

The Roma who can't return home

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***When rumors of demolition by urban transformation project in Sulukule spread, third parties offered better prices than the municipality to [property owners](#) and some sold up fearing that they might get no money at all. The Roma of Sulukule cannot afford the 'gentrification' being enforced on them***

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Sevgi Tektaş was carrying three heavy bottles of water that she had just filled from the fountain in the Sulukule neighborhood of Istanbul, one of the oldest [settlements](#) of Roma people in the world. It was freezing outside but she was not even wearing a coat, just a green cardigan. Her hands were red, not only because it was cold but also because three bottles were too much for her to carry.

Tektaş was born in Sulukule. She grew up and married there as well. But a few months ago she had to move to another neighborhood, because her landlord sold [the apartment](#) that she was living in with her family. According to the contract the landlord made with the purchaser, the Tektaş family had to vacate their home within 15 days. So they did. It was not easy to live somewhere else without the neighborly solidarity they had created in their own living quarters. So they returned to Sulukule and became "occupiers," squatting their former residence. "It is the only place where we can survive," she said with a smile as if she was ashamed. "They do not want us there. We are not one of them."

With Turkish municipalities increasingly invoking article 5366 of the law passed in 2005 which allows the demolition of shantytowns in the name of urban transformation projects, the Roma are being indirectly evicted from their homes and their [housing](#) <#> rights may be violated, said member of the board of directors of the Human Settlement Association (İnsan Yerleşimleri Derneği) and architect, Aslı Kıyak İngin.

About 23 percent of the people of Sulukule earn less than YTL 350 a month. The place has a closed economy and a peculiar way of survival. "For example, we sell one lira worth of butter, eggs, or cheese at a time. But people cannot buy one-third of a pack of butter or one egg at the big markets or groceries in any other neighborhood," said Asım Hallaç, the owner of one of the little groceries in the neighborhood.

This is actually one of the main reasons that made Tektaş and her family, together with many other families, occupiers in their old homes with no electricity or running water. When the news about the demolition spread, apart from the municipality, there were third parties who offered a better price to the owners of the houses and some sold their homes fearing that they might even receive no money at all if the municipality expropriated their houses. "The municipality said it could pay YTL 52,000 for my house. The other guy offered YTL 82,000. So I sold it," said 53-year-old Hüseyin Atasayar. "I regret it now."

'Your coach smells bad'

Atasayar has a coach. He works on one of the Prince's Islands during summer and during winter he carries goods in Istanbul. This is one of the jobs most of the men in the neighborhood do. When not working, he parks his coach in front of his [new apartment](#). One day, policemen were waiting for him near his coach. They said he could not keep the coach there, because his neighbors complained about him. "They told me that my coach ruined the view and that it smelled bad. My new neighbors were disturbed with my coach. My means of life," Atasayar said as if he was still surprised.

He brought his coach back to Sulukule and often sits in the traditional [coffee house](#) <#> , drinking tea with his former neighbors. He is still worried what will happen to them if they demolish the whole neighborhood.

An unsociable project

Urban housing projects in Turkey continue to put at risk the housing rights of the Roma people, with those living in Sulukule neighborhood, in Istanbul's Fatih district potentially most impacted, said Neşe Ozan, an activist and secretary of the Sulukule Platform co-founded by academics, architects and the people of the neighborhood to demand that the municipality transform the urban planning project into a participatory one. According to Ozan the existing project does not take into consideration the social and [economic](#) conditions of the people of the neighborhood. "It can only be called gentrification," she said emphasizing that nobody asked these people what they need or what they want.

A couple of weeks ago, some 203 tenants of the neighborhood made an agreement, similar to a [mortgage](#) system with a bank through the municipality for some new apartments in another neighborhood, which is about 40 kilometers from their own quarters. The "lucky" ones are expected to pay an average YTL 350 a month. "They cannot pay that money. It was proved by the poll held by Yıldız Technical University about their economic and social conditions," Ozan said.