

Roma people are targeted particularly harshly with forced evictions. This trend, which has risen in many EU countries and persisted throughout the covid-19 pandemic in which housing is the first line of defense, remains at the heart of the fight for the European Roma Rights Centre.

FORCED EVICTIONS OF ROMA: “EUROPE’S SILENT SCANDAL”



By **Bernard Rorke**, Advocacy & Policy Manager, European Roma Rights Centre

The [forced eviction of five Romani families](#) in the Hungarian town of Nyíregyháza on the 6th of October, marked a definitive end to the moratorium on evictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. The evictions, which left a total of 17 people homeless, were challenged by dozens of protestors, and condemned by the Vice-president of the local Roma minority self-government, László Glonczy, who criticized the municipality for its failure to engage in constructive dialogue on debt repayment. He described putting families with young children out on the streets during a pandemic as 'outrageous'.

At the European Roma Rights Centre, we consider forced evictions, which flout the law and target racialized minorities and other vulnerable people, to be 'outrageous' at any given time, but especially repugnant amid this pandemic. As [Leilani Farha, the UN Special Rapporteur](#) on the right to adequate housing put it: "In the face of this pandemic, being evicted from your home is a potential death sentence". The rapporteur declared that the right to adequate housing is not subject to derogation¹ in times of emergency. Limitations to this right are permissible "solely for the purpose of promoting the general welfare in a democratic society." In Hungary, it is unclear how forced evictions of Roma could conceivably serve the purpose of promoting general welfare.

Fighting forced evictions of Roma has long been one of ERRC's priorities and it remains one of the most intractable areas of our work. From Italy and France to Macedonia and Ukraine, we have taken local authorities and landlords to court; campaigned alongside local rights groups to protest and prevent coercive evictions – often carried out in the depths of winter and in defiance of international law and constitutional obligations; and, we have often sought, and sometimes obtained, interim measures to halt impending evictions of the very young and very old, heavily pregnant, ill and disabled persons, to prevent them ending up on the streets.

Nils Muižnieks former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, described Roma evictions as 'Europe's silent scandal'. He dismissed the wrong-headed notion that there is something inevitable about poverty among Roma, and described the appalling housing conditions as the most visible result of discrimination and social exclusion:

Roma are regularly forced to live in segregated settlements. Lacking basic infrastructure, they are victims of repeated forced evictions, and face much discrimination in attempting to access social housing or rent accommodation in the private market. With access to education, health care, and other social services – not to mention employment opportunities – often dependent on the possession of an official address, the lack of proper housing only reinforces Roma marginalisation.





Discrimination in the rental sector has forced some **100,000 Roma into **4,000** substandard hostels and dormitories**

The [EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020](#) called on Member States to draw up national integration strategies to prioritize access to education, employment, healthcare, and housing for Roma. By the 2020 end-date, the verdict from [civil society](#), a range of expert opinions, and the European Commission itself, was that in terms of implementation and actually making a difference to the lives of Roma, those national strategies were, by and large, a dismal failure.

Housing is the least successful policy area and forced evictions and demolitions continued apace, with many Roma 'relocated' to remote, sometimes toxic sites, with no access to basic services. Such actions serve to banish Roma, [to uproot and displace communities even further out of sight and out of mind](#).

The recent Communication from the European Commission on the new [Roma framework up to 2030](#), blandly notes that "the housing situation remains difficult," and aims to reduce the gap in housing deprivation by one third, cut overcrowding by half, and ensure that at least 95% of Roma have access to clean water – all very commendable 'quantifiable headline targets' – but the Communication makes no mention of 'Europe's silent scandal' and nowhere calls on Member States to halt forced evictions of Roma.

EVICTION SNAPSHOT EUROPE 2020: CORRUPTION, CRUELTY AND 'CLEANSING'

In 2020 Europe, thousands of Roma continue to live in squalid conditions in segregated camps and emergency shelters, in slum neighbourhoods and irregular settlements, under constant fear of eviction, harried and harassed, without any security of tenure and no prospect whatsoever of social integration. Worse still, evictions often serve to 'cleanse' certain municipalities of their Romani inhabitants, banishing them to remote outskirts or containing them in segregated slums.

According to [the European Agency for Fundamental Rights \(FRA\)](#) the Czech Republic has the largest share of Roma (almost half) that

perceive themselves as threatened by evictions. Discrimination in the rental sector has forced some 100,000 Roma into 4,000 substandard hostels and dormitories, where they are charged up to three times the market value of an ordinary flat by slumlords. The [European Commission against Racism and Intolerance \(ECRI\)](#) stated:

Housing support is provided for tenants to pay exorbitant rents to the 'slumlords' and ECRI is astonished that the authorities are complicit in this corrupt and degrading practice, which is contributing further to the segregation of Roma, and calls for a halt to this practice.

Czech Roma are increasingly being evicted from developed urban areas to structurally disadvantaged regions and socially excluded localities. Frequent policy changes concerning subsidies for people living in hostels have made things even more precarious, by allowing local governments to curtail such benefits. [Legal provisions adopted in 2017](#) enabled municipalities to designate whole territorial areas as ineligible for certain forms of housing support (officially known as OOP but referred to informally as "benefit-free zones"). The explicit justification has been to combat exploitation of poor people, but in reality, municipalities that have instituted these bans see them as a way to rid their territories of the mostly Romani people who draw on such benefits. [As of November 2018](#), over 80 municipalities had implemented an OOP, or announced an intention to do so. Legal challenges were initiated, and joint complaints are currently pending in the Constitutional Court.

In neighbouring Slovakia, housing policy has long been characterized by mass forced evictions and the erection of walls separating Roma from non-Roma. Surveys have confirmed that increasing numbers

of Roma in Slovakia live in poor and segregated settlements in substandard housing, unprotected from environmental hazards that include toxic industrial waste, rubbish tips, seasonal flooding, and the intermingling of waste and drinking water.

According to the [Slovak Anti-Poverty Network](#) "housing and the protection of the right to housing is the weakest component of public policies". There is an acute shortage of affordable accommodation; just 2.7% of dwellings are publicly owned (EU average 18%). [Commissioner Nils Muižnieks](#) noted that partly as a result of lack of tenure, many Roma in Slovakia live with the threat of forced eviction and that although there are several state mechanisms allowing for the construction of flats for marginalised communities, housing interventions remain limited, with many municipalities reluctant to use existing resources to promote inclusion.

Between 2015 and 2020, the situation in Bulgaria worsened considerably. Evictions of Roma in 2015 were precipitated by violent anti-Roma protests orchestrated by nationalist groups and gangs of football ultras laying siege to Roma neighbourhoods. In response to such pressure, a number of local authorities followed up with forced evictions and house demolitions. Such actions prompted the [UN Committee against Racism and Discrimination](#) to issue a blunt rebuke to the Bulgarian authorities:

Stop the persistent practice of forcibly evicting and destroying Roma settlements without offering alternative housing or adequate compensation, and take measures to legalize existing settlements to the extent possible while facilitating access to basic services in these settlements.

This call has had little effect and has gone largely unheeded. In 2019, as more 'spontaneous' far right attacks on Roma neighbourhoods took place, Deputy Prime Minister Krasimir Karakachanov, head of the extremist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization party (IMRO), upped the tension by calling for harsh measures "because Gypsies in Bulgaria have become exceptionally insolent." This was followed by local authorities demolishing fifteen family dwellings as a form of collective punishment. Video footage of the violence in Gabrovo showed the mob attacking houses, throwing rocks through windows and demolishing chimneys, while bystanders cheered and applauded. Over recent years one clear pattern has emerged in Bulgaria: anti-Roma rhetoric, forced evictions, and attacks on Roma neighbourhoods coincide with electoral cycles.

Some sense of the gravity of the situation in Romania can be garnered from the [end-of-mission statement by Professor Philip Alston](#), United Nations Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights:

The structural problem in many places is that Roma lack security of tenure. Either they have no property title or rental agreement, or they live in 'formerly nationalized houses'. At any time, they can be evicted from their homes, with all of the attendant stress. All too often, evictions have taken place with little advance notice, have been carried out in an abusive fashion, result either in homelessness or relocation far away from jobs, schools, hospitals, and other facilities, and end up reinforcing residential segregation of a discriminatory nature.

In the European Union, despite inclusion frameworks and the Race Equality Directive, forced evictions of Roma without the provision of adequate housing alternatives continue unabated, causing untold trauma to their lives.

International standards clearly provide that a state's right to evict must be counterbalanced by its duty to provide adequate alternative housing, respecting people's dignity, and to provide those being evicted with an effective chance to seek judicial redress. The ECtHR established that forced evictions could amount to an infringement of the right to respect for the home and right to family life. In several other judgments, the court has underscored that Roma "require special protection" because of their specific disadvantages and vulnerability and that evictions should not result in homelessness.

In addition to this legally binding jurisprudence, European countries have committed to uphold other standards they themselves adopted, within the Council of Europe, the UN, the EU and the OSCE, many of which they transposed into domestic legislation.

Yet, this wealth of legal standards and international commitments add up to very little, and unnecessary coercive approaches continue to be the norm in too many places and far too often. In the European Union, despite inclusion frameworks and the Race Equality Directive, forced evictions of Roma without the provision of adequate housing alternatives continue unabated, causing untold trauma to their lives, displacing them, and deepening their exclusion from their localities and the wider society.

There is no room in a civilized society for such willful cruelty. The indifference of the majority to these forced evictions is a measure of the extent to which anti-Roma racism is embedded in the social, economic, and political structures of our societies. At the ERRC we continue the fight against this form of barbarism in the wider struggle for justice and equality for Roma.

ENDNOTE

- 1 Derogation: the suspension or suppression of a law under particular circumstances