

The effects of Covid-19 on Roma communities in EU Member States and Enlargement and Neighbourhood Countries - ERGO Network



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Throughout Europe, most governments have failed to design or implemented specific measures to address the vulnerability of Roma during the coronavirus pandemic.¹ With Commissioner's Dalli statement on the importance of prioritising the protection of fundamental rights and racialised minorities during Covid-19, and the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus and EU Solidarity Fund, Member States were provided the needed support to address the impact of the pandemic crisis on the economy and society, including the most vulnerable.



Despite the massive lack of data on the situation of Roma during the pandemic, reports from our members and partner CSOs that we have used to prepare this document indicate a huge, **disproportionately negative impact of both the pandemic and the security measures associated with it** on Roma communities across Member States, Enlargement and Neighbourhood Countries, aggravated by long-term systemic **discrimination and antigypsyism**.

Disproportionate impact of the pandemic

Marginalized Roma are amongst the most affected and impacted by Covid-19, mainly due to their devastating living conditions and exclusion, along with widespread antigypsyism. Most Roma living in poverty find it very hard to protect themselves from getting the virus or spreading it further, if infected, by a lack of access to the water and sanitation necessary to washing their hands frequently and sanitising their living spaces.² This is even harder for homeless Roma or those living in segregated³ and illegal camps and settlements and improvised shelters.



Numerous Roma communities have **limited or no food supplies or medical provisions during confinement or quarantine**, which additionally worsens the health status of both parents and children and increases their vulnerability to the pandemic. The outbreak of discriminatory practices by several state authorities in terms of locking down Roma settlements will have a long-term, negative impact on the wellbeing of Roma communities, particularly women and children.

Because of poor health and increased chronic illnesses such as asthma or chronic bronchitis, Roma can be more susceptible to COVID-19 and other serious complications in the long run. Without access to health insurance, the health and lives of their entire families are seriously at high risk.

¹ Exception makes North Macedonia, which has taken measures to provide water to a Roma settlement in Prilep, in addition to several social protection measures for vulnerable groups.

² "Throughout Europe, there are Roma and Travellers living in desperately inadequate, insalubrious, unsafe conditions, without access to running water, sanitation, or other public utilities, and often in a situation of severe overcrowding. Instead of seeking additional ways to protect these particularly vulnerable members of our societies as coronavirus spreads, some politicians have actively fuelled anti-Gypsyism," said František Kopřiva, Council of Europe PACE rapporteur on discrimination against Roma and Travellers in the field of housing.

³ Romania, PataRat community in a letter asks urgent measures from the authorities to provide them with food, medication and medical care as well to clean the garbage they live on and prioritise social housing on a medium term: <https://www.ziardecluj.ro/cum-se-protejeaza-de-coronavirus-locuitorii-de-la-pata-rat-fara-apa-potabila-locuinte-insalubre>



With schools being closed and education being delivered either online or remotely, Roma children are particularly affected. Proper housing, an encouraging and supportive home environment, language assistance, internet access, possessing a laptop/PC as well as access to electricity represent the minimum conditions for all children to continue their formal education. However, most Roma children and their families (particularly those living in rural areas and in settlements) have no access to internet, do not have computers and other electronic devices, and in some cases even electricity is not available. Since lack of internet access and electronic devices is higher in regions where significant numbers of Roma reside, this means most Roma children cannot attend online classes, thus leading to long-term effects on their school performance and continuation.

In the area of employment, Roma with lower incomes and insecure or informal employment experience reductions in their income or unemployment due to the growing impacts of the epidemic will also be more adversely impacted. Many Roma working in the informal sector lost their sources of daily income, such as those working in the arts and culture as musicians, cultural producers, artisans, etc., those working the fields of private owners as daily labourers, those collecting and selling scrap metal, small traders, market sellers, flea market sellers⁴, cleaners (especially single mothers) and last but not least, those who beg. These people are present in every European country and are the most affected by the lockdowns because they cannot receive social benefits. Since official reports do not count people in the informal economy, the way to trace the countries and localities with the most affected Roma in the informal economy is to look at unemployment numbers and ask local authorities to develop local vulnerability maps. In the case of unemployed Roma, it is also worth identifying localities where local authorities have been cutting social benefits to Roma applicants, thus rendering them very vulnerable during this crisis.



In addition, there are categories that are and will be affected in particular by the pandemic crisis and its long-term effects, such as (1) children (at risk of dropping out of school; or being taken away by social protection services in case their parents die or are unable to provide adequate living conditions), (2) (a) daily and seasonal workers⁵, seldom in the informal economy, particularly women and single mothers; (b) small business entrepreneurs and the self-employed (c) long-term-unemployed risking cuts in social benefits, particularly (single) mothers; (3) support workers (e.g., health and education mediators, social workers who are visiting Roma neighbourhoods to provide information, monitor quarantine, and work with NGOs on delivering food to poor families); and (4) elderly and Roma over 45 years old - this is vital as the life span of Roma across Europe is 10 to 15 years lower than the majority population and therefore earlier delivery of a preventive plan is essential to prevent health complications and deaths among Roma.

Disproportionate impact of security measures

Security measures of social distancing, confinement and quarantine have disproportionately impacted Roma and other marginalised groups living in poverty with limited resources or savings to sustain themselves during confinement. The inability to engage in informal work and the loss of the social benefits on which many families depend expose Roma to increased poverty and further social exclusion.

Whereas it is the responsibility of the governments to ensure that the rights of those under quarantine, including the right to food, water, sanitation, and an adequate standard of living, are guaranteed, in most

⁴ A high percentage of Roma families in Spain are surviving thanks to the street markets. Many are self-employed, while some work informally.

⁵ E.g. in the Czech Republic: many Roma work through so-called “grey agencies”, which broker work mainly in manufacturing, logistics centres and warehouses; these grey agencies violate a number of legislative regulations by not paying bonuses and benefits, not reimbursing investments into work-related equipment, or paying wages late; such employees often do not have an accident insurance policy. This implies that there is a need to provide assistance to dismissed people and also to hold the Government legally accountable for the “grey” employment agencies.

situations where Roma were placed in quarantine the authorities failed to provide food, water and sanitary equipment, keeping families confined in potentially hazardous conditions.

Discrimination and antigypsyism



During the pandemic we are seeing a worrying increase in the stigmatisation and scapegoating of Roma for allegedly spreading the coronavirus. Negative statements from media and politicians contribute greatly to creating a stereotypical image of Roma and fuelling negative prejudices and antigypsyism by reporting regularly on any incident involving Roma and ethnicising cases of failure to respect security measures or violent conflicts in Roma communities. More so, some local authorities have taken targeted measures to confine Roma by creating checkpoints or employing extra police forces, constabulary and/or military to supervise and raid compact Roma communities, which sometimes results in disproportionate measures and racist violence against individuals who do not comply with confinement measures. In such extreme cases, authorities fail to ensure the safety of Roma communities or that families have the necessary food and supplies to stay at home.

Country negative examples:

BULGARIA

With the state of emergency, the Bulgarian authorities have introduced gradually stricter measures to prevent the spread of the virus in the case of Roma communities across the country.

Since 16 April residents of the Fakulteta and Filipovtsi neighbourhoods have been subject to checkpoint controls because of concerns about them being at high risk of infection after 10 cases were reported in the impoverished area. Safia Mayor, Yordanka Fandukova, denied that measures to restrict movement in Roma neighbourhoods amounted to discrimination, saying they were about stemming contagion and saving lives of residents there. “Many of the Roma work on the grey market without contracts or steady employers,” said Hristo Nikolov, a Fakulteta health mediator. “They cannot provide documents for their employment and now they cannot leave the neighbourhood and earn a living.”

The authorities have built temporary walls around and imposed a complete containment regime on Roma areas in the towns of Nova Zagora, Kazanlak and Sliven, home to some 50,000 Roma, arguing that “lack of discipline among its residents” makes the social distancing measures difficult to enforce.

Similar measures were introduced in the Roma neighbourhood of Shesti near Nova Zagora after the authorities argued that residents did not have access to clean water and sanitation and therefore were not able to maintain the recommended level of hygiene to curb the spread of the virus beyond the settlements. The authorities, however, did not take steps to ensure that the settlement itself would be granted full access to a public supply of water during the pandemic.

In some cases, government officials claimed the measures were necessary in Roma communities because of the high numbers of Roma returning to Bulgaria from seasonal and informal work in some of the severely affected European countries, such as Spain and Italy, posing a risk to the rest of the population. While the government is recommending a general 14-day self-quarantine for all individuals returning from these countries, there is no information about similar measures being applied anywhere as forcefully as in Roma neighbourhoods.

Several towns, including the seaside town of Burgas, decided to use drones with thermal sensors to remotely take the temperatures of residents in Roma settlements. While drone technology has been used in other European countries to gauge temperatures of groups of people, in Bulgaria it appears to

target exclusively the Roma population. It is not clear what measures would be put in place if some of the Roma identify as COVID-19 positive; nor is it clear how the government will ensure that the needs of affected people are met during the quarantine and the rest of the community protected from the spread of the virus.

Armed military personnel were deployed around the perimeter of settlements, which is highly disproportionate if the purpose is protection of public health. In particular, the fact that they were carrying weapons that should only be deployed in high-risk scenarios demonstrates that Roma communities are perceived as a highly worrying “enemy”. These measures risk further spreading fear within Roma communities, sparking retaliation, and further alienating Roma from the rest of society. Roma communities under quarantine in Bulgaria reported a lack of adequate information on the duration and the conditions of their confinement.

The introduction of measures focused on Roma neighbourhoods has been accompanied by an increasingly hostile, anti-Roma rhetoric, frequently stoked by politicians. The Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO) party, a junior coalition partner in the government, has exploited the public health crisis to present Roma as a collective threat to the general population that needs to be “controlled and contained”. There was no evidence of confirmed cases among the Roma community at that time.

Interior Minister Mladen Marinov has also threatened further coercive measures “to protect the general population” if Roma fail to comply with the strict social distancing measures. While Roma communities remain confined to their settlements, there is no evidence that the authorities have provided any assistance to the families living there to ensure that they can comply with government advice on how to protect against infection through regular hand washing or access necessary health care if they have symptoms of COVID-19, or provide for their families during the quarantine.

Source: Amnesty International⁶

IRELAND

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre has stated that, "The stark reality is that Travellers are one of the most vulnerable groups in relation to this crisis and yet many Travellers will not be able to effectively self-isolate (where advised)."

Source: European Roma Rights Centre/Pavee Point

NETHERLANDS

We see in general more racism and antigypsyism increasing and that access to basic needs and other necessary things become much more difficult due to financial problems which is also related to the long-existing socioeconomic exclusion. Covid-19 is even being used as a smokescreen justifying excessive force against Roma families.⁷

Attacks and invectives on Roma are increasing, including on the part of the police. Roma are afraid to report abuses or violence as they know that discrimination and prejudices against them are a norm. Mainstream CSOs working on human rights do not deal with these issues.

⁶Amnesty International criticizes closures of Romani settlements in Bulgaria and Slovakia as part of COVID-19 response, 22.04.2020: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR0121562020ENGLISH.PDF>

⁷ <https://www.omroepbrabant.nl/media/3193048/De-familie-heeft-de-beelden-gedeeld>

Roma are being targeted in a very severe way: the main concern is that antigypsyism is being approved within the framework of the measures of National Roma Integration Strategy, where repression against Roma families is the starting point hence it is included in policies and approaches. In every Dutch city where Roma communities live, except for Utrecht, where the strategy and policies focus on inclusion, these repressive measures are included in local policies.

Repression against Roma is already longstanding, and it is regularly based on racist pseudo-science and medieval prejudice. Irish Travellers face the same repressive measures implemented in a specific programme.

Media play a very significant role with respect to targeting Roma and Irish travellers in the Netherlands. However, when a complaint is filed against this stereotyping and antigypsyist media reporting, the general answer is that this is allowed under freedom of the press. This happens without conducting thorough investigation including completely denying the presence of strong antigypsyism in their programmes and articles.

Another main thing is that people who are stateless and/or at risk already do have a weak(er) legal position in society: during and after this pandemic they are and will be even more affected. Roma NGOs support Roma communities as volunteers as professionals are not acting in a proper way or even not at all. Access to health care and to education are not equal as showed in different cases.

Source: Roma Association Utrecht, NL

ROMANIA

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 letter⁸ 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 footage⁹ 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,¹⁰ 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

⁸ Letter available on Romani Criss website : http://drepturile-omului.info/arhiva-stiri/?fbclid=IwAR0kuGZbMMP5m9zqn1TA--_eOZMHSIUvq51NkZtXNznigX46DK3GOPLofpo&lang=en

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90nrKHMeV5A>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsmMpzd-WJI>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsmMpzd-WJI&t=5s>

police applied him a “correction” and forced him to apologise as a way to humiliate him, publicly. on to the above event, several people, including minors from the Rahova neighbourhood, complained that they were beaten by the police,¹¹ 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 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.

On 20 April, after the incidents in Rahova, Hunedoara and Sacele, Traian Berbeceanu, the Chief of Cabinet of the Minister of Interior Marcel Velea, posted on his Facebook page that “violence must be responded to with violence. Proportionately.” In addition, the Europol Union of the Romania Police posted to Facebook a photo of Spartacus where he appears beaten up with the comment “citizen with rights”, which is an ironic comment about human rights and an intimidating message for a police force to communicate.

In a case from Bolintin-Vale, Giurgiu County, on 18 April, police intervened in a conflict between 2 families. On the occasion, at the margin of the community, police, special forces and constabulary allegedly committed several abuses against four families. Romani Criss and UCTRR identified a number of eight Roma men and a 13 year-old boy beaten brutally by the police for half an hour, after they were taken out of their homes, handcuffed and asked to lay down on their front in the street.¹² Police entered homes without a warrant, used tear gas indoors, including against women and minor children (one child was 11 years old).¹³ The police threatened the victims with repercussions of they decide to file complaints about the violence. The two NGOs offered to assist with the legal proceedings the victims, who later requested medical certificates from the Prosecutor regarding the injuries suffered. On the 29 April, the Prosecutor will hold the first hearings in this case.¹⁴ After the

¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=av_Uw3bKLzo; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-uuteyrgzQ>

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90nrKHMeV5A>

¹³ Later, one victim gave an interview where he declared: "I was in the house. I didn't get into this quarrel, I didn't deal with them, and I was there in the house. And I remember the masked people in the house, they put me on my stomach, they came into my house (...) They beat me there, took me from there and put me here, on my stomach, here he jumped on me, they were killing me, just with sticks and iron and shovels. They broke my hand and my leg. They took off my sneakers and beat me on my heels here. They fainted me here. For half an hour they beat me here."

¹⁴ For further information and details on the case, you can contact the director of Romani Criss, Marian Mandache at: marian@romanicriss.org or at: http://www.romanicriss.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1592&Itemid=558

incident, the Bolintin Police Chief was discharged. He is currently being investigated by prosecutors for abusive behaviour.

The Council for Combating Discrimination in Romania has received several complaints from plaintiffs and CSOs regarding racist police abuse and demonisation of Roma in the media in recent weeks, which triggered increasing hate speech in the online media and social platforms with long term damaging effects against efforts to change negative stereotyping and prejudices against Roma

It is worth noting that Romania requested on 18 March 2020 a derogation¹⁵ from the application of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), based on Article 15 in time of emergency¹⁶. Romania indicated that in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to manage its consequences, the exercise of the following rights will be restricted, proportionally to the degree in which the criteria mentioned in Article 4, paragraph 4, are accomplished: a) Freedom of movement; b) Right to intimate, family and private life; c) Inviolability of home; d) Right to education; e) Freedom of assembly; f) Right of private property; g) Right to strike; h) Economic freedom.

Sources: Romani Criss, Facebook and online media, ECtHR website

SLOVAKIA

On 9 April the Government of Slovakia decided to quarantine five entire Roma settlements in eastern Slovakia: three in the village of Krompachy, and one each in the villages of Bystrany and Žehra, without providing families any information about the duration and conditions of their confinement. The Government argued that such measures were necessary to protect public health as there were 31 positive cases in those five settlements, which have more than 6,800 residents. The authorities reportedly did not separate those who had positive tests for COVID-19 from the rest of the community. Moreover, according to the available evidence, the authorities did not put in place adequate provisions of food and medical supplies. In one of the settlements, the residents together with a local entrepreneur set up an improvised system of food supply. In another of the quarantined settlements, the authorities were selling simple food packages for 15 Euros, instead of giving them for free to those families who had lost their income due to the measures.

Roma also reported instances when ambulances initially refused to come and assist residents who needed health care. In addition, people in the settlements were worried about the lack of information about the duration of the quarantine and the lack of resources to sustain themselves should the quarantine last longer.

On 27 April, a police officer in Krompachy beat five young children from a Roma quarantined settlement with a truncheon. According to the children's testimony, the officer threatened to shoot them as well. The reason he used force, allegedly, was that the children were collecting wood and playing outside of the quarantine zone. Following the events, the MEP filed a motion with the Interior Ministry Inspection Authority to investigate into the case. "It is absurd for anybody in uniform to even raise their hand to children. This is unprofessional and what's more, it's illegal." the MEP said.¹⁷

¹⁵ Notification to the Court: <https://rm.coe.int/09000016809cee30>

¹⁶ In March and April 2020, in the context of the COVID-19 health crisis, Latvia, Romania, Armenia, the Republic of Moldova, Estonia, Georgia, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia and San Marino notified the Secretary General of the Council of Europe of their decision to use Article 15 of the Convention. Further information on derogations is available in the Factsheet of the Court at: https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/FS_Derogation_ENG.pdf

¹⁷ <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/slovak-mep-from-romani-community-strongly-condemns-police-beating-of-romani-children-in-quarantined-settlement-as?fbclid=IwAR05rG1uxlaWfqdNTMerN9rdnE7Inm6UDwKJPYQQKwp6uRm25T4ma-x3CHs>

Roma declared that they do not trust institutions to provide them with fair and equal treatment during the pandemic. The Ombudswoman and journalists declared that the Government should not respond to the pandemic the way they did in Roma communities and that the concerns raised by Roma activists are legitimate.

The mayor of Kosice, Jaroslav Polacek, posted a warning to social media that coronavirus can spread because of the behaviour of "socially unadaptable people" in Roma settlements who do not respect emergency measures

Sources: Amnesty International; Romea; Roma Advocacy and Research Centre, SK

SPAIN

According to a research by Foessa Foundation¹⁸, the 86% of the Roma families in Spain are below the poverty line and the child poverty rate stands at 89% on Roma families, a very high level compared with the rest of the population.

With the closure of schools and universities due to the state of security and the introduction of online classes, many Roma parents do not have the financial resources to ensure all the equipment and Internet connection for the children and youngsters to follow the lessons. In addition, many parents do not have the "IT" or substantive knowledge to support their children with the lessons, because many of them are illiterate or dropped out of school early.

More than the 50% of Roma workers are self-employed (the majority in street markets/flea markets). Street markets are the main source of income for the majority of Roma families and the closure of the markets due to the coronavirus has left these families in a vulnerable situation and without access to unemployment benefits. The Spanish government has provided some economical support to the self-employed workers, but those are minimum; Roma families do not know how to apply for it and the procedure is very slow. Thus, more than half of the total of Roma families will be in a significantly worst situation, which will deteriorate even further in the absence of a steady income.

Regarding Roma families in the non-formal employment, the majority are also selling in the street market but in informal way. In this period, they cannot go to work, and they cannot apply for any State benefits. Even with the reopening of the street markers, public opinion is that people will not go to buy from the street markets, because of fear of Covid-19

The situation of those Roma who were temporary workers in restaurants/bars, etc. is also worrisome. They have lost their jobs and they do not have access to unemployment benefits.

The image of the Roma population in Spain has been negatively affected by speculations that Roma are to blame for the spread of the virus, including by mayors and public figures. Many Roma have been refused to enter the supermarkets or pharmacies and were getting racist insults from clients. Media contributes a lot to spreading antigypsyist feelings among the Spanish population, by spreading fake news or news that are only showing one side of the history.¹⁹

Source: Federació d'Associacions Gitanes de Catalunya (FAGIC)

¹⁸ https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/NESET_AHQ4_2019.pdf

¹⁹ https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Guardia-Civil-Santona-vincular-Covid-19_0_1011750018.html; <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20200418/48581396302/los-gitanos-en-europa-del-este-especialmente-vulnerables-ante-la-covid-19.html>; <https://unionromani.org/2020/04/17/putos-gitanos-de-mierda-me-cago-en-dios-estoy-de-una-mala-hostia-que-dan-ganas-de-salir-y-darles-fuego/>; <http://plataformakhetane.org/index.php/2020/04/08/antigitanismo-y-emergencia-economica-la-crisis-sanitaria-se-ensana-con-el-pueblo-gitano/>

UNITED KINGDOM

Since the Covid-19 lockdown period began, at least 14 local authorities have threatened to evict Gypsies and Travellers living on Unauthorised Encampments (in three of these cases evictions have actually been carried out). More positively, since the Government produced its "Covid-19: Mitigating Impacts on Gypsy and Traveller Communities" guidance, a growing number of local authorities have set up temporary transit sites with toilets and washing facilities.

Hate speech is on the rise, particularly since Channel 4 ran a TV program called "Dispatches: The Truth About Traveller Crime" which gave the clear impression that criminality was linked to ethnicity. In some cases, the Police have been contacted to take measures against the perpetrators. We await the outcome of this contact.

Sources: National Federation of Gypsy Liaison groups, UK

SERBIA

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has initiated a procedure for the imposition of interim measures on the Republic of Serbia due to the danger of violation of the right to life and the prohibition on inhuman and degrading treatment with respect to Roma living in the informal settlement of Cukarica Forest in Belgrade during coronavirus.

There are 70 Roma families who live in this settlement and who were abandoned there after they fled Kosovo in 1999, without any infrastructure being provided for their living conditions – without water, electricity or organized garbage disposal, surrounded by forests, and recently in the company of rats. In the conditions of the pandemic, when all citizens are urged to hinder the spread of infection and protect themselves and their families through increased hygiene measures, several hundred people living here do not have the opportunity to do so.

After several attempts by the Initiative A 11 to prompt the Government of the Republic of Serbia to take urgent measures to protect the most vulnerable, Initiative A 11 submitted a request²⁰ for an interim measure of the ECtHR against the Republic of Serbia. The Court acted promptly on this request and initiated the procedure against Serbia, clearly confirming that the situation in this settlement and the lack of response by the authorities present a serious, real risk of **subjecting the Roma living in this settlement to inhuman and degrading treatment and violating their right to life.**

There are at least 583 informal Roma settlements in Serbia. In almost 40% of these settlements, houses are not connected to the water supply network. This means that at least 25,000 Roma live in Serbia without water. Moreover, on March 17, the Initiative A 11 sent an Appeal to the Government of Serbia for taking urgent measures to protect the most vulnerable, and already on March 20, in cooperation with the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Team of the Government of the Republic of Serbia and some experts in the field of social rights, the Initiative submitted a proposal for measures to protect the most vulnerable during the fight against the coronavirus to the Government of Serbia. Meanwhile, the situation in the informal settlements is on the verge of a humanitarian catastrophe, and Roma displaced from Kosovo are particularly at risk. Without sufficient income, without the opportunity to do business in the informal economy, without electricity, water, protective equipment and adequate information about the measures for the prevention of coronavirus, Roma men and women are left to themselves, depending mainly on the humanitarian aid provided by civil society organizations from time to time.

²⁰ <https://www.a11initiative.org/en/european-court-of-human-rights-has-initiated-procedure-against-serbia-for-lack-of-support-for-the-most-vulnerable-in-the-fight-against-coronavirus/>

On 7 April 2020, the Government informed the Secretary General of the Council of Europe that the measures implemented by the Republic of Serbia derogated from certain obligations provided for in the European Convention on Human Rights to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the epidemiological situation and medical necessity.²¹

Source: Initiative A11

TURKEY

The number of infected people is increasing in Roma neighbourhoods in Istanbul. Some neighbourhoods in other cities have been closed down. Roma drummers cannot go out for Ramadan to make a living. Restrictions on travel between cities were introduced. Over 500,000 agriculture workers are affected, especially Roma that go out to work in the fields.

Source: Association Zero Discrimination, TUR

UKRAINE

On 21 April, the Mayor of Ivano-Frankivsk, Ruslan Martsinkiv, was heard on video²² demanding to know why the Roma from Ivano-Frankivsk have not been moved to Zakarpattia and ordering that those who refused to go “be packed and taken away”.

Allegedly, 10 Roma residing in the park area in the city centre of Ivano-Frankivsk, Western Ukraine were forcibly moved to Zakarpattia for violation of quarantine restrictions. Roma and human rights groups have demanded action from the enforcement bodies and it was reported in the evening of 22 April that a criminal investigation has been initiated.

The video from Martsinkiv’s weekly meeting on 21 April is disturbing. In his dialogue with the local police, he said, “*Also Gypsy, no... correctly people of Roma origin... We already provided you with a bus for transporting them to Zakarpattia. Why they are still here?*”. Ihor Vlzl, a head of the City Council of Emergency Issues replied to him, that “*12 people refused to travel*”. Ruslan Martsinkiv claimed, “*What does it mean “refused”? Why you did not pack them all? There are the police. By next Tuesday you should resolve this problem. We gave you a coach. The police asked to be given a coach, and we gave it. Why didn’t you pack them and take them away?*” He was told that ten Roma had been “handed over to the Zakarpattia police’ on the border of the oblasts and reiterated that they “*have to make a second round*”.

The Coalition of Ukrainian Roma NGOs reacted²³ swiftly, calling upon the Office of the President, the Verkhovna Rada and Cabinet of Ministers to comment on the actions of the Mayor of Ivano-Frankivsk and to carry out immediate action on preventing anti-Roma attitudes and behaviour in all parts of Ukraine, pointing out that Martsinkiv’s words had contained hate speech and could incite enmity to Roma.

Chiricli NGO called to the Public Administration to check the reasons of the eviction. The administration informed that the Mayor did not give any written official order about the eviction. Chiricli sent official letter to the Ombudsman office about the case and asked for her reaction. The Ombudsman issued her official position regarding the case, requested the investigation of Mayor’s actions.

²¹ Note verbal dated 7 April 2020: <https://rm.coe.int/16809e1d98>

²² <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2750266738415179>

²³ <https://www.facebook.com/radiochiriklo/photos/a.720863614713052/1914971595302242/?type=3&theater>

The Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union and Kharkiv Human Rights Group also issued a statement²⁴, reminding the Mayor of Ivano-Frankivsk that any forced movement of a person is a deprivation of their liberty and can only be carried out on legal grounds, and by court order. Such forced transfer is otherwise a criminal offence, punishable, in accordance with Article 146 of Ukraine's Criminal Code by up to five years' imprisonment.

On 22 April in the evening, the Interior Minister Arsen Avakov tweeted that the National Police have initiated criminal proceedings under Article 161 of the Criminal Code in connection with the call in Ivano-Frankivsk to forcibly move people. He called the position of the Mayor unacceptable and said that the National Police are not a punitive machine.

On 23rd April, the Mayor of Ivano-Frankivsk gave number of interviews explaining that he "proposed to assist some Roma to get to Transcarpathia", because they violated the quarantine rules and were not registered in this city.

A second case happened during the Easter celebration in Donetsk region, involving ethnic clashes in the village Novotroitske, right on the conflict line between Novovtroitske and Donetsk. 100 people were involved into a fight between Roma and locals. The situation is currently under control, the Roma houses protected by the police.

The state of emergency has not been declared, the official status now is the so-called "situation of emergency" declared by the Cabinet of Ministers, and not voted by the Parliament (as should be in the case of the state of emergency).

Source: Chiricli,UA

²⁴ <http://khpg.org/index.php?id=1587564238>

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