Uzbekistan: Luli Hit the Road

Author: Artur Samari
Gypsies return to nomadic way of life, after failure of attempts to integrate them into society.

Tourists visiting the Uzbek region of Samarkand are currently seeing a lot more Central Asian heritage than they bargained for. Every time a group stops to admire one of the many spectacular ancient monuments or medieval buildings that are scattered across the region, they are accosted by groups of colourfully-clad gypsies pleading for money or food.

Known as the Luli in Uzbekistan, they are an ancient nomadic people who have traveled Central Asia for centuries, only acquiring a more sedentary life in Soviet times. But with the post-independence economic downturn in Uzbekistan, the community has been forced to uproot once more, with many turning to begging in order to make ends meet. This is causing a major headache for the Samarkand police, who have had to deploy greater numbers of guards at historic sites to prevent the gypsies pestering foreign visitors for money.

Many other Luli travel to Kazakhstan and Russia in search of a better life. The arrival of a large group in the Russian republic of Komi this month sparked a minor diplomatic incident after a local television channel reported that "Uzbeks" were causing a nuisance by begging in the city of Syktyvkar. The Uzbek embassy in Moscow reacted with fury, and several diplomats traveled to Syktyvkar to persuade the local authorities that Lulis - not Uzbeks - were responsible.

It's a harsh reversal of fortune for the minority, which had prospered under the Soviet regime, working in factories and on farms, and even awarded state honours. But with the onset of the country's economic problems, public sector enterprises collapsed and the gypsies along with millions of other citizens found themselves out of work.

Sayd, a Samarkand gypsy who has recently returned from Moscow, told IWPR sadly, "I used to work in a leather tannery and had a good life... how I wish I could bring those days back. There is no work here for anybody. Begging was how our ancestors lived, and it will help us to survive. I feel embarrassed, asking strangers for food - but I have to eat."

Professor Khol Nazarov, himself a Luli, who has studied the history of gypsies in Central Asia for nearly four decades, told IWPR that the Soviet authorities had made a concerted effort to integrate the gypsy population in everyday life, employing them in factories and giving them plots of land to cultivate.

Luli children were expected to go to school - and any more than two days of unexplained absence would result in a teacher visiting the errant pupil's home. This strict education policy resulted in many gypsy children going on to study at local universities.

"We were glad that our people escaped the ignorance of their forebears," said Nazarov. "Before long, the Luli had its own intelligentsia, teachers, lawyers and doctors, and even the achievements of the working class were recognised with state awards."

But with the economic downturn, all the progress made during Soviet times is beginning to unravel - many gypsies having little option but to resort to begging, "All we achieved in previous years has been ruined,"
Nazarov told IWPR.

Many Uzbeks look down on the Luli, seeing vagrancy and begging as a conscious choice. According to Nazarov, his people want to live as ordinary citizens, but struggle to do so because they lack the social support they received during the Soviet era.

The hardships experienced now by the Uzbek gypsies has attracted the attention of Samarkand rights activists, who say the authorities should do more for the community. "At the moment, they don't even have a national cultural centre," said Komil Ashurov of the Samarkand Human Rights Centre.

However, even the most sympathetic activists note that the current economic crisis is also hitting the vast majority of the Uzbek population hard.

Artur Samari is an IWPR contributor in Samarkand.

**Location:** Central Asia  
Uzbekistan  
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