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News Roundup: Snapshots from Around Europe

Romani Communities Under Threat of Forced Eviction in Bulgaria

On 16 May 2006, the vice-mayor of the Sofia City Council, Tsvetan Tsvetanov, announced that all 'illegal' Roma settlements would be 'liquidated' and gave the mayors of Sofia municipalities 20 days to draw up a list of such settlements, according to ERRC research. The announcement indicated that mayors should investigate ways to limit the 'setting up and enlargement of the Roma ghettos' within Sofia and that a Consultative Council, which had not yet been formed, would prepare a strategy for the development of the Roma community. However, no details were provided as to the content of the strategy and the announcement contained no guarantee that the human rights of Roma to protection from forced eviction would be upheld. Non-governmental organisations that are part of the Sofia Roma Public Council, such as Romani Baht Foundation, were reportedly not consulted about the announcement and no consultation had reportedly been carried out with Roma communities.

A similar announcement was made by the Sofia City Council in August 2005 and led to devastating consequences for some Roma communities. On 31 August 2005, at least 24 Romani homes in the Hristo Botev neighbourhood of Sofia were demolished and some 150 Roma lost their homes and were not provided with any resettlement. Forced evictions of Roma, including the destruction of housing, were threatened in the Sofia districts of Lyulin, Krasno selo, Vazrazhdane and Suhodol-3, Ilinden.

Two eviction threats in the district of Vazrazhdane in Sofia are of particular concern. First, numerous Roma families, comprising up to 1600 persons, living in the Serdika 2 neighbourhood were threatened with imminent forced eviction, to take place on 30 June 2006. Some of this community, known as Batalova vodenitza or NPZ Sredetz, were threatened with eviction in 2005 and took legal action to stop the eviction. However, on 21 June 2006, the Mayor of the Sub-Municipality of Vazrazhdane and a Deputy Mayor of Sofia declared that the eviction and demolition would proceed due to the ruling of the Supreme Administrative Court, which confirmed that the Mayor could proceed with the eviction. Notices were issued on 23 June 2006, giving the residents only seven days to leave. The community had reportedly lived on the land for almost a century. Although the Bulgarian media have reported that some socially vulnerable families are entitled to one-time support in the amount of BGN275 (approximately 130 EUR), this compensation is extremely inadequate to cover even the most urgent needs of the families who will be rendered homeless after the evictions, and might not even be provided to all of the affected families.

Second, on 26 June 2006, the Municipality issued eviction notices to the 16 families of another community also called Batalova vodenitza, which is in the district of Vazrazhdane. Although the community had resided on the land since 1926, the families were informed that Administrative acts were issued against them and they had 14 days to object. The acts and the objections were to be sent to the Regional Directorate on Control of Illegal Constructions who has the power to forbid the use of the buildings and cut off electricity and water supplies.

On 29 June, the ERRC and the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) appealed to Bulgarian President Mr Georgi Parvanov to undertake urgent action to stop the forced eviction of Roma families from Batalova vodenitza or NPZ Sredetz neighbourhood in the Vazrazhdane district of Sofia, planned for execution on 30 June 2006. On that day, the Government of Bulgaria, in a welcome intervention, suspended the demolition of Romani homes from Batalova vodenitza.

Later, on 12 July, the district government sent letters to sixteen Roma families living on Dobri Jelyazkov street, Sofia, requiring them to leave their homes within 10 days or the municipality would issue an order for their summary eviction, despite the fact that the communities had lived on the land for several generations. On reasonable justification or adequate notice was given, the affected families were not consulted or offered compensation and any alternative housing or social support.

On 19 July, the ERRC and COHRE sent another letter of concern to President Parvanov and Prime Minister Mr Serguei Stanishev, urging the Bulgarian government to intervene in the case of Dobri Jelyazkov. The ERRC and COHRE also requested that the Government call for an immediate moratorium on all evictions of Roma communities until the laws and procedures governing forced eviction in Bulgaria are made consistent with the Constitution and international human rights treaties ratified by Bulgaria, and in depth consultations are made by the Government and the Sofia Municipality with affected Roma communities and civil society organisations in order to explore all feasible alternatives to the planned evictions. As of 9 October, no evictions had taken place.

On August 16, 2006, Bulgarian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy responded to the ERRC/COHRE letter of concern describing the measures to be taken with regard to the housing rights crisis in Batalova vodenitza. According to the letter, Sofia Municipality will construct 60 temporary housing units for Roma who were registered in Sofia before 1996. The people who do not have registration will be returned to the areas from

which they have originally come. The Ministry of Labour will ensure additional employment opportunities in these areas

As of October 10, 2006, no temporary housing was provided for the Roma from Batalova vodenitsa. No evictions were carried out either. An eviction order for 16 Romani families was suspended by the Sofia District Court in July 2006. An appeal against the suspension by Sofia Municipality is pending before the Sofia City Court as of October 10, 2006. Earlier, in June 2006, the Supreme Administrative Court upheld the legality of an eviction order affecting 180 Romani individuals from Batalova vodenitsa. The eviction of these families can take place any moment. A complaint by the affected families claiming violation of Article 8 (respect for private and family life) and Article 1, Protocol 1 (peaceful enjoyment of one's possessions) of the European Convention of Human Rights is also pending before the European Court of Human Rights.

(ERRC, COHRE)