



ROMA IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

An Early Warning from Six
EU Member States

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European Union (EU) member states covered by this briefing (Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) have not responded with proportionate attention to the much higher risk of death from COVID-19 in Roma communities.

- Health measures are inadequate for conditions of extreme poverty and are conditioned on health insurance coverage, which many Roma lack.
- Soldiers, police personnel, and drones have been more present in Roma communities in Bulgaria and Slovakia than have nurses, doctors, and medical supplies.
- After initial assistance efforts organized by Roma civil society and some international organizations, governments have started providing emergency aid, yet it is aid that is inadequate and will not be enough to address community needs.
- States provide social assistance, but the assistance does not cover those who made a living in the informal economy and those who have returned to their countries of origin from Western Europe.
- Distance learning measures leave more than half of Roma children out of school and will likely lead to an increase in the already high dropout rates among Roma students.
- Disinformation by members of the far right and others, combined with excessive security measures and police abuse, frames the Roma as a public health threat, reinforcing and politicizing hatred.
- The most dramatic and long-lasting impact is on Roma workers and entrepreneurs, many of whom worked in the informal economy, in low-skill and low-wage jobs, or in the arts and culture industry and who are not included in social and economic recovery plans.

The recommendations section of this briefing (page 8) lists urgent measures that should be calibrated in each country and community. Some of the member states covered here have taken measures that are highlighted as positive examples below. These examples, however, are exceptions

that confirm the rule rather than signs of solidarity or a better systemic approach. The long-term measures that we propose would be the basis of such an approach.

The current crisis and the EU recovery plan present both the necessity and opportunity to consider the situation of Roma as a matter of fairness, rights, obligations, needs, and benefits for Roma communities. Even without the COVID-19 crisis, the future of European economies was troubled due to aging populations and other negative demographic trends. At the same time, the Roma remain the youngest, most vibrant, and fastest growing segment of Europe's population. In this context, right after the 2008 financial crisis, the World Bank reported that racism and the exclusion of Roma cause significant economic losses. For example, lower bound annual productivity losses range from 526 million euro in Bulgaria to 887 million in Romania, and lower bound annual fiscal losses range from 202 million euro in Romania to 370 million euro in Bulgaria. Now more than ever, it is necessary to reconsider this argument as a matter of sound political and economic decision-making.

Our primary recommendation is that the European Commission and the EU's financial institutions—for example, the European Investment Bank—should take responsibility for complementing the measures of national governments, both in the short and long term. The expectation that EU structural funds alone would be an adequate instrument for making a macroeconomic impact on Roma communities has proven to be far from realistic—and will remain so—if supervision over these funds is loosened. The measures we recommend can be effective if the EU institutions centrally allocate and manage targeted funds to maximize the potential of the Roma population. Such an approach should pay particular attention to targeting cities, towns, and districts with a higher proportion of Roma inhabitants and be carried out in partnership with innovative and capable Roma advocates and Roma-led organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Roma communities in Europe face a much higher risk of death from COVID-19, as their situation, already marked by extreme racism and poverty, has been worsening in the last decade. In the richest continent on Earth, 80 percent of Roma surveyed live below their country's threshold for being at risk of poverty; about 30 percent live in housing without 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 Roma children in segregated, substandard education increased by half, from 10 percent to 15 percent.

The COVID-19 crisis is accelerating the worsening trend toward more catastrophic figures. It is very difficult to get a quantitative grasp of the situation, both generally, without systems for ethnic data collection in place, and specifically, with the current state of lockdown and fast-changing government responses and levels of virus spread. This briefing, therefore, presents an early warning based on information collected through the Open Society Roma Initiatives Office's network of advocates on the ground in Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. The aim is to direct the attention of EU policy makers to responses by EU member states that currently are speeding up a looming disaster for millions of Roma. This disaster will not only affect the Roma but also mainstream societies, economies, and politics, and heighten interethnic conflict to a level not seen in the last three decades.

EU MEMBER STATE RESPONSES

Health measures. Preventive measures such as hand washing and physical distancing are much more challenging for Roma than other populations, as many of them live in conditions of extreme poverty. On average across the European Union, 30 percent of Roma do not have access to tap water and up to 80 percent of Roma live in dense neighborhoods and overcrowded housing. Although national governments are aware of these conditions, they have not prioritized Roma neighborhoods when distributing supplies of disinfectants and implementing disinfection measures.

Because testing for COVID-19 in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Spain is conditioned on health insurance coverage, a significant proportion of the Roma population is excluded. For example, only 45 percent of Roma in Bulgaria and 54 percent of Roma in Romania have health insurance. A positive example, however, is the city of Milan, which has implemented large-scale COVID-19 and oxygen saturation testing in the Roma camps on its territory, regardless of insurance coverage.

Restrictions on public transport in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Spain provide access to essential medical care only for Roma with chronic illnesses or special circumstances (e.g., pregnancy), as Roma rely on public transport for visits to doctors and pharmacies.

Discriminatory medical treatment has been reported in Slovakia (i.e., mandatory testing for Roma communities only) and in some Roma neighborhoods in Bulgaria. A Gallup survey commissioned by the Open Society Foundations in 2017 found that doctors are most likely to discriminate against Roma in Bulgaria, Italy, and Romania. With health systems overwhelmed in these countries, Roma are at even greater risk of mistreatment.

Security measures. Instead of devoting special attention to health measures, some governments have resorted to over-policing or disproportionate use of force. In Bulgaria, for example, police checkpoints for monitoring the movement of inhabitants were set up in several Roma settlements although proportionally the number of infected people was no higher than in the rest of the country. The security measures were not followed by health support, except for 165 tests done in the Fakulteta and Filipovtsi neighborhoods—the largest Roma neighborhoods in Sofia, where more than 50,000 people live. It is also worrisome that some municipalities used drones for monitoring and control of people's movement.

In Slovakia, five Roma settlements with a COVID-19 case rate of 1 percent are under quarantine by the military, yet government rules stipulate a 10 percent threshold for introducing a quarantine. In Italy, a Roma camp in Castel San Giovanni is under lockdown because of one COVID-19 death and five positive cases, leaving 50 Roma inside the camp without access to basic necessities.

The lack of food forces the most vulnerable Roma to break the quarantine, which endangers their access to social aid and exposes them to police abuse, particularly in Bulgaria and Romania.

Emergency and humanitarian measures. When the pandemic crisis hit, initiatives organized by Roma themselves provided crucial support to families in need much sooner than states did. In all the countries covered by this briefing, governments have since introduced measures to provide basic goods to those most in need. This assistance, however, is mostly limited to food and hygiene packages and distributed through organizations that lack accurate data about the Roma most in need and have no means to obtain this data. Due to the inadequacy of these measures and conditions that were already worsening before the COVID-19 crisis, the need for humanitarian and emergency support will grow exponentially.

The systemic failure to provide access to water to 30 percent of Roma communities is taking its toll and, except in Slovakia, there have been no measures to address this problem specifically during the pandemic. Due to outstanding debts, the poorest Roma neighborhoods face electricity shortages; for example, El Gallinero in Madrid; or in southern Italy, where 10,000-15,000 Roma families have no regulated electricity and water supplies in their households. According to an Open Society early warning survey, access to electricity is an issue for segments of the Roma population in all countries.

Social measures. With no cash savings to buffer the loss of income, many Roma face increasing unemployment and bankruptcy that pushes them into deeper poverty. Governments continue to pay social aid, and it is a positive development that some countries have expanded the coverage or otherwise adjusted it to the situation. In Hungary, for example, recipients of social aid and energy benefits will also receive food packages. In Slovakia, the government is paying social aid in weekly installments instead of monthly ones. However, it is uncertain how governments will process new requests or further expand coverage for those who will lose their income and savings.

Many Roma are not covered by social welfare, and the most vulnerable are informal workers and emigrants. Those in the informal economy are not eligible for aid, while current measures prevent them from earning an income. Those who emigrated to Western Europe to work, who have up until now been economically independent and have sent remittances to friends or family in their countries of origin, are losing their jobs. For example, 60,000-70,000 Roma, out of more than 200,000 Bulgarian citizens in total, have returned from Western Europe in the last two months, according to estimates by the Roma Standing Conference, a nationwide movement in Bulgaria. Emigrant workers are not covered by support measures, they are not eligible for unemployment benefits, and they cannot be registered by the employment offices due to administrative criteria.

A positive example is UNAR, the Italian government agency responsible for the implementation of the national strategy for Roma, which has reallocated 100,000 euro to cover the basic needs of Roma living in Milan, Naples, and Rome who are not covered by social protection, mostly due to the lack of documents and status.

Subsidies for housing are a less common measure. Currently, only half of the countries (Italy, Romania, and Spain) provide some sort of help for housing. Evictions have been suspended in Hungary, Italy, Romania, and Spain but this is not a solution to the housing problem.

Some countries have postponed mortgage and credit payments, but these measures do not cover non-financial and short-term lenders, which are key sources of credit for Roma. Some measures require a clear credit history before the pandemic, a condition that disproportionately affects Roma. Those who benefit from the lack of emergency and humanitarian support are the loan sharks, especially in Bulgaria and Slovakia where the police and army have sealed off communities.

Education measures. The Roma Education Fund expects that the already high dropout rate of 68 percent among Roma schoolchildren will increase further due to conditions that prevent Roma children from participating in distance learning. The following are the most common barriers faced by Roma children:

- **Access to utilities:** Roma with no access to electricity or the internet cannot connect to remote education programs.
- **Access to technology:** In Spain, about half of the Roma children have no access to the technology needed for distance learning. This situation is likely to be even worse in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.
- **Digital literacy:** Roma with no computers, televisions, printers, and other technology cannot benefit from remote programs. Half of those who do have access to such devices are unlikely to be able to use them for meaningful learning.
- **School supplies:** Many distance-learning activities rely on multiple supplies that Roma children usually do not have at home. Educational supplies are not part of any systemic assistance measures.
- **Limited contact from teachers:** In some cases, teachers do not contact Roma parents because, for example, Roma parents do not have access to e-mail.
- **Overcrowding:** Studying at home is more difficult in small homes inhabited by large families.
- **Independent work:** Remote schooling requires independent work from students or the intensive involvement of parents, but Roma parents with low levels of education are not able to provide support.

One recent positive development is from Bulgaria, where the government has announced that it will provide free internet packages, but it is too early to assess the scope of the program or its impact on Roma children.

Economic measures. This is the area with the most serious negative impact on Roma during the pandemic and it will have generational consequences. Because most Roma work in low-skilled, low-paid jobs in the gray market or in informal businesses, Roma cannot access the benefits provided by member states and EU COVID-19 related support measures. In Romania and Spain, especially, confinement and physical-distancing measures have cut off the incomes of all

the Roma who work as street vendors. In Italy, the closure of amusement parks affects about 15,000 families—around a third of the country’s entire Roma and Sinti population. In every country, a significant share of income for Roma comes from the collection of recyclables and from musical performance, both of which have been made impossible by the pandemic.

A survey of 195 Roma-owned businesses—conducted in March in North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia by the Roma Entrepreneurship Development Initiative, an Open Society grantee, found the following:

- Of the Roma entrepreneurs surveyed, 50 percent said that they would not be able to make their rent and loan payments if the crisis lasts longer than two weeks.
- Around 90 percent of surveyed entrepreneurs did not see any opportunities to generate income in the near future.
- A majority of Roma entrepreneurs, 60 percent, said that their businesses would go bankrupt and close in the next two months in the absence of immediate support measures to ensure their cash flow needs.

The European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture estimates that 70 percent of Roma who earn a living from the arts and culture industries will not be able to cover their basic necessities for more than three months during the crisis.

None of the EU countries are taking measures to support workers in precarious situations or those who work in the informal economy.

Disinformation measures. Existing legislation allows governments, based on health concerns, to impose sanctions for spreading fake news. So far, however, there are no sanctions for hate speech related to Roma and COVID-19. Fake news against Roma is widespread in all of the countries, stoking fear and hate against the Roma. At the same time, excessive security measures such as those in Bulgaria and Slovakia seemingly confirm the fake news.

Not surprisingly, the far right is using Roma as scapegoats. Their main message is that Roma are not following preventive measures and are therefore a risk to society as a whole. In Bulgaria, the far right spreads messages that the Roma are a major source of the infection. In Italy, the Lega Nord and Fratelli d’Italia parties are spreading claims, mostly via social media, that Roma are not following government containment measures and are spreading the virus. In Spain, far-right media like Mediterraneo Digital—but also ABC, ABC-Seville, and ABC-Larioja have blamed Roma for not respecting confinement measures. In Romania, fake news blaming Roma for the pandemic is also spread via social media.

A positive development is that General Mutavchiiski the head of Bulgaria’s national emergency agency, responded to provocative questions from journalists attempting to blame Roma for the crisis, by repeatedly stating that ethnicity is not a factor when he makes decisions about patients and public health measures and that the current health crisis does not select victims based on ethnicity or social status. General Mutavchiiski, however, is a very rare example within Bulgaria’s far-right government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the implications of the crisis are myriad, some needs are particularly urgent. The recommendations below are aimed at EU institutions and their funding criteria and conditions for measures taken by national and local governments.

Health measures

Urgent:

1. Implement mass testing for COVID-19 and oxygen saturation levels for those in dense Roma settlements with no access to water and for those without health insurance. This measure should be implemented based on the health conditions and level of risk that Roma communities face.
2. Decide on quarantine measures in a non-discriminatory manner and impose them at the individual level rather than at the level of entire settlements, unless there is a massive outbreak in a particular location.
3. Provide quarantine facilities for those living in overcrowded conditions, where home isolation endangers family members, particularly those who are old or chronically ill. If private facilities are publicly funded, quotas should be established for vulnerable groups such as Roma.
4. Ensure humanitarian aid also includes medicines as well as formula and other supplies for mothers and infants.

Long-term:

1. Expand primary health coverage to include groups like the 30 percent of Roma who currently do not have any health insurance.
2. Evaluate co-payment requirements and eliminate conditions that disproportionately affect Roma and other groups in similar conditions.
3. Implement mass vaccination programs, not only for COVID-19 but also for other diseases, as the pandemic measures will likely increase the number of non-vaccinated Roma children.
4. Establish internal control systems to monitor the quality of health services and emergency assistance for Roma that would include racism audits of health institutions.

Security measures

Urgent:

1. Re-evaluate decisions to establish police checkpoints in several Roma settlements in Bulgaria (Kazanlak, Nova Zagora, Sliven, and Sofia) and in five settlements in Slovakia (two streets in Krompachy and Roma neighborhoods in the towns of Bystrany, Dreveník, Stará Máša, and Žehra). Ensure that any closure of settlements is based on health-risk facts, and not on ethnicity, and is enforced in parallel with humanitarian, medical, and other support for Roma.
2. Investigate incidents of police abuse rigorously to ensure that there is no impunity and to ensure the participation of Roma human rights advocates in monitoring committees.

Long-term:

1. Support and establish programs that will train Roma for positions in the police and security forces, and gradually ensure equitable representation of Roma in police forces across the European Union.
2. Ensure that police checkpoints are always put in place to protect citizens when there are threats to Roma by far-right groups.

Emergency and humanitarian measures

Urgent:

1. Ensure immediate access to water, food, medication, and protective gear in all Roma settlements without water supplies. Part of the financing for this could come from the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived under the Corona Response Investment Initiative. A conservative estimate puts the number of such settlements in the six surveyed countries at 54.
2. Prohibit the cancelation of basic utility services during the pandemic. Consider subsidizing consumption costs for the most vulnerable and those who have lost incomes or suspending payments until recovery from the pandemic begins.
3. Liaise with telecom and internet operators to quickly establish Wi-Fi hotspots in Roma settlements to ensure that information and education resources are accessible.
4. Ensure that previous debt and credit history does not limit Roma access to benefits rolled out as a response to the pandemic. This includes restructuring loans from both financial and online creditors.

Long-term:

1. Develop a special program that will legalize informal Roma settlements.
2. Prioritize investing for infrastructure development and housing improvement for newly-legalized informal settlements. This would be an opportunity to invest in green and sustainable community designs.

Social measures

Urgent:

1. Ensure that social welfare is extended to cover informal workers who are unable to earn a living due to the pandemic as well as emigrants who have recently returned to their home countries.
2. Ensure that social aid is not conditioned on the participation of children in home schooling, as is currently the case in most countries.

Long-term:

1. Reform social welfare systems so that aid is coupled with training and education that increases Roma employment opportunities.
2. Design an effective social safety net by piloting social audits that identify poverty risks stemming from the intersectional vulnerabilities of Roma.

Education measures

Urgent:

1. Distribute computers/tablets and educational supplies, and ensure access to the internet in order to prevent the exclusion of Roma children and an increase in dropout rates. Partner with large IT and telecommunications companies to scale investment.
2. Adopt digital literacy programs to support Roma families.

Long-term:

1. Build on the urgent investments in technology and invest in digital literacy programs that can support Roma children after school, once schools have re-opened. The Roma Education Fund is now piloting such a program and it could inform the future design of a larger program.
2. Provide scholarships for Roma who are studying to be teachers and gradually increase the number of Roma teachers, especially in early education and primary school.

Economic measures

Urgent:

1. Encourage member states to make full use of the flexibility under European Structural and Investment Funds to reallocate funds for the measures detailed below.
2. Create programs to protect people affected by temporary loss of income, specifically targeting informal entrepreneurs and particularly vulnerable workers (street vendors, informal recyclers, amusement park workers, day laborers, musicians, artists, and other entertainment workers).

Long-term:

1. Devise programs for people who are self employed or active in the informal sector that are similar to the SURE instrument, which protects people who are part of the formal economy. Programs should include direct measures targeting informal entrepreneurs as well as indirect measures dedicated to support microfinancing institutions that are providing loans in vulnerable communities and to informal entrepreneurs.
2. Invest in programs to teach new skills to Roma and other vulnerable groups, delivering market-driven vocational training to make them more resilient in the face of future threats, such as those posed by Industry 4.0 and artificial intelligence.
3. Build on the positive results of the Youth Employment Initiative and accelerate the transition of young people from education to private sector employment through coaching, mentoring, traineeships, business incubators, and dual education for vulnerable youth. (This would be best if combined in a two-step scheme with the following measure.)
4. Devise support schemes for businesses providing employment to vulnerable people. For example, at least 30 percent of all public works funded by the European Union should be implemented by small and micro-enterprises employing staff from vulnerable communities.
5. Introduce basic income guarantees.
6. Deploy integrated finance interventions: financial literacy, combining repayable and non-repayable finance, and reinforced microfinance interventions focused on employment assistance and job creation, as well as support for self-constructed housing through microloans.
7. Establish a guarantee fund to stimulate investments in businesses owned by social groups that are at risk of poverty or face racism. The Roma Entrepreneurship Development Initiative is currently piloting such a vehicle, which could be the blueprint for future programs.

Disinformation measures

Urgent:

1. Sanction and prosecute those who spread fake news and hate speech against Roma in connection with COVID-19.
2. Ensure that government information about the pandemic is presented in a way that does not endanger privacy rights and that does not view this health crisis through an ethnic and racial lens.
3. Ensure that the most important information is presented in Romani, especially information about new legislation and available relief measures.
4. Support organizations and initiatives that provide alternative, well-informed, and credible information and narratives about the Roma. One such organization, the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, is currently negotiating a partnership in this area with Deutsche Welle.

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