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A Day Spent Chasing Moscow's Gypsy Beggars

By Allison Quinn

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A policeman speaking to a family of gypsies.

It's not uncommon in any major European city to see groups of women in crowded public places clutching infants to their bosoms and asking for spare change. But it's a red flag when the babies change from day to day and the mothers stay the same.

"We knew one woman who went through at least eight different babies," said Dmitry Vtorov, co-administrator of The Search for Missing Children, a grassroots organization that conducts searches nationwide for children reported missing.

Vtorov is one of many activists campaigning to get law enforcement to crack down on Moscow's community of professional beggars who use infants to bolster their profits. While some argue that the beggars aren't actually committing any crimes or hurting anybody, Vtorov and activists from the group Kids in the Hands of Beggars say there is often more than meets the eye.

"We have information that the kids are sometimes rented out: borrowed in exchange for alcohol or drugs" when the parents are addicts, Vtorov claimed during a recent raid with police from the city's central district and members of Officers of Russia, a coalition that lends support to law enforcement agencies.

Klara Khrenova of The Search for Missing Children and Pavel Proshkin of Kids in the Hands of Beggars said that in their experience, there was often evidence that children with professional beggars did not belong to them.

"Sometimes they'll present a birth certificate for the child, and the gender will be wrong. The document will say the child is a boy, but they're holding a girl," Khrenova said.

Khrenova lamented the fact that criminal cases are so rarely launched against beggars using infants as props.

Children's rights activists have filed numerous complaints about the beggars in a bid to pressure authorities to crack down on those suspected of child exploitation, Khrenova said, but all the complaints yield the same result: inaction.

"Even the refusal to open a criminal case comes only two, three or four months after the complaint is filed," she said.

All activists agreed that the practice of begging with infants was done exclusively by members of Moscow's Gypsy community — a factor that only aggravates the situation, forcing authorities to tread a very fine line between appearing flat-out racist and forcing members of another culture to assimilate to Russian norms.

Authorities have heeded warnings from activists like Vtorov and Khrenova, however. The Public Chamber's Commission for Public Safety held a roundtable on Sept. 8 to discuss the issue together with representatives of the Moscow police. The end result of that meeting was an agreement by all sides to form a working group to tackle the issue and have police, activists and members of Officers of Russia conduct frequent raids of the more than 30 spots in the city where such beggars are known to operate.

The first raid, attended by this reporter for The Moscow Times, shed light on why the practice of public begging using children has been so difficult to eradicate — and why it may be here to stay.

Police Inaction

Both Vtorov and Proshkin of Kids in the Hands of Beggars confronted police directly at a brief roundtable before the raid, asking why the numerous complaints against beggars they had made in the past failed to materialize into a criminal case and why police seemed to respond so rarely to their calls.

"We call and then wonder why we bothered to call in the first place," Proshkin said, noting that more often than not, police would show up and do nothing.

In the best-case scenario, he said, "they show up and then disappear within minutes, having done nothing."

"We understand that this is a complicated issue, but [the beggars] seem to work more actively than our police do," Vtorov said.

A central district police spokeswoman, Anastasia Noskova, said it was not a simple matter.

"I've heard of cases when they [the police officers] show up and the beggars and their kids just scatter in all directions, nearly running under the tires of the police vehicle. ... At that point, what can police even do?" she said.

Roman, a police official specializing in cases involving children who refused to disclose his surname, echoed that sentiment, saying police appear apathetic about the issue only because they know that there are no charges that will stick.

"There's no abuse, the kids aren't starving," he said.

"By the time we send patrol cars [to confront the beggars], the women are already long gone," he said, noting that the beggars are professionals and have a well-organized system in place to alert each other when police approach.

To bypass this warning system, activists and representatives of Officers of Russia went out in search of beggars during the raid while police representatives sat in wait nearby, out of view.

A group comprised of six women carrying two infants and two young children did just as police predicted: After hollering out to each other to run, they scattered in different directions, stopping traffic as police and activists followed in pursuit.

The chase ended with chaotic detentions on various sides of the Pokrovsky Stavropigialny Monastery near the Taganskaya metro station and one of the women hiding her son in a public toilet.

After all of the women's documents were checked, activists and police herded them all together in front of a shop.

The showdown that followed was nothing if not farcical, and it highlighted major cultural differences that perpetuate the problem: Anton Tsvetkov, head of Officers of Russia, shouted at his aides to find him a Romanian translator while the detained women beside him spoke to each other in Russian.

Gypsy curses abounded, though it was unclear at whom they were directed.

The women repeatedly attempted to flee, shoeless, saying that they had done nothing wrong and that begging was simply their way of life.

"What have I done? I have done nothing to you!" one of the women shouted. "This is how we live, and it's been that way for generations. This is all we know!"

The six women were taken to the local police station so that their identity documents could be thoroughly checked. Their papers were found to be in order, and the children with them were their own. Nothing stood out as especially alarming about the women's treatment of their

children: The kids were well-dressed and seemed genuinely happy, demonstrating none of the tell-tale signs of abuse.

But rather than attending school, they were spending their days on the streets.

Vtorov of The Search for Missing Children said that even in a best-case scenario like this, when the kids are with their own mothers, fed well and generally taken care of, they are still deprived of education and a socially acceptable path to adulthood.

"What kind of people will they grow up to be if they spend their days on the streets and in the company of criminals?" Vtorov asked.

"In all the work that we've done, we've never once had social services intervene. We even called them ourselves once and they said, 'Well, was the child running around alone? If not, it doesn't concern us,'" said Maryana Shevtsova of Children in the Hands of Beggars.

Police representatives said social services were unable to do anything unless there was evidence of abuse or the children had lost their parents.

If social services took on every case of a child involved in forced begging, they said, they would have nowhere to put them all.

All the activists agreed that the simplest solution would be to amend the relevant legislation.

Currently, the two statutes in the Criminal Code that veer closest to addressing forced begging contain loopholes that allow professional beggars to evade prosecution.

Authorities have tried but failed to open cases against beggars using Articles 151 and 156, according to police representatives at the raid. The former applies to cases in which adults involve a minor in "antisocial behavior," and the latter to cases in which parents fail to properly care for a minor.

More often than not, professional beggars walk a very thin line between these two statutes and don't fall under either one.

The six women detained by activists and police were the perfect example of such a situation. Legally, they had done nothing wrong.

So the only option for police, Roman said, was to charge them with involving the kids in "antisocial behavior" — but that would require the child to be cognizant of the fact that he is involved in such behavior.

And that's the problem, Proshkin said, noting that current legislation leaves too much leeway for such women to wriggle out of prosecution.

"How can an infant say that they have been involved in begging or been forced to beg?" Proshkin said.

"They need to add the specific phrase 'including by begging' to the definition of antisocial behavior in Article 151," he said.

Just Business

The bigger concern among activists is the likelihood that the groups of beggars are part of a larger criminal scheme, one that is allowed to flourish because social services and police have failed to adequately address the overall issue of begging.

"It's a business," Proshkin said, "a well-organized, profitable business."

Several local shopkeepers in the area near the Pokrovsky Stavropigialny Monastery where this particular group of women beg said they had grown accustomed to seeing the women every day, and one kiosk owner who declined to be named claimed that she had seen the women appear to hand money to a person in a vehicle in the evenings.

The women themselves denied this, however, saying they spent the money they earned begging only on themselves and their young children.

"Do you send the money you earn back home to people in Romania who live in fancy, golden houses?" City FM journalist Anna Abakumova asked the women at the police station.

"What are you talking about Romania? We're from Astrakhan," one of the women responded. "We spend the money on our kids' clothes," she said, pointing to the tags on one of the baby's socks.

Activists from Alternative, a movement that seeks to fight trafficking and labor exploitation, have alleged that some of the profits in this "business" go to police to ensure smooth operations. Proshkin and Khrenova both said that while they had heard of this happening, they themselves had never witnessed police accepting bribes from beggars during their frequent raids.

Way of Life

The conundrum with forced begging is complicated by the beggars' accusations of prejudice and discrimination against the Gypsy lifestyle: Are the women as sneaky and vile as activists believe them to be, or are perceptions tainted by age-old misconceptions about Gypsy culture?

The six women detained in the presence of this Moscow Times reporter repeatedly defended their actions as part of an age-old tradition in their culture.

When asked why they didn't simply find a job, one of the women replied bluntly: "We're illiterate."

"We don't go to school. What other options do we have? This is how it's been from generation to generation. It's not normal to you, but it's normal to us," she said.

The women admitted that they were detained on an almost daily basis, held for a couple of hours and then let go as soon as police verified that their documents were in order.

Both the police and the Gypsies behaved as if the whole procedure were a tired old routine they had grown weary of long ago.

The group was let go with no charges after a few hours in custody.

"If we go back to the spot where we found them tomorrow, they'll be back there begging again," Proshkin said.

"We don't even have to wait until tomorrow," Shevtsova said. "They'll be back by 6 p.m. this evening."

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