

# The Sulukule Affair: Roma against Expropriation

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**F**IRST recordings of historical data show that the Sulukule Roma came to Byzantine Empire territory at the end of 11<sup>th</sup> century. Historians adhere to the notion that Roma faced frequent pressure from the Orthodox Church and lived in a camp area outside Edirnekapı city walls in black tents.

Sulukule, which came to be known for music, dance, fortune telling and bear shows during the Ottoman era, survived as a center of historical entertainment tradition until contemporary times. The land registers dating from the Ottoman Empire point to demographic and cultural continuity. The Sulukule festive traditions of the Ottoman epoch were maintained in the Republican Era in the private quarters of Roma under the name “devriye evleri” (entertainment houses). Dancing, especially belly dancing, is still an important profession for the female Sulukule residents. Baby girls in Sulukule have finger cymbals placed under their pillows so that they become good dancers.

In the entertainment houses, Roma offered visitors music, dance accompanied by some appetizers, fruits and the local spirit raki. In these “family enterprise” houses, the musicians were usually the father, sons and close relatives, and the

dancers were the daughters. According to research, the songs and music played in these houses were unlike any of those found in other districts or areas.

The entertainment sector that developed in Sulukule contributed to almost 3,000 people’s livelihood, ranging from musicians, dancers, cooks, managers, local taxi drivers, waiters, etc. That was until 1992.

## The social fabric

Sulukule’s population is around 5,000 people, 3,500 of whom are Romani. One of the most important qualities of this district is that the whole population is in one way or another related to each other, causing the neighbourhood to give the impression of a huge extended family. According to the research conducted by the Sulukule Platform, 76% of the district’s residents were born in Sulukule. Street vending by the district’s own residents enables the neighborhood to exist in a self-sufficient manner. In addition to the textile, fruits, vegetable, fish, pickle, toy, and balloon selling street vendors, the neighbourhood markets, food shops, small restaurants and tailors cater exclusively to their local clientele. In other words, the residents of Sulukule are able to survive without stepping out of their neighbourhood. According to the aforementioned research, 66.3% of the residents are content to live in Sulukule.

In 1992, the Yedikule District’s Police Chief Süleyman Ulusoy became notorious for terrorising Sulukule inhabitants. As Sulukule fell under Ulusoy’s authority, he took the liberty to raid entertainment houses, had the local residents beaten and the musicians’ equipment broken; eventually 37 of these houses were closed down.

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*The Urban Renovation Project of Sulukule is under legal scrutiny by a Turkish court due to a case submitted with the support of the ERRC. Despite this fact, demolitions continue in Sulukule. In mid-March 2008, excavators of the Municipality were again at work, this time razing a total of seven houses.*

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In the 1990s, the economy of Sulukule fell into dire straits as a result of the closure of the entertainment houses. As the majority of Sulukule Roma had no profession other than contributing to the running of entertainment houses, their disbanding had far reaching social impacts. Unemployment and poverty escalated in Sulukule, and especially the musicians were hit hard. Most of the musicians had to become street vendors because they had no other choice to keep financially afloat. The entertainment houses were offered for rent or became barns for animals. Sulukule was left to decay silently.

### **Towards destruction**

Sulukule residents first heard about the Urban Renovation Project endorsed with the

slogan, “People First”, on 28 June 2006. The Fatih Municipality, in charge of devising and implementing the project, invited local residents to inform them about the plans. In fact, the arrangements for the project were made in 2005, based on Law No. 5366 (Yıpranan Tarihi ve Kültürel Taşınmaz Varlıkların Yenilenerek Korunması ve Yaşatılarak Kullanılması Hakkındaki Kanun – The Law on the Protection and Revitalisation of Cultural and Historical Immovables). Immediately after learning about the project, Romani residents of Sulukule got together to make a declaration before the press. The common statement of the Sulukule Roma was as follows:

“As a consequence of this project, we will have to leave the places in which we lived for centuries. If the Municipality really wants to preserve Sulukule as a historical post, we can be

offered financial and technical assistance for the renovation and repair of our houses. We wish to have Sulukule revived and become a positive feature of Istanbul's cultural and entertainment life; so that we can have employment opportunities generated for the young-elderly-women-men, simply everybody”.

Two weeks after their press meeting, on 13 July 2006, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, the Fatih Municipality and the Prime Minister's Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKI) signed a co-operation agreement. Unfortunately, the Sulukule residents, who would be the prime party affected by the project, were not invited to the protocol ceremony. Despite the fact that they were not invited, Sulukule

two municipalities and TOKI members. After the ceremony took place, Pündük and his fellow Sulukule people made a press declaration and publicised the fact that nobody asked for their opinion. They indicated that the signed protocol was without their consent.

Truly enough, the residents of the zones were not offered the chance to express their opinions during neither the preparation nor the decision phase. In fact, expropriation acts by the state have always been harsh and provided little chance for the affected parties to object throughout the history of the Republic. It was hoped that the European accession process would have altered such inconsideration, but as far as the successive urban renovation plans devised in the course of the last years are concerned, the practices of the state have not been any different. Especially when the districts inhabited by Roma are in question, urban renovation and recreation projects that supposedly target the rehabilitation of urban decay areas seem to in fact target the residents' removal. The compensation schemes offered by the municipalities to local residents, who are often very poor, are inadequate. It is offered that these people become a party to the projects by engaging in leasing agreements that have 10-15-year-long debt spans.

In case of Sulukule, an “urgent expropriation” decision was issued in October 2006 and this decision came into effect after being printed in the Official Gazette. In fact,

### Roma accused of prostitution

The Sulukule project was sent to the Fatih Municipal Council after being approved by the Urban Renovation Council in early November 2007. During a Fatih Municipality Council meeting on 3 December 2007 to discuss the project, Republican People's Party (CHP) Parliamentarian Can Özyedierler spoke about the collapse of the entertainment sector in Sulukule and stated that the proposed urban renovation project should be one that would reward the district's residents with employment opportunities again. In reply, Justice and Development Party (AKP) Parliamentarian M. Köksal Özer stated the following:

“Entertainment sector [...], that place has nothing to do with entertainment. Thirteen, 14 and 15-year-old girls are forced into prostitution there. There is no normal entertainment there. These people have such an inclination from birth. I know that they start playing music in their primary school years, because I grew up amongst them. However, the place we call Sulukule is different, it is a hotbed of prostitution. It is the bad face of the entertainment sector. We have to change that place. Of course, we need to support the maintenance of these peoples' culture and let them develop it. But, we need to save these people from the environment and I want to thank those conceptualising the project specifically for that.”

Roman Kültürünü Geliştirme ve Dayanışma Derneği (Sulukule Romani Culture Development and Cooperation Association) leader Şükri Pündük and four of his colleagues attended the ceremony as part of the audience. The protocol was signed, accompanied by applause from the

the very utilisation of the urgent expropriation law, which should only be put into effect in highly special cases such as wars, meant that this legal measure was an instrument of threat against those resisting the forced evacuation of their residence.

## Expropriation threat

The mere existence of the expropriation order, although not put into effect yet by the Municipality, caused panic amongst some of the Sulukule residents, propelling them to embark on a selling spree. In return, the sudden placement of dozens of buildings on the real estate market prompted a downwards spiral in their prices. For the real estate speculators and investors retaining cash, collecting the Sulukule estates at rock bottom prices and then joining the project for leasing agreements was a huge bargain. As Istanbul's real estate market is booming, once the project is finalised, the new condominiums nearby the city centre will be of golden value. Meanwhile, 17 projects were prepared by an architecture company named Aarti. The projects were created taking into account the desires and wishes of new owners in the market for cheap real estate, not the needs and expectations of the local people inhabiting the quarters traditionally. The changes made were strictly luxury and comfort oriented; for example, the 65 metres squared houses were expanded up to 180 metres squared after the new benefactors expressed their wish.

According to research conducted by the Sulukule Platform, 54% of the traditional owners were told by the Fatih Municipality that their houses would be seized by the state unless they took the agreement offered. Again according to this research, 20% of the traditional owners sold their houses and all of them agreed with third parties, not the Municipality. Over all, 62% of the house owners did not consider selling their estate to the Municipality, but they also could not or would not attempt to lease the condominiums to be built by the project because they are not able to afford that, plus the projected property is alien to their lifestyles. It should be remembered that the Sulukule Platform's research shows that a quarter of the local residents' income is below 300 Turkish lira (approximately 150 EUR), and half of them make under 500 Turkish lira monthly (around 300 EUR).

## Participation

Fatih municipal authorities frequently state that the local people of Sulukule are a part of project.

This is wholly untrue as the only options offered to the district's dwellers are to sell off their property and migrate elsewhere, or embark on leasing agreements that are well beyond their budgets. According to the survey made by the Sulukule Platform in September 2007 about participation in the project, only 7.5% of the local residents affirmed that their opinion was asked. On the whole, 56% of them said that they have had not been contacted by the municipality.

In May 2007, the Fatih Municipality invited those who had not yet sold their houses to a meeting to "reconcile". The Municipality was acting upon the Law No: 5366, the legal document that equips the Municipality with the right to have an expropriation decree issued by applying to the First Instance Courts for seizing the estates that could not be obtained through reconciliation.

## 35 houses demolished

The house standing on Sulukule Street that accommodated the Güldür family was demolished on 21 February 2007 without having its electricity and water supplies cut. At the time of the demolition, the Güldür family was away in Ankara. After the demolition, Fatih Municipality declared that the building was razed without their knowledge and that it was sorry about the incident. They apologised to the residents. However, after this apology a total of 35 houses were demolished in Sulukule.

The majority of the tenants of the demolished houses had to relocate to districts other than Sulukule, where the rents are 4-5 times that of their former quarters. Others who could not afford such an increase in their rent payments took refuge in the houses of their relatives or rooms that their neighbors provided. Thirteen percent of the tenants had paid less than 100 Turkish lira (around 50 EUR) monthly, 60% less than 200 Turkish lira (around 100 EUR) and 80% less than 300 YTL (around 150 EUR). By comparison, in the districts neighbouring Sulukule, rental prices start from 600 Turkish lira (around 300 EUR). In addition, 63.5% of the Sulukule residents whose houses were demolished have no social security.

### Fast Facts on Sulukule

- Sulukule is located within the Fatih Municipality boundaries, lying nearby the historical centre of Istanbul. The neighbourhood is next to the historical city walls.
- Sulukule consists of two settlements: Neslişah and Hatice Sultan.
- It is around 8,000 metres squared in total.
- The district first suffered from demolitions in the mid-1960s, when a large portion of the original Romani quarter was destroyed, causing many residents to leave or relocate to a nearby location.
- In 1982, a second wave of destruction took place and the core of old Sulukule was demolished.
- Throughout its history, Sulukule has been one of the most famous entertainment centres of the city. In the Republican Era, Sulukule was an attraction centre with its well-known “in-house” music and belly-dance performances. Local people as well as the tourists used to visit Sulukule to taste its vivid night-life.
- Sulukule is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site; Fatih Municipality’s plans for the districts will fundamentally alter the neighbourhood and destroy its value as a World Heritage Site.
- Since the closure of the music and dance private houses in 1992, the majority of Sulukule’s Roma live in extreme poverty.
- After the closure of these houses, the population of the quarter shrank from 10,000 to 3,500.
- Sulukule is located in a very central area. The value of the land is high, which makes Sulukule attractive and open to land speculation.
- Following the demolition of resident’s homes by Fatih Municipality, at least 2 Romani infants and 1 Romani adult have died of exposure or burning caused by the highly substandard housing conditions into which they were forced.

### Tenants sent 40 km away

The only tangible solution for the impoverished and helpless Romani tenants or owners of Sulukule offered by the Fatih Municipality has been the possibility of buying cheaper apartments at the state’s social housing complex in Taşoluk. Taşoluk is a newly developing area, cut off from the central parts of Istanbul as it is located approximately 40 kilometres away from Sulukule. The 434 tenants and 571 owners concerned have been offered opportunity to lease property in Taşoluk with 180-month long credit agreements.

As a result of a draw that took place in the sports hall of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality in Edirnekapi on December 4, apartment numbers

for 205 of the tenants renting Sulukule estates were determined. Following the draw, leading Romani activist from Sulukule, Şükri Pündük, said, “How will the people who cannot pay 60 Turkish lira (around 30 EUR) in rent have the funds to pay 275-475 Turkish lira (132-246 EUR) per month for this credit debt? They [Fatih Municipality] are throwing people away like garbage to survive by their own devices. Taşoluk is like a segregation camp. It is the last step of the assimilationist policies exerted upon Roma.” It should also be noted that some Roma who entered lease agreements for Taşoluk apartments have already faced discrimination by their new neighbours: Non-Romani Taşoluk residents are now calling TOKI and the Fatih Municipality, demanding that the Roma from Sulukule be relocated somewhere other than their district.



*The Romani community of Sulukule organised a handful of public protests and conducted a high profile campaign for raising public awareness about their Quarter's situation and the demolitions with the help of human rights activists and concerned individuals. The sign held by the woman on the left reads, "I live here, I go to school here".*

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### **Parliament ruled Romani culture is not destroyed**

The Sulukule Platform submitted complaints against the Sulukule urban renovation project to Turkey's Grand National Assembly's Human Rights Commission (HRC) in early 2008. The Commission decided that there was no evidence that the Romani culture of

Sulukule would be destroyed through the implementation of the Sulukule project. With supportive votes from members of the Justice and Development Party and the Nationalist Action Party, the Commission found that the evacuation of Sulukule residents from their homes would not constitute a violation of human rights. Thus, the case of the Sulukule Urban Renovation Plan was closed.

### **ERRC Legal Action on Sulukule**

The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) and its partners in Turkey, the Helsinki Citizen's Assembly (hCa) and the Edirne Association for Research of Romani Culture and Solidarity (EDROM) initiated a court case aiming to cancel the urban renovation project targeting Sulukule. The complaint was filed on 31 December 2007 at the Istanbul Administrative Court by Sulukule's

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own residents, represented by Turkish attorney Hilal Küey, in cooperation with the ERRC. In their complaint, the plaintiffs, including Sulukule residents Mehmet Asım Hallaç, Ayşe Gülşen Gökırmak, Gülsüm Bitirmis, Şükrü Pündük, as well as the Sulukule Romani Culture Development and Cooperation Association, accuse the Fatih Municipality implementing the project and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism that approved its implementation of breaching domestic and international laws, including Turkey's Constitution. The ERRC supports the litigants financially within the framework of a European Union funded project entitled "Promoting Roma Rights in Turkey", in partnership with the aforementioned NGOs. The work of the ERRC in Turkey is sponsored by the European Commission, Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the Open Society Institute (OSI).

In their complaint, the applicants ask the court to annul the urban renovation project on the grounds that it is in contravention of the national Constitution, a number of domestic legislative acts, as well as international human rights law. In particular, the applicants claim that the implementation of the project is in violation of the Constitutional protection of the right to property and heritage as well as the protection of historical, cultural and natural assets. Furthermore, the complaint asserts that the project violates rights protected under the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms – the right to private and family life (Article 8); the prohibition of discrimination (Article 14) in connection to Article 8; as well as the right to peaceful enjoyment of one's possessions (Article 1, Protocol 1).

The lawyer of the plaintiffs Hilal Küey asserts that the Second Administrative Court of Istanbul already issued a decision to halt the execution of the project, but that despite this decision the demolition of Sulukule houses continues, violating the court's ruling. Küey underlines that Article 4 of Law No: 5366 that regulates expropriation acts violates the Constitution. Küey, also points out that the plaintiffs' legal rights were breached due to a conflict of interest in the composition of the body which approved the Municipality's project, as 2 members of the Renovation Council were Municipality bureaucrats.