

North Ossetia: Domestic Strife Fuels Homelessness

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Breakdown of family ties resulting in people being thrown onto the street.

In good weather, a shabby group of people can be seen in a small park near the central market in Vladikavkaz. They eat their lunch from newspapers spread out on the pavement, oblivious to curious glances from passers-by.

"We buy food with money we get from friends or strangers. At night, we sleep by the wall or on the benches," said Fatima Gaziumova, a small woman with a hoarse voice. Her three children are growing up in an orphanage. "We have nowhere to go and no one to help us except God."

"I would say there are around 3,000 homeless people in North Ossetia, maybe even more," said the director of the single homeless shelter Valeriy Kesayev. "The homeless are those who have hit very hard times and, for whatever reason, lost the roof over their head. Vagrancy is a different matter - it's a way of life."

The general public make no such distinction, it seems. A tram conductor shook her head when I asked for directions to the shelter, which opened in 1999. Then as the tram approached the pink single-storey building, she said, "Oh, you mean the doss-house! You should have told me that's where you were going."

The shelter has four large rooms, which can accommodate 47 people. But Kasayev anticipates growing numbers of homeless, "Our government has passed a housing reform which will force those who are unable to pay rents out of their homes."

Kasayev said it used to be the case that most homeless were from outside the republic, but now around 60 per cent are Ossetians, "It never used to be liked that. Ossetians have always had strong family ties, but those are breaking down now. Before, relatives used to help a family member in need, now nobody wants to help a poor or troubled sibling."

"In 1992 I was imprisoned for illegally distilling and selling vodka. I sold two cases a day," said Roza Kaitukova. "I'm a widow, I had no job at the time and two sons to feed. While I was in jail my older sister sold the house where I lived. Since I got out in 1996, I've been on the streets. My twin sister won't help me either, even though she is far from poor. My sons have rejected me and I'm too proud to ask them for help."

Liudmila Sautneva, senior administrator at the homeless shelter, said, "Sometimes our clients are brought here by their own family, who want to get rid of them."

Sergei Kalayev, a civil society activist, said, "There is no greater shame than to see Ossetian families leaving their relatives, including the elderly, to live on the streets. There were very few in Soviet times, but many became homeless during perestroika."

"We natives of North Ossetia, can't find work or afford housing - the government gives everything to refugees from South Ossetia," said Ruslan Kusov, a ravaged looking 22-year-old sitting on the curb in the park. "I grew up in an orphanage, then I went to school and lived in a dormitory. When they closed the dorm down, I found myself in the street. Tell Dzasokhov [President of North Ossetia] that we orphanage children have lost trust in him."

Everyone I met at the park was Ossetian, and long time resident Fatima Gaziumova said that 15 people died there, either freezing to death, or falling into one of the many bonfires while drunk.

The sorry plight of the homeless is such that some are in denial about their circumstances.

Irina Trush claims that she used to perform as a singer in the city's most expensive hotel, the Imperial. She and her mother Nina are sitting in the park opposite an expensive boutique, but they insist they are not homeless like everyone around them. They are just resting and they get very indignant if anyone doubts their story.

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