

POLICY BRIEF

Environmental Racism, the Climate Crisis, and Europe's Roma

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Across Europe, entire communities of Roma subsist in deep poverty. Many are forced to live in close proximity to landfills or toxic sites. They are often spatially segregated from the rest of society, living in 'settlements', slum neighbourhoods, or improvised camps, and routinely denied equal access to clean water and sanitation. The efforts of the European Union to promote Roma inclusion in member states and candidate countries have failed, to date, to make a dent on environmental racism.

In its 2020 report, the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) found that unequal exposure to environmental

burdens is one of many dimensions of antigypsyism, and that "environmental racism against Roma communities is a structural and widespread problem in the countries researched in the EU and its immediate neighbourhood."

Over the past two decades, tens of thousands of Roma have been forcibly displaced due to armed conflict, or evicted to make way for gentrification, tourism, or corporate development projects. Mass demolitions and evictions frequently banish Romani communities beyond the pale, to desolate locations, devoid of infrastructure or public transport or services.

For more than 25 years, the ERRC has litigated and campaigned in dozens of cases to defend Roma against three main categories of environmental harm:

- 1. forced evictions and mass displacement;**
- 2. denial of access to clean water, sanitation, and other essential services;**
- 3. hazardous living conditions, where Roma are forced to live and work in toxic and environmentally degraded sites.**



The ERRC have been involved in three emblematic episodes of environmental racism against Roma:

ITALY'S 'NOMAD CAMPS'

The failure since 2011 of successive **Italian governments** to meet their commitment to 'overcome the system of the Roma camps', and dispense with policies of spatial segregation, forced evictions, displacements, and demolitions of improvised dwellings – policies that have only served to stigmatise, immiserate, and further exclude Roma.

LEAD POISONING IN KOSOVO

The plight of **Romani IDPs**, victims of pogroms in **Kosovo**, placed and stranded by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), to languish in lead-contaminated camps for a decade after the war, in conditions described by a UN panel of inquiry as 'particularly distressing', and for reasons dismissed by the same panel, as 'discriminatory and debasing'.

EVICTED TO THE DUMP

The notorious case of **Pata Rât in Romania** which involved the forced eviction of 270 residents from their homes with scarcely a day's notice, the illegal demolition of their houses, and forced relocation to a site placed at a landfill and pharmaceutical waste deposit.

THE THREAT OF A 'ROMA-BLIND' EU ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

For many racialised communities in Europe, the impact of climate disruption is already a reality. The European Green Deal – marketed by European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, as '*Europe's new growth strategy*' cutting emissions while creating jobs – does acknowledge that "the most vulnerable are the most exposed to the harmful effects of climate change and environmental degradation". To ensure no one is left behind, and adaptation is fair and inclusive, the Just Transition Mechanism was put in place to protect citizens and workers, so that "*all EU initiatives live up to a green oath to 'do no harm'.*"

But nowhere is there a mention of the harms done to marginalised and racialised communities in the European pursuit of a 'prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy'. Environmental justice for racialised communities is not on the agenda, and huge numbers of Roma risk being 'left behind' once again.

THREE MUSTS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN EUROPE

With regards to all future interventions, by state authorities and EU bodies, to promote Roma inclusion and participation, the ERRC calls for considerations of environmental justice to be fully integrated into all policy priority areas including health, housing, education, employment, and combating antigypsyism.

1. **Improved access to justice for Romani communities** who are victims of environmental racism, and a broader focus on environmental justice to remedy the harms done by disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards, denial of access to clean water, sanitation, and other essential services, including waste collection and disposal.
2. **A moratorium on forced evictions of Roma**, and an immediate halt to arbitrary mass displacements to hazardous and degraded sites. Instead, authorities should urgently devise environmentally sound and sustainable policy solutions, that accord with states' international commitments, and meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals
3. **An end to all forms of residential segregation** that imperil the health and safety of Romani communities and expose them to the harmful effects of 'climate change and environmental degradation.'