

# **The impact and challenges of the Covid-19 for the Roma community in Europe**

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**Abstract:** The paper “The impact and challenges of the Covid-19 for the Roma community in Europe” presents just a small part of the challenges that the Roma community are facing and how they were exacerbated by the apparition of the Covid-10 pandemic. Even before, the Roma people were a vulnerable group, having problems integrating because of the discrimination that brought forth other inequalities that they face in the society. Therefore, a special attention must be paid during this period of crisis in order to prevent further unreplacable losses.

**Keywords:** *Covid, Roma community, challenges*

## **1. Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic has influenced all the communities through the last 3 years, many of them still trying to bounce back and restore to a sense of “normality”. The most affected communities were in special the ethnic minority groups and in special the people of Roma origin. The pandemic has affected the daily life of the Roma people through Europe, many of them still living in marginalised communities and are still suffering from poverty and social exclusion.

Roma communities face a much higher risk of dying from the Covid-19 virus in Europe as their community is already marked by extreme poverty and racism. Almost 80% of the Roma people live below their country’s threshold for being at risk of poverty; about 30 % live in housing with no tap water and every third Roma child lives in a household where someone went to bed hungry at least once in the previous month. In only five years, between 2011 and 2016, the number of children of Roma origin children in segregated, substandard education increased by half, from 10 to 15 percent<sup>1</sup>

The reason why the Roma community is one of the most affected groups or the most affected one by the Covid pandemic is , in principal, due to their poor living conditions and health state, all of this combined with a widespread antigypsism. During the pandemic, many people of Roma origin living in poverty found that they are experiencing a great challenge when it comes to protection against the Covid-19 because of their lack of clean water and sanitation. The impact was even higher and harder for those living in informal or segregated settlements or in improvised shelters.

Numerous Roma groups have limited of no food and medial provisions during quarantine of confinement, which additionally worse the health of both parents and children and also increase their vulnerability to the virus. In addition, the outbreak of discriminatory practices by several authorities of

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<sup>1</sup> ROMA IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS An Early Warning from Six EU Member States, Neda Korunovska and Zeljko Jovanovic Open Society Roma Initiatives Office

the state in terms of locking down Roma settlements will have a negative impact in terms of a long terms strategy on the wellbeing of the Roma communities and in particular to the women and children

## **2. Access to education**

With the school being closed and education being delivered through online means of remotely, Roma children have been particularly hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. An encouraging and supportive home environment, proper housing, possession of a tablet/laptop or PC as well as access to electricity and internet represent the minimum conditions for all children to continue their online education. Despite this, most families and especially the Roma children (in particular those that live in rural areas or improvised settlements) have limited or no internet access, computers or tablets and in some cases, even electricity is not available. Because of this, most Roma children cannot attend online classes and this leads to long-term effects on their education. As some studies show, as a consequence, a significant number of Roma children were not able to pass their classes.

In order to fight some of this problems, the elaboration of a comprehensive national policy or policies that aim to effectively reduce the educational gap between non-Roma and Roma children, including the segregation in schools is desperately needed. Such policies must provide an immediate response to the current challenges that the Roma parents and children face and also the school professionals in continuing formal education. Affordable access to internet, electricity, and adequate equipment for providing and following online classes such as laptops tablets or a PC in addition to TV devices for tele-school are also a must.

There are also many Roma children that rely on school meals that can be supported through food vouchers. In addition, there are EU emergency funds allocated for tackling Covid-19 that can be used specifically to reflect and help the needs of the Roma children and other vulnerable children.

Discrimination is a big part of the problem when it comes to the Roma community and the fact that there are some physical distancing rules for the Covid-19 must not be used for further stigmatization and discrimination of the Roma students and other vulnerable groups. Hand in hand with this proposal, there must be a social, financial, psychological and pedagogical support for the Roma children during and after the pandemic in order to handle its effects on education and health regardless of the children's school attendance.

A particular attention must be paid to supporting vulnerable children who are more likely to drop out of school and to experience more severe drop in their academic future after prolonged school breaks

A study presented by the Fundamental Rights Agency presents that only 53% children of Roma origin attend early childhood education. In addition, 64% of the Roma people between age 16 and 24 are not employed in training or education<sup>2</sup>. Only 18% of the Roma people completed secondary education or higher and one in three Roma children are attending classes where most classmates are of Roma origin<sup>3</sup>. In contrast, the study presents that only 39% of the non- Roma population would feel comfortable if their children were in the same class as Roma children. The percentage when it comes to the Roma population between aged 30 to 34 to achieve tertiary education in 2019 was close to 0 (this was before the pandemic started).

This study shows us that Roma children are not enough or not at all provided from a very early age with the same learning environment, opportunities because of the vicious circle of discrimination and poverty, which act as a powerful barrier in accessing education and training. In connection, they have lower attendance and completion rates, which therefore lead to poor labour market integration or social

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<sup>2</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey - Roma, 2017: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2016-eu-minorities-survey-roma-selected-findings\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-eu-minorities-survey-roma-selected-findings_en.pdf) (hereinafter EU FRA 2017)

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Report on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies – 2019 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/swd2019-320-final\\_report\\_on\\_the\\_implementation\\_of\\_national\\_roma\\_integration\\_strategies\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/swd2019-320-final_report_on_the_implementation_of_national_roma_integration_strategies_en.pdf) (hereinafter EC NRIS 2019)

participation. In addition, segregated education where the Roma children are over-represented is not only against European Union values and principles, but also fuels discrimination and inequalities. The European Anti Poverty Network reported that Roma experienced high levels of disadvantages when it comes to education during the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures.

The Roma students have found themselves unable to access online education due to a lack of infrastructure and equipment. Home schooling had also a negative impact as the teachers and school assistants could not be replaced by parents, many of who have a low education or are sometimes illiterate. Moreover, the closure that the schools provides is also a negative factor when it comes to the Roma children, some of them relying on the free daily meals and thus creating an addition burden for their families strained budgets.

### **3. Access to healthcare**

The Roma community is one of the most vulnerable groups when it comes to health conditions because of their living conditions and base income. In addition, because of these conditions, they suffer from chronic illnesses such as asthma or bronchitis compared to the general population and therefore the Roma people can be more susceptible to the Covid-19 virus and other serious complications in the long run. Without a proper access to health insurance, the health and lives of their families are at high risk.

When it comes to health insurance, nearly 42% of the people interviewed by the ERGP network through their study did not have insurance and almost half of them suffered from different health problems such as: bronchitis, asthma, diabetes, heart problems, cancer n pneumonia, which could be considered high risk factors when it comes to the Covid-19 virus. The majority of the Roma people faced problems in accessing protective gears or medication, mainly due to their economic situation. A significant numbers of Roma people also suffered from anxiety or depression during the pandemic.

A significant health gap and inequality exists between the Roma people and the majority population across every area of mental and physical health and wellbeing, including suicide rates, infant mortality and life expectancy. There are some social determinants such as poverty, inadequate conditions, high levels of racism in accessing health care and discrimination, as well as impaired access to both long-term care services and medicine.

Because of all these factors there is a 10-year difference in life expectancy between non-Roma (74) and Roma people (64) as well as a tenfold higher vulnerability to tuberculosis or other diseases. One in 10 Roma people felt discriminated when accessing healthcare system in six countries, while almost all report more limitation than the general population according to the Fundamental Rights Agency<sup>4</sup>.

### **4. Discrimination**

During the pandemic, the Roma people have been scapegoated and stigmatized for spreading the coronavirus. Many report hat that they feels attacked and discriminated through the internet and social media because they were Roma, by the medial staff, by the police, in shops, by civil servants by employers. They expressed that they have experienced offensive language or hate speech, a refusal to attend to their problems by municipalities, lockdown, and discriminatory restrictions when it comes to freedom of movement, racist attacks or police violence. Most of the Roma people who were victims of discrimination or personal crime did not report the victimization.

Most people of Roma origin face harassment, discrimination and hate crimes because of their ethnic origin. As a result of antigypsism, important parts pf the population struggle with social exclusion, poverty and limited access to employment or services, such as healthcare, education, housing and others. Recent studies shows that roam face disproportionate barriers in accessing health care services exacerbated by a lack of insurance or personal identification documents, but mainly die to distance or discriminatory attitudes. Roma also see their access to justice cut off for financial reasons, lack of

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<sup>4</sup> EU FRA 2020.

information and pervasive discriminatory attitudes.<sup>5</sup> According to FRA reports, 41% of the Roma population feel they have been discriminated against in day-to-day basic situations such as looking for a house, looking for work in health and in education.

According to the 2019 Eurobarometer, 77% percent of the non-Roma people do not have a Roma friend or acquaintance and 61% of them consider that there is widespread discrimination against the Roma people in their country.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, drastic measures that have been adopted with the purpose of curbing the spread of the virus, including suspensions of mass gatherings, mandatory quarantines, isolation of individuals, travel bans and cordoning-off cities or regions with sanctions in case of non-compliance.

## **5. Romania case study**

Since the beginning of April 2020, and particularly around Orthodox Easter in Romania, many violent police abuse cases have happened across the country. Romani CRISS – Roma Centre for Social Intervention and Studies and UCTRR – Civic Union of Young Roma from Romania sent a letter<sup>8</sup> to the Romanian President on 23 April requesting the immediate dismissal of Mr. Marcel Vela, Minister of Internal Affairs and of Mr. Traian Berbeceanu, his Chief of Staff, on the grounds of irresponsible behaviour, disastrous management, and encouragement of the Romanian police to commit violent acts against their own citizens, described briefly below.

In the case of Hunedoara – several Roma and non-Roma living on Batiz street from the neighbourhood Micro 6 denounced that they were beaten by the police as "revenge" following a previous confrontation. Publicly available footage<sup>9</sup> shows a man being beaten by special forces inside a block of flats, on the stairwell, and a 14-year-old child is violently abused near the building. Police entered many homes without a warrant, used tear gas indoors, including against women and minor children (one child was 11 years old). Two men were beaten by special forces when they declared that they wanted to file a complaint against these abuses.

In the case from Rahova - Bucharest, a person using the name "Spartacus" organised a party and his place and posted a live video daring the police to come. Hours later he posted a new video to his Facebook page on 19 April where he apologizes to the Police, <sup>10</sup> where he appears bruised and swollen. The conditions under which these injuries occurred are not clear, nor is it clear how he was able to make the post on Facebook the second time given that he was in pre-trial detention. It seems that the police applied him a "correction" and forced him to apologise as a way to humiliate him, publicly. On the above event, several people, including minors from the Rahova neighbourhood, complained that they were beaten by the police,<sup>6</sup> who allegedly had entered the wrong address (looking for Spartacus) and later left, apologizing for the confusion.

Linked to the above events in Rahova, a 29-year-old mother declared to media and NGOs that the police entered her home while watching TV with three of her four children and pulled her by the hair outside. They took her outside where there were other women, including Spartacus's wife, telling them to kneel in a line together with their children. The woman asked one of the police officers to let her find her children and the officer screamed at her: "Shut up you fucking crow! Fuck your crow mouth!" According to police reports, 37 persons were taken to the police station that night, including children. At the station everyone was made to face the wall in the police yard, and kept there for four hours in the cold, without the possibility to go to the bathroom and drinking water from a hose. Allegedly, Spartacus wife was beaten by three police officers and was left prone and covered in blood. After 15 hours in the police station, they were questioned about the conflict regarding Spartacus, after which many were released. Five men, including Spartacus, were arrested and two women are under judicial

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<sup>5</sup> The impact of covid-19 on Roma communities in the European Union and the Western Balkans, Survey December 2020, Ergo Network

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-uuteyrgzQ>

investigation. Those who were taken abusively to the police station and beaten went to the Forensic National Institute to obtain medical certificates, as evidence of their physical abuse. However, they are afraid to file complaints, as police have threatened to beat them that they must testify to beating each other up and causing themselves the injuries.

### **Conclusion**

The Covid-19 pandemic managed to demonstrate the extreme exposure of marginalised and excluded Roma communities across Europe to negative fundamental rights and socio economic impacts. There is an urgent need to make significant investments in marginalises Roma communities in order to improve access to quality education, healthcare, employment, housing and infrastructure because of the Covid-19 pandemic which made them more and more clearer.

The approach of the local authorities and governments is crucial when dealing with vulnerable groups such as the Roma community in order to secure humanitarian aid for the poor and marginalized communities, to ensure access to a proper education for all children, whether that is online or offline, to support families losing their income because they were working day to day jobs , to keep families and individuals safe from domestic or racial violence and to ensure continuous care to specific groups such as pregnant mothers or women.

In addition, anti-Roma rhetoric increased significantly during the pandemic, blaming the Roma people for spreading the coronavirus

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