

RUSSIAN ROMA FACE EVICTION IN THE ARCTIC AS EVICTION “EPIDEMIC” SPREADS IN EUROPE

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Washington, DC: In another example of the crisis of Roma evictions which is sweeping Europe and threatening the continent’s cultural heritage, two of Russia’s most isolated and exposed vulnerable Roma communities are facing expulsion in the far west and north of the country.

The latest flashpoint involves the Roma community of Dorozhny, in the province of Kaliningrad, Western Russia, where scores of families are being evicted from land they were forced to settle on in 1956. One community leader recently returned from a trip to find that his house had been demolished.

The Dorozhny confrontation follows another dispute in the northern province of Archangel’sk where 16 Roma families are being evicted after being targeted in a vicious mayoral electoral race. The families were promised a final appeal in court, but the court has yet to meet and the Roma are being offered money to leave immediately.

Stephania Kulaeva, from the Northwest Center for the Social and Legal Protection of Roma, described the evictions as a “social catastrophe” and said that the Roma were “deeply dispirited.”

A 2002 census put the number of Roma in Russia at 183,000, although the real number is thought to be much higher. Russian Roma are isolated from the mainstream of the European human rights movement and dependent on advocates like the Center to publicize their case. But the threat they face bears many similarities with moves to expel Roma elsewhere in Europe, as the epidemic of evictions spreads.

The Dzeno Association in Prague, a partner of the Advocacy Project, has studied evictions in several European countries and found that the laws often exploit the vulnerability of Roma instead of trying to protect their unique culture. The laws are usually implemented by local governments, which are more susceptible to prejudice.

In the United Kingdom, Travelers and Gypsies are routinely refused planning permission to set up caravans on land they own, and then threatened with prosecuted under vagrancy laws if they move. In one case, which has been closely followed by the UK Association of Gypsy Women (another AP partner), the British High Court will shortly rule on the eviction of around 600 Travelers from the Dale Farm site in Essex County. Bailiffs destroyed four Traveler homes near the site on Tuesday.

England’s Gypsies and Travelers were vilified by right-wing politicians during the 2005 UK General Election, and the same has happened to the Roma in Archangel’sk. These Roma, who are from the Kelderash sub-group, arrived in 2004 from Volgograd and received permission to

settle on 1.5 hectares of land by the mayor, O. Nilov. They started to build, which was technically illegal although many Russians do it - the North-West Center has secured retroactive building permission for other Roma communities.

The families were then caught up in the electoral campaign between Nilov and his right-wing challenger, Aleksandr Donskoj, who accused Nilov of having taken bribes from the Roma and described the Roma as “beggars, swindlers, and thieves.” Donskoj’s charges helped him to win the election, after which he annulled the rental agreement and offered the Roma the equivalent of \$100,000 to leave. This has since been reduced to \$10,000. The local court has yet to meet to hear a final appeal.

The residents of the second threatened community, Dorozhny, also have a strong claim to their land, which they have occupied since 1956. In 2000, many of the families received permission to privatize their land. The government even offered to fund a social reconstruction, and the Roma invested their own money to develop a plan.

According to Ms. Kulaeva the mood changed, and in 2005 the Governor of Kaliningrad “declared war” on the Dorozhny Roma, accusing them of criminality and drug-peddling. The police found no evidence of either, but the demolitions have already begun. One elderly woman, Arlauskenia, who is bringing up 7 grandchildren, including orphans, was in hospital when she was told her house would be demolished.

This intimidation is being accompanied by subtle administrative measures. According to Ms. Kulaeva, Roma children are not being registered with their families and Roma families which change their passports are being refused stamps to prove their registration. “Hundreds of people have suddenly become officially homeless,” she said.

Meanwhile, European Roma advocates are developing a united front on evictions. The European Roma and Travelers Forum (ERTF) issued a strong protest at its first meeting in Strasbourg in January. The International Roma Women’s Network (IRWN), an AP partner, has also lobbied its members to take up the Russian case. The Dzeno Association, in Prague, plans to take up the issue before the new United Nations human rights council.

- Contact [Stephania Kulaeva](#).
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- Read a [2004 report](#) on the Roma of Russia by the Center and the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH).