying the vulnerabilities of Romani residents. Importantly, there is no evidence implicating Romani residents in these environmental violations (Stefanidou 2023).^[3] Moreover, Romani residents claimed that they had caught outsiders setting fires near the settlement, apparently in an effort to cast blame on Roma (Thermis News 2019). Nevertheless, residents are blamed collectively, fostering antigypsyism that justifies and enforces their forced eviction.

3 As the article notes: "On 23 September 2019, an eight-member committee of the 'Citizens' Movement' knocks on the door of the Prosecutor for Prosecution and Environment and files a criminal complaint, co-signed by 551 citizens and accompanied by 2,000 signatures of protesting citizens. This complaint was archived on 11 April 2022, due to unknown perpetrators."

As mentioned, a citizens' movement against environmental crimes with a strong social media presence played a pivotal role in the decision to evict the remaining residents (Stefanidou 2023). Their intention was a good start, but far-right and extremist elements infiltrated the initiative, triggering extreme anti-Romani sentiment and even incitements to violence.

Forced Evictions: Legal Aspects and Community Advocacy

Forced evictions and the legal battles surrounding them have been central to the experiences of Romani residents of Tsairia. These evictions serve as a stark example of the interplay between antigypsyism and environmental injustice.

In September 2019, many make-shift homes were destroyed (*Makedonia* 2019). On 25 September 2019, the mayor of Thermaikos posted on social media: "With all the objective difficulties we faced, we managed to remove the thorn from our area, and I see all of you helping for the final good result, I thank you all. We have received an environmental, health, and humanitarian 'bomb.'^[4] The mayor claimed in his post that 205 out of 210 shacks were removed; this, however, was immediately rebutted by the remaining Romani residents, who claimed to be more than 30 families.

The municipality of Thermaikos issued a protocol of administrative expulsion in October 2019, without ensuring the provision of alternative accommodation, despite the fact that the settlement is recognized officially by the Greek National Roma Contact Point as a Type I settlement requiring relocation and other measures. A range of legal challenges, both at the national and international level, were initiated against this decision by many remaining residents who are represented by the author (Stefanidou 2023).



Figure 2. The access road to Tsairia by Georgios Tsiakalos, autumn 2019

⁴ Georgios Tsamaslis, Facebook, 25 September 2019, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2715295108521815&id=100001240577265&ref=embed_post.

Residents faced multiple charges such as electricity theft, land occupation, and non-permitted building, leading to hefty fines. According to residents, these charges are aimed at creating an indirect eviction and were initiated approximately at the same time as the evictions of 2019 – and continued even during the pandemic. The author has been defending many residents in the courts but providing *pro bono* representation for all is not feasible.

Legal Challenges



Figure 3. Illegal waste at Thessaloniki, Greece by Georgios Tsiakalos, 1 October 2022

Tsairia residents, assisted by legal counsel, challenged the eviction decree. It is pertinent to note that the decision was not disseminated to all residents, and some individuals named therein had moved on. Despite these inherent complexities, a majority of the remaining residents came together to navigate a demanding legal proceeding.

The legal recourse undertaken rested upon the infringement of provisions within the European Convention on Human Rights, with a specific emphasis on Articles 2, 3, 8, and 14. These violations

were rooted in the adverse impact of the forced evictions, compromising their right to life, especially in the context of pandemic-induced risks, encroaching upon their right to private and family life – as spelled out similarly in the *Yordanova and others v. Bulgaria* case (European Court of Human Rights 2012) – and the prevention of discrimination based on their Romani origin.

The opposition to the administrative protocol was accompanied by an injunction to immediately suspend its execution, which was granted. Subsequently, on 10 March 2020, the County Court of Thessaloniki annulled the eviction order.

The Court underscored the necessity to secure alternative accommodation before effecting eviction, thereby safeguarding the well-being of the community and stopping a vicious cycle. This decision was grounded in the doctrine on the abuse of rights, as no instances of adversarial actions against Tsairia residents had been launched during their decades-long habitation, thereby casting doubt on such claims at that juncture.

On 7 February 2022, the Appellate Court reversed the prior decision, affirming the legality of the administrative eviction protocol. This ruling placed significance on a comprehensive list of alleged

infractions encompassing the entire settlement compiled by the police. It included a range of offenses attributed to Roma, such as burning plastic, disturbing the peace, itinerant trade, and traffic violations during the sale of their goods. Furthermore, with a simple assumption that all Roma are nomadic in nature, the ruling presumed that Romani residents would not suffer harm from their forced displacement. It should be noted that some of the plaintiffs tried to relocate to another municipality far from the settlement, only to face serious opposition from any new neighbours. As a Romani resident who made efforts to relocate attests, non-Romani parents will not send their children to school where Romani children attend (*Thermis News* 2019). Local elected officials in this municipality attest to residents' strong opposition to Roma settling in their neighbourhoods (*GR Times* 2019).

Immediately after notice of the appellate decision, on 8 February, the author agreed to represent the applicants and made a Rule 39 request for interim measures before the European Court of Human Rights. The European Court of Human Rights initially granted an interim measure, which was later extended multiple times. On 17 March 2022, the Court decided, in the absence of sufficient official assurances regarding alternative housing for the applicants and their minor children, to prolong the interim measure. This measure instructs Greece to refrain from evicting the applicants until further notice, effectively for an indefinite period. This decision has been hailed as a significant precedent for future cases involving forced evictions of marginalized communities, particularly Roma. As of the date of this document, an eviction has not been carried out.

Current Developments

Despite the European Court of Human Rights' prohibition against evicting the applicants, no effort has been made to relocate them to a better site. Nonetheless, the development of the technology park progresses; it will be built in the area where the applicants currently reside and has received both a Spatial Building Plan and funding from the Recovery and Resilience Fund (Karagiannis 2024). As mentioned in a recent meeting with developers, the mayors of Thermaikos and Thermi, the Hellenic Police, and the Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family, preliminary roadwork restoration will be carried out to ensure that heavy vehicles can use the road before starting the project. Simultaneously, the clearing of the green areas will proceed gradually. However, finding a solution to relocate the Roma community remains challenging, as it requires significant time and the allocation of suitable land. The same article by Karagiannis mentions the position of the president of the development company of the technology park, who acknowledged that: "It is indeed a problem as they are right next door, but I think that as the work progresses they will also understand that they will have to leave from there" (Eliades 2024).

It must be noted that a shelter for stray animals that also was in the area is being relocated (Proiou 2024). During the latter part of 2024 and into February 2025, residents reported a heavy and daily police presence in the entrance of the settlement, along with numerous prosecutions and arrests for electricity theft and other violations. Even when they attempted to restore service to their only malfunctioning water faucet, they were arrested. Residents believe these incidents represent yet another indirect attempt to evict them. The residents are preparing a complaint before the Greek Ombudsman.

Conclusion

This case study highlights the intersection between environmental injustice and antigypsyism. Romani residents of Tsairia grapple with abysmal living conditions, inadequate access to basic services, and the looming threat of forced eviction. The alleged lack of infrastructure has been used as a pretext for eviction, obfuscating the role of antigypsyism in perpetuating these injustices.

The rhetoric of collective criminality, a clear manifestation of antigypsyism, influences local elections where candidates often are judged on their willingness to evict Roma. This not only fuels antigypsyism but also undermines Greek democracy.

At a critical moment when Tsairia's residents were smeared with accusations of environmental crimes and a campaign was initiated aiming at their eviction, the author was compelled to defend them, recognizing the transformative impact of interacting with vulnerable communities as part of a life-long dedication to the cause of justice. Tsairia's residents have demonstrated remarkable resilience, using community-based advocacy, legal avenues, and media attention to challenge their forced eviction. This case serves as a milestone in combating forced evictions of marginalized Roma communities in Greece, setting a precedent for future cases.

In conclusion, the Tsairia case highlights the urgent need to address environmental injustices and racism against Roma communities in Greece and Europe. It also calls for a restorative environmental justice model, which includes reversing fines and criminal penalties and investigating and addressing the health issues of those affected.

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