LEVEL: ADVANCED

THE STRUGGLE OF ROMA COMMUNITIES: GENEALOGIES AND ORAL HISTORY

Some of the critical issues and keywords that the text below includes:

- Resettlement and Reeducation
- Oral history of Roma in urban areas
- Segregation in outskirts
- Roma resistance
- Communism in Albania

Empathy is an important part of understading cultural differences and diverse ontologies than yours. Keep it in mind.

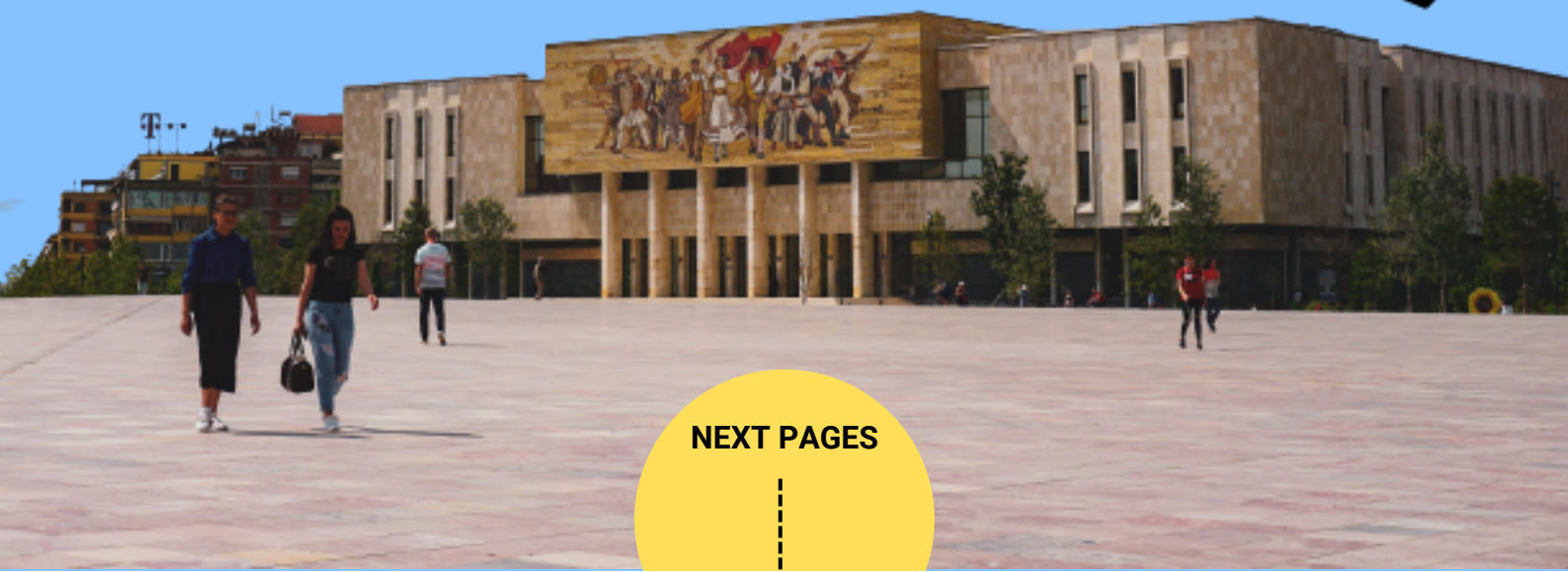
1 COMMUNIST REEDUCATION

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Albanian Communist Party established a similar regime to those in Eastern Europe, following the model of the Soviet Union. Due to the economic and political conditions of the country, one of the main tasks was to discipline the whole society, to be ideally composed of "new men with a socialist morale." This holistic approach brings the Albanian communists to transform the society by also considering the Roma population.

Resettlement and reeducation of Roma began in the first years after the establishment of the "socialist regime." The first document dates July 21, 1947, namely a year and a half after the communist takeover. The Prime Minister's office report on Roma minority stated that community members were predominantly nomadic and capable of committing acts of vagrancy, begging, and various crimes. The report also highlighted the miserable economic, moral, and social conditions that Roma communities lived in. Acts of corruption, parasitism, immorality, and other evil deeds, were also ascribed to Roma groups and considered a major concern. In fact, Roma communities did not only put authorities on alert for being nomadic and, therefore, potentially escaping security control and policing. They were also supposed to begin a correction of societal behaviour as the only path to integrate themselves into a valuable Communist society.

CAN YOU SPOT THE GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION OF TIRANA THis ALBANIAN MAP?





NEXT PAGES

However, the report subtly differentiated policies and reforms of the Albanian population from the everyday life of Roma communities. Among the memoirs of former communist leaders of that time, and even in the personal notes of Enver Hoxha himself, the socialist regime was praised for having achieved great results only in grouping and settling Roma neighbourhoods by providing houses.

The process of "education" of the Roma population in Albania was paternalistic and discriminatory in its rhetoric. Oral histories still recollect the events of Roma gathered and settled in urban clusters in order to stop their movement in the streets and "damage" the image of the Albanian cities. According to socialist leaders, Roma who begged in the streets or wandered as nomads tarnished the image of the city, especially the capital Tirana. This explains why still nowadays all Albanian cities host Roma neighbourhoods in their outskirts and suburban areas, mainly ghettos where Roma communities have lived since the socialist period. This form of ghettoization deepened when schools, kindergartens, nurseries, and some agricultural or handicraft enterprises were organised within those Roma areas where locals could work. Only a few non-Roma and tiny families used to live in those areas.

The Ministry of Interior was tasked with gathering Roma people in certain places and banning their potentially "uncontrolled movements" across the Albanian nation. It was also requested their full registration in the statistics of the Ministry (for the first time in the history of the Albanian state), including specific data about their identification number, age, and physical and health condition. This operation aimed at controlling Roma better and penalizing their potential acts of vagrancy. Other government bodies were also tasked with similar actions to be undertaken. Particular emphasis was placed on the both moral and political education of Roma population, thereby attempting to strip customs and align their everyday life with "proletarian morality." For this reason, the government bodies also relied on the Party bodies.

Roma workers were engaged in handicrafts such as blacksmithing, basket weaving, and pottery. After resettlement, they lived in cities where they had to abandon their work in the agricultural sector. Moreover, only some Roma families settled in rural areas. In urban clusters, instead, between the late 1940s and early 1950s, Roma settled in the basements or first floors of city blocks. Since then, it even became a tradition that the first floors of palaces were occupied only by Roma. Here, it should be explained that the first floor of the newly built socialist blocks were almost half basements, as part of the apartment were underground and rather unliveable. Nevertheless, Roma apartments were often overcrowded - sometimes even with more than 20 people living together - thereby showing how housing program was gangrene for the system.

Particularly in Tirana and Durres, urban construction did not follow criteria from the socialist period until around 2005. Civil conflicts erupted as public spaces were occupied by citizens coming from rural areas that could be officially state property. Private owners seized them during the socialist regime, and many were expropriated generally without compensation. After 1991, the new liberal democracy system considered these expropriations unfair, recognized in principle the right of ownership of the "legal" owners of these properties, and stated that the state would try to return or compensate these properties. In turn, however, social conflicts erupted between those who had built their houses on public property and those who claimed ownership of these spaces even before 1945. Since the 1950s, in many outskirts of Tirana where Roma lived, construction of residential areas began expelling Roma from their homes. The first case of Roma being forcibly displaced happened in 2004. In the former Food Factory area, 15 Roma families were forcibly expelled from their homes without any reward. The justification was a private matter between individuals, as it was a property owned by someone who entered into a personal relationship with the constructors.

Once again, Roma people were considered only a "collateral damage." In addition, the state institutions responsible for housing, namely the Housing Authority, did not assist homeless Roma after their expulsion from their houses. The story of these expulsions came to the public attention once again after almost 11 years, when from another suburban area of Tirana, a Roma refugee camp was burned, and the inhabitants were expelled, as a residential area would be built there. Interviews with Roma deported from the camp in 2016 said they had taken refuge there, having had their homes demolished in previous years, including deportation in 2005, without being offered any housing opportunities.

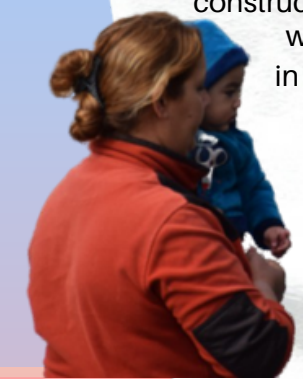
With the expansion of the city of Tirana, suburbs became more and more valuable. New owners discovered these suburban areas for having a great potential for development, regardless of the "collateral damage" that could hit the majority of Roma citizens in the years to come. Such a flagrant case also occurred in 2011 around the Train Station in Tirana, previously considered a remote suburb of the city. The Municipality of Tirana undertook this gentrification for commercial purposes. About 37 Roma families have lived in modest houses since the 1950s. In previous cases, an owner was found demanding that the property should have been returned for new "investment and development." Many Roma families were not yet again given any housing opportunities, finding legal artifices common in Roma evictions. These artifices consisted in the fact that, although these families lived for years in these territories, Roma did not have ownership certificates of these areas. Even the law "On restitution and compensation of property", Roma property was recognized as belonging to the "rightful owner" - namely, the descendant who owned it before 1945.

The systemic expulsion of Roma from this area was conducted forcedly. Meanwhile, the Municipality of Tirana and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs did not offer any remuneration. The only "solution" proposed to the Roma community was to provide temporary houses and recognize their right, "in principle", to be accomodated in the city. In practice, however, neither time was allocated nor housing program was developed.

The place offered to set up these tents was a field near a landfill in Sharra - namely, another suburb of Tirana. Despite the resistance of the residents and the protest of the civil society organizations, the State Police intervened and forcibly evicted these residents from their homes. Even today, after almost 11 years, these Roma residents have not received social housing, live in barracks, and have even been forcibly relocated to other cities in the country.

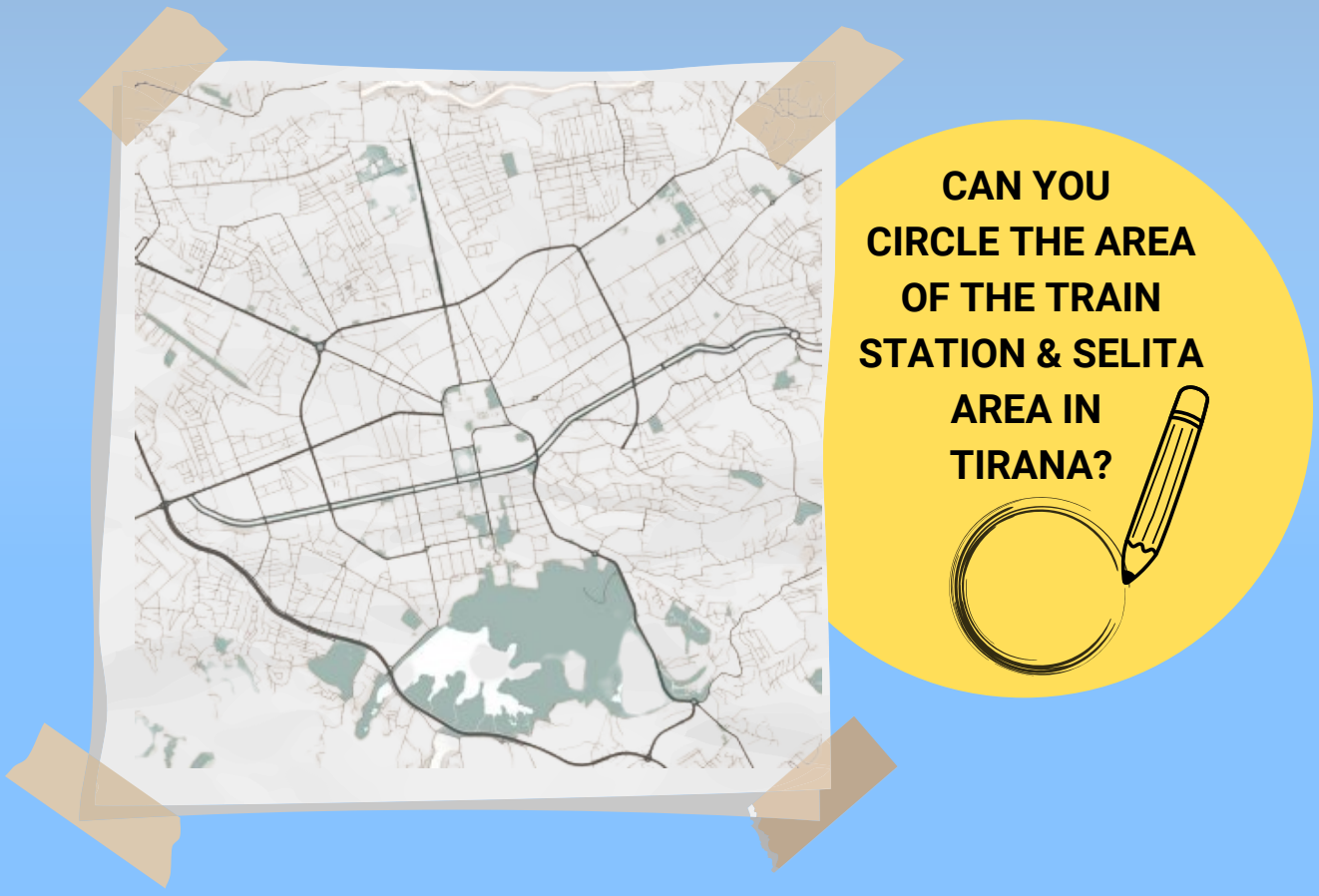
LEARN TO UNLEARN

Although Roma families were expelled from the area nearby the Train Station in Tirana, it should be pointed out that a more modern and more functional railway station has never come to life. Besides the dubious construction procedures, the Train Station was completely flattened, and in today's Tirana there is neither a proper train station nor a developing area with a flourishing business.





What is worth mentioning here is how the discourse on the common good and the public cause are used to justify the eviction of people from their homes and a case of fraud. Also, authorities spoke of "the general public interest cannot be held hostage, manipulating the rest of the citizens about the Roma expulsion and covering up the vested interests.



In all the cases of Roma deportations since 2004, the most critical case in the Selita area was the expulsion of 130 families for the construction of the Great Highway of Tirana. In late July 2015, the Inspectorate of Territorial Planning launched an action to demolish houses of Roma in the area of Selita, which were on the trail of the construction of the Great Highway of Tirana.

Those residents were not informed in time, and no alternatives were offered, although this is mandatory by law. The only thing left for the residents was a protest near the responsible institutions. Residents organised some public demonstrations and forwarded an official request for help to the only institution that agreed to wait and tried to help them, the Ombudsman. Yet, an administrative problem appeared: the residents had not received official notification for demolishing their houses, which the Ombudsman could appeal in Court. Although the Inspectorate continued to demolish Roma houses, officially in line with the judiciary system, this was not happening as there was no official announcement. The Ombudsman gave some official recommendations to solve the problem, such as providing social housing as a long-term solution, as well as providing temporary rent. Yet noone followed any recommendations. Rome residents displaced from the Selita area had the same concerns because houses were built before the fall of the socialist regime. Other residents said that Roma locals, like the rest of Albanian people, are very attached to their houses and have invested all their life savings in the building at least one. They were very attached to the houses as they had invested much savings and energy in them; however, within a few days, they lost everything.

The Municipality of Tirana refused to expropriate them at actual market prices. Still, thanks to the tremendous social pressure and the protests of the Roma, the Municipality undertook to pay the rent bonus for two years, which was by no means a long-term solution. For these people evicted from their houses, it was challenging to secure housing, firstly because the amount of rent offered by the Municipality was difficult to afford, even in suburbs. Secondly, due to prejudices on Roma people, landlords refused to rent apartments. For these reasons, Roma citizens, put in extraordinary difficulties, were forced to go to Germany to seek asylum. Despite the discrimination against them, since Albania was considered a safe country, they were not granted asylum and returned to the country after some months.

Likewise, in June 2016, in the River Bank on the outskirts of Tirana, the Municipality informed the Roma community that they would be displaced from their barracks in order to plan the construction of a new residential area. Thus, Roma residents were deprived of the right to give any proposal for resolving the situation. The offer of the Municipality foresaw one year of rent paid by the Municipality at the rate of 80%, and the residents had to go out to the free market themselves to look for news houses. According to residents and activists who have been dealing with this issue for about four months, this offer had two main problems: (1) It takes a lease to prove the payment by the Municipality, and (2) residents need a place to collect recyclable waste, thus securing a livelihood. Residents have verbally opposed this offer and requested a meeting with the Mayor to negotiate. These residents have agreed among themselves to claim a piece of land. The employees of the Municipality had asked them to sign a statement to benefit from a facilitated loan. Still, these families suspended the loan for a long time due to insolvency. Activists have also requested a map for the Municipality, knowing which families will be specifically affected by these works. Although no response was provided, seventy-two families in the River Bank area were affected by this construction and left without any alternative.

It is known that the socialist system in Albania was a harsh dictatorial system that undertook disciplinary policies for modernizing the masses. According to the discourse of the socialist regime in Albania, the Roma, who had to settle in certain places, were supposed to be disciplined and reeducated through work. While supposed to be cultured through a proletarian morality, Roma would have become valuable to society. This kind of rhetoric, which has a paternalistic and prejudicial approach to the Roma, was similar to other segments of society, especially to those who were called "inverted classes" who had to be disciplined and made valuable to socialist society.

With the tremendous social changes in Eastern Europe, which also affected Albania in 1991, political discourse emphasized freedom and democracy. Yet, the displacement of Roma people, the destruction of their homes, and the lack of suitable alternative housing continue to function in the postsocialist predicament.



STIMULUS MATERIAL 2

…in the early 1950s they together with other Roma families came to Tirana from where they lived as nomads and settled on the first floors of buildings…

… after a few years, five or six, the police had forcibly expelled them from the basements of the palaces in Tirana…

… removal from the basements of the palaces in Tirana was done by force. The police came and gathered the Roma, loading with all the few items they had in the trucks, and sent to the suburbs of Tirana. There settled and did not move anymore, initially the government had given them some umbrellas to live and some of them had built some barracks with reeds that grew by the river …

…not all Roma were treated equally, as those who were closer to the Party and the authorities received more help or more quickly, while others tried to improve their living conditions…

On the left, memories of locals from Tirana. Down, an official document from the time of socialism

According to the documents of the Ministry of Interior, relocation of Roma people from the basements of blocks to separate and more isolated neighborhoods, was taken in order to tackle Roma misbehaviours in making...

… noise, irregularity, lack of discipline as they went out to beg publicly, and disturbed order and tranquility."

Can people's memories be considered also official history?

3 PRACTICES & ACTIONS

If you are in Tirana or nearby, **organize a visit around the Train Station** and **collect oral histories from locals**. Ask about traditions, everyday customs and how the area has changed after the demolition of Roma houses.



After visiting Selita area, **build your knowledge on archival materials and other documents**. By asking permission to locals, **take photos and collect first-hand data in order to create a visual map of the neighbourhood** and understand how State-run campaigns of dispossession of Roma properties have radically changed their everyday life.



After your potential visit and desk-research activity, **use social media**. **Produce a social media campaign** in order to raise awareness on Roma rights, their (oral) histories and resistance in Albania

