

Inclusive football says no to racism

“Roma Katerini” sports club shows us the way ... scoring goals against prejudice.



George Tsitiridis 22 February 2024, 18.04

Football has often been stigmatized by tragic events of fan violence that cost human lives. Such incidents have taken a heavy toll in Greece in recent years.

There have been 13 victims over the past 40 years, in additions to dozens of injuries, but there were three such tragedies over the course of just two years: The deaths of Alkis Kambanos, Michalis Katsouris and Giorgos Lyngeridis.

Greece also has a negative record over the past two years on the issues of police repression and anti-Roma sentiment. The deaths of three Roma in the space of two years – and in very similar circumstances – raise serious concerns.

All of these incidents served to spur on the realisation of a years-old idea. The creation of the “Roma Katerini” sports club

The Roma settlement of Pelekas is situated on the outskirts of the city and is the result of the relocation of some families from Tyrnavo, Karditsa and Sofades to the Prefecture of Pieria.



Today, forty years later, living conditions remain difficult. Hopes of their relocation to a new model settlement foundered, and the residents are struggling to survive.

The settlement's 373 Roma, including 100 women and 175 children, live in rough-built shelters. The area has no streets – no school, church, square, kindergarten, clinic, shop, café or anything else.

To this day, very few children attend school on a regular basis, and many of them fail to complete their schooling.

In recent years, major efforts have been mounted – with good results – by the Community Centre with a Roma branch and the Municipality of Katerini to stop children from dropping out of school or getting married too young. Despite the difficulties, all residents work in seasonal jobs and factories in the area, and there is zero delinquency. They may not have experienced systematic violence and racism, but their contact with non-Roma is minimal, and despite their exemplary behaviour, the other residents of Katerini view them with suspicion.

This closed and stifling ghetto is being broken open by the “Roma Katerini Sports Club,” founded only a few months ago.

It started with the local men's love for and desire to play football, and the idea was to combine it with the openness offered by matches with other teams. The Roma Katerini team is a sports club that draws its members and players from residents of the area. Its goal is to use sports to stop prejudice, racism and violence.



Its board of directors is made up of women, so that they, too, have an incentive to engage in the community and to break the stereotypical gender roles that doubly stigmatise Roma women.

Ioannis Karagounis is the community mediator and team manager. For years, he and his friends longed to create a football club, but lack of funding prevented them from achieving their goal. Funding from EEA Grants gave them the opportunity to

form their club. Through EEA Grants Greece, the football team receives a grant from the “Roma Inclusion and Empowerment” programme.



“Men from the settlement played for various amateur teams in the prefecture, in the local championship. We did not have problems with our teammates, but sometimes people in the stands might swear at us, shouting insults. When we were given the opportunity, we launched the plan to create our own team. It wasn’t easy; we faced a lot of problems.

Our goal was for children to be able to engage in sports and not be drawn into other things. People are united by sports. It is through sports that I have met most of my non-Roma friends. I thought that if we played for other teams, it would be an opportunity to get to know each other. Instead of going to play for other teams, we brought non-Roma to ours. The coach and some players are non-Roma and have no problem being with us.

For the time being, we have adult football, but in the future, we want to create children’s programmes in football, basketball and swimming.

The association is open and wants to help the community. Not everyone is interested in football. Some people like other sports. We also have to find ways for women to participate.”

The team already counts four wins in five matches in the third-tier championship of the Pieria Union of Sports Clubs, and it's looking forward to qualifying for the knock-out round to move up to the next tier.



Roma and non-Roma cheer peacefully at the games, although initially there were fears that the Roma might cause problems.

Those who believed that the Roma would not be able to adapt to the rules were proved wrong.

The goal is for the team to remain active after the championship ends and find the resources to compete in the next season.

The Club also plans to extend its activities into cultural and historical initiatives, with the additional mission of trying to keep children in school and facilitating integration of young people into the job market.