



ROMA RIGHTS IN THE TIME OF COVID

CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY



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Introduction

The first half of 2020 was a particularly turbulent period, with what seemed like one tragedy after another across the world. The opening six months of the new decade began with out-of-control wildfires burning through more than 18 million hectares of Australia; two air disasters killed hundreds of people in Iran and Pakistan, with the former incident bringing Iran and the United States dangerously close to an armed conflict; religious violence in Delhi, which saw Hindu mobs burning mosques and driving Muslims from their homes, left more than 50 people dead; the killing of George Floyd, a black man, by a white Minneapolis police officer sparked widespread protests worldwide and a corresponding wave of police violence in the US and beyond; and on 11 March the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), which had originated in Wuhan, China, was declared a fully-fledged global pandemic by the World Health Organisation.

The virus, which has now infected more than 24.3 million people and killed more than 828,000 worldwide, has fortunately not impacted directly on marginalised Romani communities in Europe in terms of numbers of infections. Eastern and Central Europe has had, until recently, a tiny number of cases compared to Western Europe. Most commentators attributed this to stricter emergency measures in those countries. However, these same measures put in place by governments, and the climate which they created, allowed a greater number of human rights violations to be committed against Roma during the period of emergency lockdowns.

This report provides a snapshot of some of the major human rights violations against Roma which occurred in the context of these emergency measures. It includes information on 12 countries where the ERRC is active (Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Turkey, and Ukraine) and covers the months from February – June 2020, during which time most of Europe was under strict social distancing measures.

Whilst no one was looking, vulnerable Romani communities were being brutalised by racist police officers, forcefully evicted from their homes, scapegoated by the far-right, denied equal access to healthcare, and left out of emergency policy-making. Their children were being denied access to education, their neighbourhoods closed off and quarantined, all while a hostile media, starved of tabloid content, demonised them for cheap clicks. Through all this they were also among the groups worst affected by the economic and social knock-on effects of the pandemic.

Ultimately the structural problems which force thousands of Roma to live shorter, harder, and more miserable lives have not gone away because of the pandemic. On the contrary, in most cases they have been exacerbated by it. Institutionally racist public institutions have both directly and indirectly caused additional suffering to Roma living on the margins of society in segregated neighbourhoods throughout Europe.

While this report offers a summary of the diversity of human rights abuses perpetrated during lockdown conditions, it should be viewed against the backdrop of almost complete economic and social exile which many Roma are subjected to, even during normal times. These recent human rights violations are simply the most visible manifestations of the antigypsyism

which permeates every strata and sector of our society. The real existential threat to most marginalised Roma is more often than not a question of how they will manage to feed their families. How will they find work now that the informal sector has all but ground to a halt? How will their children be educated from home, when their home doesn't even have electricity let alone an internet connection?

Whilst the threat of a devastating outbreak of Covid-19 in the most impoverished Romani communities is real, it is these everyday inequalities which cause the greatest concern. These issues are unlikely to go away and have the potential to turn into a large-scale humanitarian crisis in the months to come, as Europe is plunged into an ever-worsening economic recession.

Albania

Country Profile

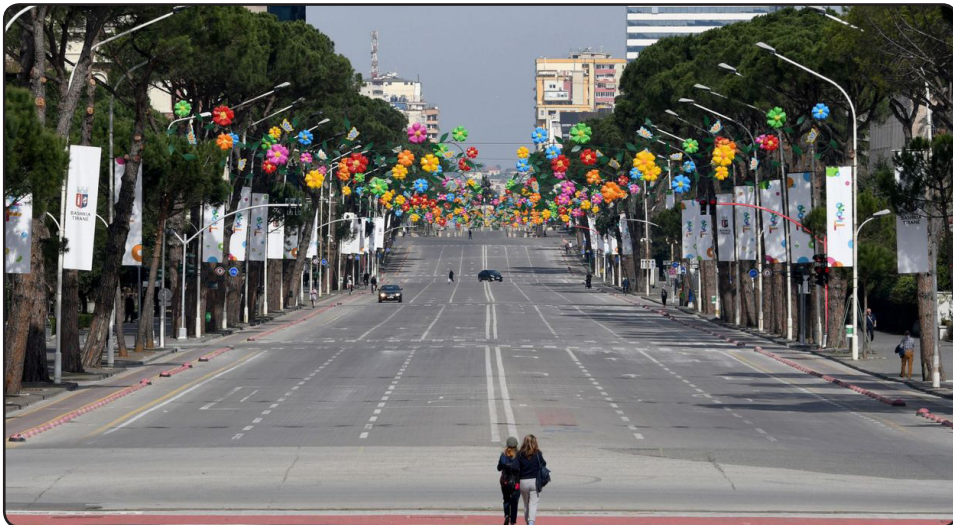
FIRST RECORDED CASE: 8 MARCH 2020
FIRST RECORDED DEATH: 11 MARCH 2020

STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED: 16 MARCH 2020
SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES: 10 MARCH 2020
BORDERS CLOSED: 15 MARCH 2020

INDIRECT DISCRIMINATION IN EMERGENCY FINANCIAL MEASURES

Roma in Albania were disproportionately affected by lockdown measures which were implemented by the government. Historical exclusion and societal prejudices mean that large numbers of Roma are amongst the most vulnerable people in the country and rely on informal work to survive. For many Roma who work in the informal sector, their ability to go out and work to provide for their families was severely curtailed by the emergency measures which limited freedom of movement and public gatherings, including informal markets. Additionally, the Albanian government's measures to counteract economic difficulties faced by low-income families were not applicable to those working in the informal sector, a significant number of which are Roma. This overrepresentation of Roma amongst those affected by the lack of provision of emergency payments amounts to indirect discrimination.

On the 28th March 2020, the government announced a financial aid scheme in the form of an extra sum to be paid to people in receipt of social welfare. The payment system was carried out through the general directory of tax through the government's "E-filing" platform. The



A deserted central boulevard in Tirana on 14th March 2020 during the lockdown.

PHOTO CREDIT: GENT SHKULLAKU - AFP



Albanian police and army enforce lockdown in Tirana, the country's capital.

PHOTO CREDIT: EPOKA E RE

system ensured that people who used to work in the private sector but had been left unemployed could benefit from a minimum wage of 26,000 ALL (210 EUR). This scheme does not provide for those working in the informal sector, and there was no formalised national proposal to provide for these people by including them in the emergency payments system.

In response to the lack of consideration for Roma working in the informal sector, protests against government institutions for the lack of support and emergency payments to Romani families took place on the 30th April in Tirana. On the 18th May, activists, alongside Romani and Egyptian families, submitted a petition signed by 1,100 citizens demanding the legalization of particular informal jobs commonly carried out by vulnerable groups.

The Albanian Government responded by implementing support for workers engaged in informal employment, announcing they will be included in the emergency payments policy. Following consultation with the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination and Romani civil society organizations, the government invited informal self-employed workers to register as unemployed jobseekers so that they could receive emergency payments.

Belgium

Country Profile

FIRST RECORDED CASE:	4 FEBRUARY 2020	STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED:	12 MARCH 2020
FIRST RECORDED DEATH:	11 MARCH 2020	SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES:	10 MARCH 2020
		BORDERS CLOSED:	20 MARCH 2020

VEHICLES SEIZED, PREGNANT WOMEN ARRESTED, AND FAMILIES MADE HOMELESS DURING LOCKDOWN

Romani Travellers in Belgium were the focus of increased police attention and harassment on the pretext of enforcing emergency social distancing measures. From the 18th March, the Federal Government adopted new measures in response to the emergency decree allowing urgent measures for limiting the spread of the corona virus. These included restrictions on freedom of movement and gatherings of people which adversely affected Romani Travellers living nomadically in large family groups and without a fixed address.

On the 4th and 5th April, police operations took place concerning two groups of Travellers living at unofficial sites in Jumet and Couillet respectively. The police exclusively targeted members of the Romani community with the aim of seizing their caravans, which were also their homes. Multiple police cars arrived at the sites alongside a large number of armed federal police, dressed all in black, to deal with what the police said was a routine vehicle check.

“The police arrived on the site at around 3:00 pm on 5th April, 2020, fully armed with weapons, and disproportionately many, in around 7-10 police cars” said a Romani man from Couillet.

“Me and my family were parked with our two caravans in an open area belonging to the municipality as we were forcibly evicted from the previous site where we resided legally...the police searched and seized the two caravans. I bought my caravan a year ago from a private person and have documents proving that. The four of us adults in the family were arrested for interrogation and taken to Charleroi police station. During the arrest a police officer used a racial slur calling us “dirty gypsies”. The interrogation lasted for about two hours. I was asked whether I wanted a lawyer to be present but refused because I just wanted to finish as soon as possible and go back to my children whom were left outside depending on me. The rest of the adults also signed the documents without understanding their content. For instance, my daughter-in-law only speaks Dutch but the police refused to speak to her in a language other than French. She signed without being able to read the documents, while in pain from her pregnancy and having a little child waiting for her outside the police station.”

The police officers seized four caravans from Jumet and Couillet, without a warrant, while being verbally aggressive towards the Romani families who were ordered from their homes along with all their belongings, which were dumped on the ground next to them. The four people arrested at Couillet were released without any charges being brought against them.

The affected Traveller families were made homeless as result of the raid, without being offered any alternative housing solution, social aid, or COVID-19 emergency support. When the father in Couillet asked the police where they would live after the confiscation of their homes, the police told them: “You gypsies can arrange it among yourselves”. The families also heard the officers say of the caravans “this is one we missed last year”, indicating that the police operation was connected to the [May 2019 raids on Belgian Traveller sites](#). The 2019 operation, codenamed “Strike”, mobilised over a thousand police officers to raid 19 sites around the country to seize homes and freeze bank accounts of innocent people who were collectively punished for the crimes of a few. In Couillet, the Romani man who was arrested also noted to the ERRC that back in 2019, his caravan was searched by the police multiple times, but no problem had been detected back then.

The families affected by the recent police operations included minor children, a pregnant young woman, and persons with serious health conditions who found themselves sleeping in the open air or sharing overcrowded caravans together with other Travellers, without being able to practice self-isolation. Their living conditions were made extremely dire by the police actions and they were left completely dependent on the help of those in their immediate vicinity i.e. other Travellers, friends, and/or relatives. After the raids they had no access to public water or toilets, proper nutrition, health care services, or medication. Children had not been fed properly for days and were not able to follow online education. Additionally, the pregnant young woman had no access to a gynaecologist, and those with serious health conditions were running out of medicines because none of the adults were able to work or freely move around because of the government confinement.

The ERRC brought a complaint concerning the police actions before the European Committee on Social Rights, alleging that this operation amounted to ethnically targeted collective punishment.



Bulgaria

Country Profile

FIRST RECORDED CASE:	8 MARCH 2020	STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED:	13 MARCH 2020
FIRST RECORDED DEATH:	11 MARCH 2020	SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES:	8 MARCH 2020
		BORDERS CLOSED:	18 MARCH 2020

“ETHNICIZATION OF THE PANDEMIC”

From the very outset of the COVID-19 state of emergency leading Bulgarian politicians, particularly those belonging to the far-right VMRO party which is a governing coalition partner, without a shred of evidence singled out Romani neighbourhoods as nests of contagion to be quarantined. As the lawyer **Orhan Tahir** observed, despite the fact that the claims were completely unsubstantiated, “some mayors responded to these appeals by imposing restrictions on Roma settlements with no recorded cases of COVID-19. Such preventative measures produced wild media speculation, and growing distrust among Roma towards the actions of the government.”

- **13 March 2020:** On the same day the National Assembly voted to declare a sense of emergency, Interior Minister Mladen Marinov told parliament that Romani ghettos will be quarantined if necessary, should people ‘lack self-awareness’; and that the Ministry will exercise its powers “to ensure compliance with quarantine”.
- **18 March 2020:** MEP Angel Dzhambazki, leader of the far-right political party VMRO (coalition partner of the current Bulgarian government), called for the closure of Romani ghettos everywhere: “Think about whether or not the ghettos will turn out to be the real nests of infection. Hundreds of people live there in poor living conditions, without the opportunity to observe even basic hygiene standards, let alone the high ones due to the pandemic”.
- **19 March 2020:** The Sofia District Prosecutor’s Office (SRS) sent instructions to Sofia mayors and the SDVR to mount checkpoints “in neighbourhoods of Sofia populated by people of different ethnicities, clearly demonstrating their unwillingness to comply with the restrictions.”

While general restrictions on movement were introduced and widely perceived as a necessary response to contain the spread of the virus, the quarantine, curfew, and blockading of Romani neighbourhoods marked an ‘ethnicization of the pandemic’: the measures were deemed to be disproportionate, unrelated to actual infection rates, and later acknowledged to have been largely ineffective.

- **17-19 March 2020:** Restrictions reported in seven different locations included the blockading of the *Kvartal Karmen*, in Kazanlak. Exits to the wall which surrounds the neighbourhood were sealed, and the sole entry-exit point was manned 24-hrs a day by



Police officers check the papers of a Romani woman in Sofia, April 17, 2020.

PHOTO CREDIT: DIMITAR KYOSEMARLIEV-REUTERS

law enforcement to check documents, restrict movement, and ‘monitor compliance with the quarantine.’ Pass regimes were introduced, with police checkpoints mounted at the entrances and exits to the *Shesti* quarter in Nova Zagora and the *Nadezhda* quarter in Sliven. Increased police presence and checkpoints were also reported in *Kvartal Rayna Knyaginya*, while in Yambol *kvartal Lozenets*, Stara Zagora, a ban on more than two people gathering in public spaces was introduced, as well as a neighbourhood curfew between 8 pm and 4 am.

- **15-28 April:** The National Crisis staff announced a high number of infected people in the two Sofia Romani neighbourhoods of Fakulteta and Filipovtsi, and police checkpoints were set up around both of these neighbourhoods. Within one day it became evident that this claim was false, with only 10 confirmed cases in Fakulteta and Filipovtsi, against a total of 486 cases in the territory of Sofia. The mayor said that she saw nothing discriminatory about these measures, which targeted only Romani neighbourhoods.

UN: HIGH-LEVEL RHETORIC “EXACERBATING ANTI-ROMA SENTIMENTS AMONG THE POPULATION”

These measures provoked domestic protest and international criticism. The over-securitized and ethnic-specific approach was harshest in Yambol, which was fully quarantined and blockaded for 14 days. On the morning of the 14th May, a helicopter sprayed nearly 3,000 litres of detergent to ‘disinfect’ the Romani neighbourhood.

In a statement, issued on the 13th May, two **UN Special Rapporteurs** on racism and minority issues expressed deep concern “at the discriminatory limitations imposed on Roma on an ethnic basis that are overtly supported by Bulgarian State officials as part of the broader measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.”



Georgi Benkovski neighbourhood of Yambol, the town where Roma were quarantined for weeks and disinfectant was sprayed by plane from overhead.

PHOTO CREDIT: MARCIN SZALA

“The placement of checkpoints since mid-March at the entrance of the already segregated Roma areas in Nova Zagora, Kazanlak, Sliven, Yambol, and Sofia – allegedly implemented as part of efforts to curb the pandemic – is a violation of Roma’s right to equality and freedom of movement, and could further expose Roma residents to the virus, especially where access to sanitation is poor such as in the Nova Zagora neighbourhood”.

The experts called for an end to the police operation codenamed ‘Respect’ that specifically targeted Roma as “it violates the principles of non-discrimination and equality, and adopts an overly-securitised approach that may put at risk the right to health of Roma people.” The statement went on to condemn inflammatory rhetoric from high level officials from the Government, noting with concern that “a nationalist party leader described Roma quarters in the cities as potential ‘nests of infection’, which fuels hatred and violence against Roma.” They called on the government to condemn hate speech, swiftly and unequivocally, and warned that “authorities should not exploit the pandemic to further exclude Roma and portray them as criminals and contagious.”

SOCIAL IMPACT OF EMERGENCY MEASURES ON ROMANI COMMUNITIES

While the authorities were quick to blockade and quarantine Romani neighbourhoods, they failed to ensure that residents had full access to clean water and sanitation, health care, medical treatment, or adequate supplies of food and medicines. For instance, in the Romani neighbourhood of Tsarevo, at the height of the pandemic in early April, 500 residents were left without water for 10 days. After journalists raised the issue with the mayor, the water supply was resumed. Due to the severe restrictions on movement preventing Roma from leaving the blockaded settlements to get work, **median incomes in Romani neighbourhoods** dropped by an

estimated 60%, causing food shortages and inflicting extreme hardship on families already living in poverty. The most vulnerable, working without formal employment contracts, could not benefit from financial support measures for those who became unemployed due to the crisis.

Romani children living in poverty were hard hit by school closures, as they missed out on breakfasts and lunches provided under the ‘School Milk Scheme’, and the ‘School Fruit Scheme’ which covers more than 3,200 schools and kindergartens across the country. On the 22nd April 2020, schools began distributing packages of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products to parents. As in other countries, these children became victims of the digital divide, as home schooling without adequate internet connections, necessary devices, or know-how is just not feasible.

In contrast to the resources mobilized for drones, helicopters, checkpoints, and police reinforcements to secure and blockade Romani neighbourhoods, the government response to ameliorate the hardships and address the emergency needs of deprived communities during the pandemic was plainly inadequate. It is clear from the European Commission *Overview of the Impact of Coronavirus Measures on Marginalized Roma Communities in the EU*, that the communities were largely dependent on the efforts of about 200 health and education mediators, and the work of NGOs and other voluntary organizations in the field. For example, local NGOs established a coordination group, in which public health and educational mediators visited Romani neighbourhoods to provide information, monitor quarantine and refer people to specialists, distribute schooling materials for children, translate preventive brochures (15,000 printed), and support local authorities’ action to provide food, water tanks, IT equipment, and internet access for online learning programs.



Police set up a checkpoint in the Roma neighbourhood of Plovdiv.

PHOTO CREDIT: TV KANAL 3

Hungary

Country Profile

FIRST RECORDED CASE:	4 MARCH 2020	STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED:	11 MARCH 2020
FIRST RECORDED DEATH:	15 MARCH 2020	SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES:	11 MARCH 2020
		BORDERS CLOSED:	16 MARCH 2020

In Hungary, one of the major concerns raised by Roma activists and NGOs was vulnerability to infection among marginalized Roma living in segregated settlements and overcrowded poor-quality housing, with limited access to health-care, clean water and sanitation, and “poorly placed to practice social distancing”. An additional cause for concern was the high incidence of chronic illnesses and pre-existing respiratory conditions among Roma.

While ethnically disaggregated data on infections is not available, it is clear that cities have borne the brunt of the pandemic, citizens abided by the lockdown restrictions, and **infection and mortality rates** remained relatively low (596 deaths out of 4,448 confirmed cases as of 22 July 2020). The concern among aid workers was that once the lockdown restrictions were lifted, the virus could spread more easily to rural areas where many of Hungary’s Roma live. At the time of writing, this has not transpired, and infection rates remain low. Of more tangible concern is the impact that isolation and economic shut-down has had on already deeply impoverished communities (see below).

As far as human rights and the rule of law is concerned in the time of pandemic, the raft of emergency measures adopted by the Hungarian government proved to be the most controversial in Europe, and a textbook example of the warning issued by **UN Special Rapporteur Fionnuala Ní Aoláin** of the dangers of executive overreach in a state of exception; how extraordinary powers made available to government under emergency legislation can become part of the ordinary, normal legal system, rendering the protection of rights “increasingly fraught and difficult.”

HUMAN RIGHTS, THE RULE OF LAW AND THE ROMA

Immediately prior to the COVID-19 crisis, **Prime Minister Orbán** had been engaged in waging an overtly racist propaganda campaign against Roma in Hungary. The objective was to obstruct the implementation of a ruling on school segregation by the Debreceen Court of Appeal in favour of Romani families in the town of Gyöngyöspata.¹ Orbán’s plans to hold

¹ The court ruled that the Hungarian state should pay 80 million HUF in compensation to Romani children who had been segregated for a decade from their peers in school. In a succession of provocative broadcasts to the nation through state-controlled media, the Prime Minister declared that the court’s decision “violated the people’s sense of justice”, stigmatized the local Roma as workshy, their children as violent, unruly and un-educatable, and asserted that what went on in Gyöngyöspata was not segregation but “catching up”. Orbán dismissed “the whole thing as a provocation”, fomented by Soros organizations, and stated that “there is a boundary that a Hungarian will never cross, or believes cannot be crossed. That boundary is giving people money for nothing.” The government announced a



Romani children attending Nécsei Demeter Primary School in Gyöngyöspata were the focus of international attention and a battle over the rule of law in Hungary.

a national consultation on the issue were sidetracked by the pandemic. However, by the time the state of emergency was introduced, the Prime Minister had succeeded in putting anti-Roma racism centre-stage in Hungarian politics through a series of polarizing broadcasts to the nation, further amplified by government-loyal media outlets.

All of this was advantageous and a source of encouragement to those even further to the right of the regime, for whom antigypsyism is almost a founding principle. Following a fatal double stabbing in Budapest, the neo-Nazi “Mi Hazánk Mozgalom” called on its supporters to gather outside the offices of the National Roma Self-Government for a rally against “gypsy crime” on 28 May. In defiance of regulations banning protest gatherings, the **Mi Hazánk supporters converged with thousands of far-right ultras** in the city centre streets, chanting racist anti-Roma slogans, with many giving fascist salutes.

On the 15th May, Hungary’s Supreme Court (*Kuria*) upheld the earlier ruling that pecuniary damages must be paid to the families of the Romani schoolchildren. In response, **Viktor Orbán said**, “It’s unacceptable for a majority to feel ill at ease in their own towns, or country, and it won’t happen while I am premier. This is a country of natives, after all, this is our country.” He asserted that such cases are funded and used by Soros-funded rights groups to “grab money and attack the majority”; that the ruling was unfair, and that legislation was being prepared to prevent any such cases coming to court in the future.

new ‘national consultation’ on the Gyöngyöspata case, and declared “we take the side of the 80 percent who are decent, working Hungarians who demand a suitable education for their child.” The government stated that it already has clear answers to questions that have provoked social debates, “however, it needs a robust social mandate in order to represent them in the international arena as well as within Hungary.”



Far-right organisation Mi Hazánk staged an anti-Roma protest in the centre of Budapest on 28th May, defying the government ban on large gatherings.

Such planned moves, and a deeper regression into nativist policy-making, will be much easier in the wake of the controversial set of coronavirus measures passed in the parliament. This 'Enabling Law' included jail terms for spreading misinformation and created what Dávid Vig, [Amnesty International's](#) Hungary director, described as "an indefinite and uncontrolled state of emergency (that gives) give Viktor Orbán and his government carte blanche to restrict human rights." Legal expert [Kim Lane Scheppele](#) warned that these emergency powers handed Orbán "the fully-fledged dictatorial powers he would need in order to cling to office."

In a special debate on the 14th May, prompted by Orbán's Enabling Act, the [European Parliament](#) adopted a statement describing Hungary's measures are "incompatible with European values." Provisions in the bill included an attack on the rights of transgender people; and the Hungarian government issued more than 100 decrees, most of which were unrelated to the pandemic, including the imposition of sectoral taxes and the removal of significant financial resources from local communities that partially fell in the hands of the opposition last year.

Orbán's spokesman Zoltán Kovács described the extraordinary measures as "congruent with the treaties and the Hungarian constitution", claimed the law upheld EU values, rule of law, and press freedom, and accused critics of being misinformed, and branded the Parliament debate as "[a witch-hunt, a show trial](#)".

In mid-June, Orbán's government announced its intention to rescind the extraordinary measures. Critics condemned the move as a [political sleight of hand](#), claiming that the legislation will cement into everyday use the sweeping powers claimed by Mr. Orbán to fight the virus, and "create a legal basis for the use of newer extraordinary and unlimited government powers." In a rapid analysis published by the [Helsinki Committee](#), the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union and Amnesty International, this move by the government was described as "nothing but an optical illusion: if the Bills are adopted in their present form, that will allow the government to again rule by decree for an indefinite period of time, this time without even the minimal constitutional safeguards."



Soldiers patrol an empty Heroes Square in Budapest on 6th April 2020 during lockdown.

PHOTO CREDIT: REUTERS-BERNADETT SZABO

STATE RESPONSE TO THE NEEDS OF ROMANI COMMUNITIES

In its submission to the [European Commission](#) overview of the impact of COVID-19 measures on Roma Communities, the Hungarian government listed already-existing and ongoing social programs targeting impoverished settlements. The National Roma Minority Self-Government (ORO) reported that in response to its call for specific measures and the setting up a dedicated Roma Task Force, the government replied that there would be no Roma-specific program in relation to COVID-19.

On April 6th, the government announced a [stimulus package](#) amounting to 18%-20% of GDP - around 9.5 trillion forints, or \$30 billion - to alleviate the economic impact of the lockdown. The package, which included tax breaks, wage contributions, and lending subsidy programs, prompted criticism from a group of [15 prominent Hungarian economists](#), who claimed that “the economic measures proposed by the Hungarian government are insufficient to address the economic crisis and do not even attempt to address emerging social issues”, such as the lack of solutions for those who lost their jobs, the deficit of social trust, and an overall failure by government to grasp the severity of the crisis for Hungarian economy and society.

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE EMERGENCY ON MARGINALIZED ROMANI COMMUNITIES

From the outset, Romani leaders highlighted the grave threat the pandemic and subsequent shut-down posed to the precarious situation of marginalized and impoverished Roma. The

economic stimulus package, with its focus on boosting investment and employment, neglected the plight of the poorest and most vulnerable. Neither were there any interventions designed to respond to the specific needs of Romani communities as, according to an official spokesman, Government measures to mitigate the crisis were “in the interest of all Hungarians.”

As Erno Kadet, a rights activist at Hungary’s Roma Press Centre told [Reuters](#): “From the very first moment, the economic crisis has had a huge impact especially in segregated rural areas ... They have zero savings, zero buffer...The government ignores them.” As in other countries, the shut-down deprived many Roma, dependent on casual labour or public works programs, of the opportunity to earn money to put food on the table. As a [VOA report](#) from the northern town of Ózd highlighted, many Roma from what is one of the European Union’s poorest regions, “fear hunger more than COVID-19”.

School closures and the sudden switch to online learning brought additional hardship, and exacerbated disadvantages for Romani children. Data collected by the [Roma Education Fund \(REF\)](#) indicated that most Romani children and their families living in rural areas and in settlements have no access to internet, do not have computers and/or other electronic devices, and, in some cases, even electricity is not available. The Hungarian educational system, long condemned for its failure to address systemic racial segregation and social inequities, had made no provisions for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in the sudden transition to online schooling.

In addition to the challenges of limited food supplies and poor access to clean water and sanitation that marginalized communities face across Europe, Roma in Hungary faced the added burden that receipt of social aid is dependent on school attendance. Since the lack of internet access and electronic devices is [higher in regions where significant numbers of Roma reside](#), most Romani children cannot attend online classes. As REF pointed out, in addition to the detrimental effect this is likely to have on educational attainment and drop-out rates for Romani youngsters, failure to take part in online classes can lead to even more hardship if families are penalized and denied vital social services and family allowances as a result.

Italy

Country Profile

FIRST RECORDED CASE:	30 JANUARY 2020	STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED:	31 JANUARY 2020
FIRST RECORDED DEATH:	21 FEBRUARY 2020	SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES:	23 FEBRUARY 2020
		BORDERS CLOSED:	26 MARCH 2020

NEGLIGENCE FROM AUTHORITIES TOWARDS ROMA LIVING IN SEGREGATED CAMPS

In Italy, around 20,000 Roma live in segregated formal or informal camps which are known locally as ‘nomad camps’ (campi nomadi) or ‘villages’ (villaggi). The Italian authorities have built so-called nomad camps for Roma since the 1980s. They started as a result of regional policies, implemented when Roma from the former Yugoslavia arrived in Italy, which dictated that segregated settlements had to be approved and constructed by city and/or regional authorities. They are based on the Italian Government’s fundamental misconception that all Roma are nomadic, even though just 3% of the Roma in Italy are said to live an itinerant lifestyle.

The camps consequently fail miserably to meet the needs of Roma living in Italy during normal times, let alone during the unprecedented situation many Roma found themselves in during the pandemic. Camps often have no access to drinking water, power, or sewage. Living in a segregated camp usually means living in an overcrowded house (7-8 persons per caravan, shack, or shipping container) somewhere on the periphery of a town or city. According to an EU Fundamental Rights Agency report, these Italian camps have one of the highest rates of Roma living per room in Europe. During the period where Covid-19 emergency measures



were introduced in Italy, conditions were not necessarily always better for Roma living in formal, government-run camps than for those in informal camps.

According to ERRC monitoring, in most cases no masks, hand-sanitiser, nor hygiene supplies were distributed to camps (even to those without access to water). This made following recommended hygiene guidelines difficult, if not impossible, for the Roma living there. In addition, the government did not ensure there was adequate communication of public health messaging regarding the risks associated with corona virus to the residents of formal and informal camps. In the absence of a state response to segregated camps, the responses of local authorities in Italy were characterised by their disparate approaches to the particular needs of Romani communities.

In some cases the communities were simply left to themselves, without any formal intervention on the part of local municipalities. For example, during the entirety of the lockdown period the municipality of Vicenza provided no support of any kind to a group of approximately 70 Roma (including many children and pregnant women) living within their municipality. These people live in cars or caravans in particularly precarious living conditions. They do not have a permanent place to live because the municipality forbids them through **ordinances** to stop in most of the city. Despite the pandemic, the municipality did not provide them with a place to stop, and these people were left without access to drinking water, or to hygiene supplies such as masks or sanitizing gel. The municipality, although well aware of their situation, made no efforts to provide for this group of people.

As in most places, many Roma in Italy were not able to carry out the informal jobs they would normally rely on for a living (such as the collection of iron, informal markets, and construction work.) There was an absence of programs or policies from the government to address this, nor were there any structural rescue packages devoted to helping the most vulnerable groups in general. The government earmarked funds that local authorities could use to provide one-off support to people in need, normally in the form of shopping vouchers, but there was no long-term structural financial package available.

EVICCTIONS CONTINUED DURING LOCKDOWN

The ERRC has been closely monitoring forced evictions of Roma in Italy for a number of years. Since April 2014 the ERRC has recorded at least 363 forced evictions; this should not be considered to be a comprehensive number of all forced evictions of Roma in Italy, but as a sample of cases about which the ERRC has received information.

ERRC field research has found that families living in informal camps are persistently evicted without respect for the protections prescribed by international standards. Residents are generally not consulted prior to eviction and they do not receive formal eviction orders, making it difficult to challenge the evictions legally. The situation of schoolchildren, elderly people, pregnant women, and people with health issues is rarely, if ever, taken into consideration. Most of the time the evictees are not offered alternative accommodation, which forces them into an endless cycle of evictions from one camp to another.



Residents of camps like the one at Via Salvati in Rome were all but abandoned by the state during the lockdown period.

PHOTO CREDIT: ARIEL SOPHIA BARDI-AL JAZEERA

Between February and June 2020, evictions of Roma from informal camps continued, as they have for the past decade, despite the extraordinary situation brought about by the pandemic.

Despite the government decree issued on 19th May (no.34, law no. 77/2020) which suspended evictions throughout Italy, the ERRC has recorded at least 7 evictions of Roma between February and June 2020.

- On 6 March, Carabinieri forcefully evicted 15 Sinti who had parked their four caravans in an area in San Cesario near Modena. The **eviction** happened after a routine check carried out by the Carabinieri discovered that the children, despite being enrolled in a school in Syracuse, were not attending classes. The entire family group was subsequently removed from the area in question.
- On 10 March, police were called by residents in the **neighbourhood of vico Gelso**, in Torre Annunziata, after Roma who were not resident in the area were seen visiting the homes of friends and relatives. The residents were concerned that the Roma had come from areas where there were many cases of coronavirus, so the police took them away from the city. At this point, the ministerial decree banning travel without an urgent reason had not yet come into force, meaning the Roma were not in breach of any emergency measures.
- On 21 April, two Romani families illegally occupying empty social housing during lockdown were confronted and eventually **driven out by other residents of the apartment block**. The Carabinieri supervised their eviction from the building in the Quarto Oggiaro district and cleared the apartments of their belongings. Local councillor, Fabio Galesi, referred to ‘nomads’ in Milan occupying social housing without permission during lockdown as a “group of jackals around to identify vacancies to occupy.”

- On 21 May, 16 people were evicted from an informal camp in Nova Milanese by the police and Carabinieri. The camp was located on via Galvani and had been previously occupied and evicted in March. The displaced Roma were made homeless once again without alternative accommodation. The eviction was attended by Red Cross volunteers.
- On 23 June, eight people were evicted from an area on Via Tor Bella Monaca in Rome and their makeshift homes were destroyed. The eviction was carried out by local police and municipality workers who arrived ready with vans, bulldozers, and equipment to dismantle the camp.
- Over the weekend of 26 -28th June, a group of Roma living in campervans were driven from a carpark on the seafront in Porto Sant'Elpidio where they were staying by firefighters. The group had been staying there for around a week before they were forced to move. The reason for their eviction was to ensure the carpark could be used for tourists visiting the town, as the season was just beginning.
- In Turin, police officers continued to demolish the homes of around 500 Roma in Germagnano informal camp, as they have done since the camp was seized by a judicial order in 2016. Since then, the empty shacks have been routinely destroyed, even if the families have moved away and then returned. Law enforcement regularly place a sign on the shack that says it is “under seizure” but the affected people do not receive any formal document informing them of the eviction. Because the families are not present, they do not receive any offers of housing alternatives from local authorities. Due to the constant evictions many Romani families have been left homeless during the lockdown, forced to live in cars or caravans on the outskirts of the city.

Local activists and witnesses report police officers frequently visiting Romani families living in camps (as often as 4 or 5 times a week) to try and convince them to leave the area. It is highly probable there have been more evictions during the lockdown which went unreported while media attention was diverted by the pandemic. Furthermore, many evictions of small groups of Roma are termed ‘removals’ rather than ‘evictions’ and go underreported.



The aftermath of an eviction of a Roma camp on Via di Tor Bella Monaca.

PHOTO CREDIT: POLIZIA ROMA CAPITALE

PUBLIC HOSTILITY TOWARDS ROMA DURING LOCKDOWN

The Covid-19 emergency has, in some places, exposed old hostilities towards Roma in Italy, particularly through the media and its, at times, sensationalist reporting on Roma during the pandemic. In Milan, several news outlets gave a lot of **attention** to social housing being illegally occupied by Roma and migrants, sparking protests in some cases. In Rome, Il Giornale newspaper ran with the **headline**: “*The emergency does not stop the Roma: they go out to rummage through the rubbish.*” In Campobasso, the funeral of a Romani citizen aroused controversy and sensationalised reporting from Il Messaggero who published the **story** “*Coronavirus, Roma nomads organize a funeral: an outbreak of Covid in Campobasso explodes.*” Most media articles referred to Roma from a ‘nomad camp’, when in fact the Roma in question had lived in the area for 600 years and lived in integrated housing. This pushed local Roma to make calls for people not to ethnicize the pandemic. The case was additionally exploited by local politicians, including from Matteo Salvini’s Lega party who **said** the local mayor “had the duty to supervise also the Roma community of Campobasso, which has its own lifestyle and its own rules that often do not coincide with those of the other citizens of Campobasso.” Ex-prime minister and architect of the infamous ‘nomad emergency’, Silvio Berlusconi, even weighed in on the issue, **referring** to “the negligence of a mayor who neglected to apply the law”.

QUARANTINE OF NOMAD CAMPS

In some municipalities, where a case of coronavirus was confirmed in a Romani camp, the decision was taken to quarantine the entire community. The overcrowding and poor housing conditions in the camps, caused by Italy’s segregation policy, meant it was difficult to isolate a single person or family. The Roma were treated as a collective, and quarantined correspondingly, rather than being treated as individuals as any other citizen of Italy would be.

In Cuneo, over 50 people living in a ‘nomad camp’ were **quarantined by the municipality** on 13th March after one person reported having been in contact with a friend from Nichelino (Turin) who had since tested positive for coronavirus.

In Castel San Giovanni, in the province of Piacenza, a camp which is home to around 40 people was quarantined for four weeks according to Italian Roma rights activists in contact with the ERRC. The camp was closed off sometime during the lockdown period after someone was reported to have died from Covid-19 there.

Moldova

Country Profile

FIRST RECORDED CASE:	7 MARCH 2020	STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED:	17 MARCH 2020
FIRST RECORDED DEATH:	18 MARCH 2020	SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES:	27 MARCH 2020
		BORDERS CLOSED:	17 MARCH 2020

ROMA LABELLED AS CARRIERS OF DISEASE BY MAYOR

Language from politicians which portrays Roma as a public health risk, by labelling them as carriers of the coronavirus, poses a real danger to Romani people. In the moral panic created by such speech, Roma can easily become targets of hate crimes incited by this dangerous speech from politicians or others with public platforms.

In Edinet, Moldova the mayor of the town did just this by **publically voicing concerns** that Roma returning from abroad constituted a public health hazard to the rest of the population. He argued that because they are returning from foreign countries, and because they do not respect quarantine measures, then the number of cases of Covid-19 in the town will rise.

“The Roma are very noisy, now many have come from abroad. There were about 400, now there are over 1000 people coming. They do not obey the rules at all, they are in the streets, they are not aware of the dangers of this pandemic. We try to explain them, but it’s harder. Recently they had a funeral, they had the burial with music, there were a few hundred or so Roma in the deceased’s yard, can you imagine? And half of them were foreigners, so we expect to see new cases of infected people” said Mayor Constantin Cojocaru.

The mayor also requested that the city be quarantined due to the presence of the Roma.

LACK OF ACCESS TO WATER DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTS ROMA

Roma in Moldova are less likely to have access to clean, running water, putting them at a greater health risk from Covid-19. At a time when the main recommendation for prevention against the coronavirus is regular handwashing, Roma are disproportionately at risk due to lack of water access. According to Romani community mediators, very few Romani villages have access to a regular source of water, let alone drinking water. According to the **United Nations Development Programme**, 44% of Moldovans are without access to safe potable water, with Roma disproportionately affected.

According to a **interview** with Natalia Duminica, a human rights activist, in the village of Schinoasa where the Roma live in overcrowded and segregated conditions: *“there is no water at all in this village, people take water from two sources that periodically dry up.”*



Poor access to water is the norm for Roma across Moldova, who often have to rely on untreated water sources like this one in the village of Bdăceni.

PHOTO CREDIT: ERRC

A Roma community mediator, Varvara Nenica, also spoke about the problems related to access to water in northern Moldova: *“For example, in the village of Nicoreni there are very poor Roma families, they live on the outskirts of the village, where there is no water supply. In general, there are many situations in which the Roma live on the outskirts of the village, in which they do not have access to water, and the well is far away.”*

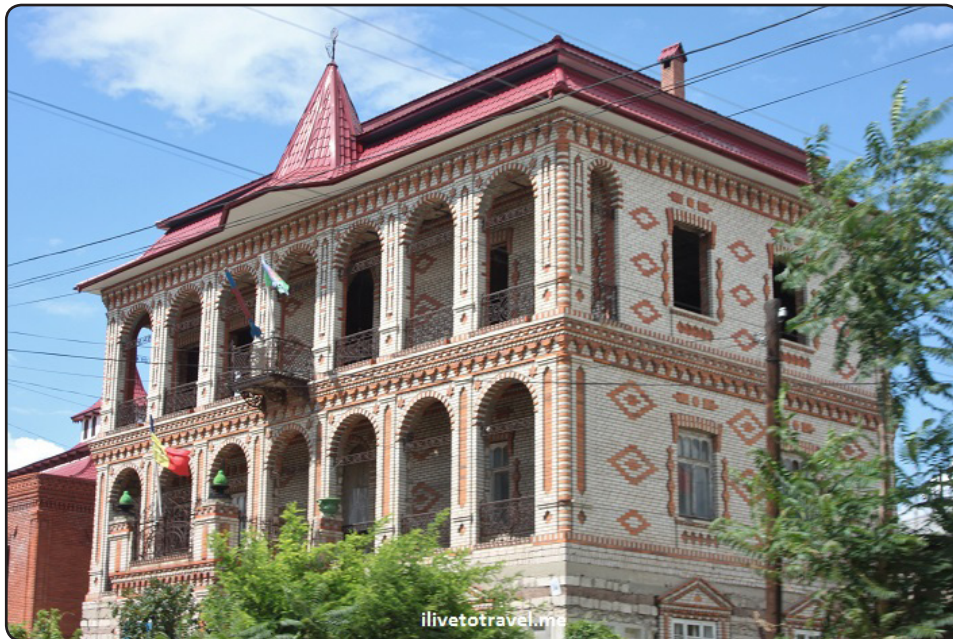
LACK OF PUBLIC HEALTH INFORMATION AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN SEGREGATED COMMUNITIES

Roma community mediators have also expressed concerns about difficulties for people taking care of their mental health in segregated communities with poor access to public health information.

According to community mediator Silvia Feraru, it is difficult for Romani families who are poorly educated to deal with the lack of verified information about the pandemic, as well as the isolation that comes with living in a closed off, segregated setting during a state of emergency.

“They have nothing to help them deal with the situation with during their isolation. While some can read books, study the advice of psychologists, many Roma read only the news and, because of this, their fear of this disease increases day by day” she says.

The ERRC’s discussions with Roma mediators in Moldova have indicated that there was no specific effort on the part of government authorities to provide public health information to segregated Romani communities.



The so-called ‘Roma capital’ of Moldova, Soroca was quarantined by the military to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

CITY OF SOROCA QUARANTINED

Soroca, the so-called “Roma capital of Moldova”, was **quarantined** by the Moldovan government after a relative rise in the number of infections in the city. On 1st April, the army were called in, alongside the police, to monitor the movement of people in the city. According to the **Operational Command Centre**, 51 soldiers from the 22nd Peacekeeping Battalion and the Anti-Air Missile Regiment installed fixed checkpoints at the entrance and exit of three localities to monitor the movement of citizens and vehicles.

North Macedonia

Country Profile

FIRST RECORDED CASE:	26 FEBRUARY 2020	STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED:	18 MARCH 2020
FIRST RECORDED DEATH:	22 MARCH 2020	SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES:	10 MARCH 2020
		BORDERS CLOSED:	16 MARCH 2020

DEATH OF A 9-MONTH-PREGNANT ROMANI WOMAN WHILE AWAITING COVID-19 TEST RESULTS FOR EMERGENCY CARE

A 37-year-old Romani woman and her baby died on 31st March in Skopje, after being emergency transported to the hospital from Ohrid. The mother suffered complications which resulted in the death of her baby in utero, whilst she was waiting for the results of a coronavirus test for more than six hours outside the hospital doors. She died later of sepsis after doctors in the emergency care unit were unable to revive her.

The incident occurred after she had already been waiting for three days since her waters had broken for doctors to accept her at the gynaecological clinic at Ohrid and deliver her child. The woman came from a very poor background and lived in substandard housing conditions. She visited the clinic on several occasions complaining of extreme pain and showing signs of infection, but was denied treatment and sent home. The clinic neglected to treat her in a timely manner, considering the obvious complications she was describing. She was finally rushed to the emergency department in Skopje only to be left outside the hospital doors while they tested her for the Covid-19 virus. The Ministry of Health later confirmed that her results came back negative.



The hospital in Skopje where a 37-year-old Romani woman and her child died awaiting a Covid-19 test on 31st March 2020.

A close neighbour and family friend who took her to the clinic and witnessed the events in the days leading up to her death said: *“I saw her in bad condition, she was begging the doctors for help for days. I think it happened because of how she looked to them, her appearance and her socio-economic situation.”* The neighbour also recounted how she had heard the staff at the clinic commenting that the Romani woman smelled bad, and she had witnessed them laughing and joking when they told her she was not ready for delivery and sent her home.

It is unclear at what point the baby died; during the two hour drive to Skopje, or in the hours she was left outside the hospital doors, but the doctors at the emergency department of the hospital noted that the baby was dead on arrival.

Nobody from the hospital called to tell her family or friends that she had arrived safely, they found out through contacting a Romani doctor who was working in a laboratory in Skopje. The only official communication her family received from the hospital was at 8:30pm when they were told that she was being taken into surgery to remove the baby. After the operation was complete she reportedly had further complications and a high fever as well as signs of sepsis. She was intubated and medics attempted to treat her for more than two hours but were ultimately unsuccessful and she died at around 10:00pm.

The Ministry of Health confirmed that the State Sanitary & Health Inspectorate are investigating her death at the University Clinic of Gynaecology & Obstetrics in Skopje, the hospital which she was brought into. Additional inspections are being carried out at the General Hospital Ohrid Department of Obstetrics, Gynaecology, and Neonatology and with the family doctor.

The case illustrates how the corona virus pandemic has exacerbated existing systemic problems faced by Roma in North Macedonia, and across Europe. This woman died not only because of the unprecedented public health situation, but because this situation coincided with her being Roma and her being poor. The intersection between her skin colour, her gender, and her class meant she was treated unequally and unprofessionally by a system that institutionally discriminates against people who look like her.

ETHNIC PROFILING AND QUARANTINE OF ROMA AT THE BORDER

Nine Romani musicians travelling in a convoy of 200 people were stopped at the Deve Bair border crossing and quarantined whilst attempting to return home from Austria. They were the first people to be quarantined on return to the country, and the only ones amongst the convoy to be held, despite not showing symptoms of the Covid-19 virus and signing a declaration agreeing to compulsory self-isolation at home.

The Minister of Health Venko Filipce announced on 17th March that the entire group of 200 people arriving at the Deve Bair border crossing would be placed in quarantine, as they were travelling from Austria and Italy which were deemed medium and high risk countries in the context of the pandemic. He announced that *“all of them will be placed in a group quarantine in the Prepeliste army building in Krivolak, where they will have a medical team who will do check-ups, give them food, and everything that is needed will be provided”*.



Romani musicians were the only people from a group of 200 who were quarantined at the Deve Bair border crossing on 17th March 2020.

The Minister of Defence, Radmila Shekerinska, later announced on her official Facebook page that all citizens coming from high-risk countries will be quarantined in the requisitioned army barracks in Prepeliste, until tests could be carried out to determine if they carried the novel corona virus. It only later emerged that the only people to be taken to the Prepeliste compound were a group of nine Romani musicians, belonging to the Orkestar Veseli Momci group, who had travelled from Salzburg, Austria to their homeland.

The whereabouts of the other 190 people became something of a mystery at the time. Later announcements from the Minister of Health suggested that these people had yet to be granted entry into the country, whilst eye witness reports from a TV24 journalist say that many were allowed to walk across the border and get into cars after signing a declaration to say that they would self-isolate at home for 14 days. As it turned out, all of them were granted entry into the country and none were placed into state quarantine or assigned to isolation.

The government did not offer any explanation for why the only nine people to be quarantined were Roma, or why they were taken to the Prepeliste army barracks whilst the rest were not.

The group of Roma released a [video](#) of their isolation compound on social media which showed that they were the only people being held there, as well as the unhygienic conditions in which they were being kept. In it, all nine of the Romani men are visible, with one saying to the camera:

"We only want to be tested and if we have to stay in home isolation and quarantine, we will stay, not only 14 but 30 days if needed. Here the conditions are dire. The entire world speaks about hygiene but here we can't have that. They lie to us that 200 people will be placed here, but is only the nine of us, all Roma."

On the 19th March, the nine Romani men were moved to a location in Demir Kapija after their video went public. Their test results also came back negative for the Covid-19 virus, something they only learned of through a public announcement from the Mayor of Demir Kapija municipality on his Facebook page, rather than being informed personally.

The men were released on the 21st March without an explanation from the authorities. They were ordered to complete an eight day quarantine in their homes. Reportedly, police officers called on them sporadically to ensure they were complying with the order.

POLICE BRUTALITY

As in other countries, the period in which emergency measures were enforced in North Macedonia saw a number of incidents of police violence against Roma. The implementation of curfews, bans on public gatherings, and social distancing measures provided additional contexts for law enforcement with inflated powers to brutalise Romani people with relative impunity.

Shuto Orizari 15th May 2020:

A 21-year-old Romani man was hit by a police car belonging to the special 'Alfa' police unit in front of his house in Shuto Orizari, sometime after 16:00 on the 15th May.² A short time later, the police officers returned to his house and informed him that it was an accident and apologized. Later when his family took him to a hospital for examination, police officers were waiting for them there and took the man into custody. They brought him to Kisela Voda police station where he was reportedly beaten severely.

After he was released, he returned to the hospital to be examined where he was issued a medical certificate confirming the injuries he sustained at the police station. The incident was reported to the police, and it was announced on the 17th May 2020 that the case will be reported to the Internal Control of the Ministry of Interior.

Skopje Railway Station 7th June 2020:

During curfew hours on the 7th June, a police patrol arrived at an area beneath the railway station in Skopje where ten Romani families were living together in informal housing. The group is comprised of around 60 people, of which 30 are children.

The officers were responding to complaints from some residents of nearby buildings that they were playing music loudly. The Roma told local media that a homeless man named Harun, who did not live in the neighbourhood, came there in a drunk state and asked them to play music. According to them Harun is already well known to the police for often causing problems and incidents in the area.

² Video showing the aftermath of the incident with witnesses commenting on what happened: <https://www.facebook.com/teti.roleks.3/videos/870614623443593/UzpfSTc3NzE5NDQ3MjoxMDE1Nzg4MT-MwNzQ5OTQ3Mw/>.

“When the police arrived, they asked us to turn off the music, which we did immediately” said Suzana Demir, a Romani woman who was present at the incident. “But Harun started arguing with the police and they called for reinforcements. In a few minutes, about 20 police officers from the section known as ‘Alfa’ arrived, with five or six vehicles, and without asking what was happening, they immediately started hitting us. They beat all of us including men, women, children and elderly.”

Suzana was beaten alongside the other Roma living underneath railway station. According to witnesses interviewed by the ERRC, the police officers used racial slurs and curses during their intervention, saying ‘fuck your mother’ (пичка ви матер) and ‘fuck you gypsy’ (да ве жебам цигани). One person who did not wish to be identified said *“I am afraid they will come again to beat us. There is no one to protect us. There is no one to complain to.”* Another man described the moment the police reinforcements arrived: *“One of the police officers broke the door and forcibly entered the house and started to beat me and my wife who was holding a two-year child in her arms, I had no idea why they were beating us. The child was terrified and was screaming, but the police didn’t care”.*

Following the attack, five people were arrested for charges relating to the Covid-19 restrictions.

One of the men who was beaten and arrested explained: *“After beating us, at about 8:00 p.m. they took the five of us to the police station in Aerodrom. Before we entered the police building they beat us more, and when we were about to enter the building, they realized that I was innocent and let me return home while the other four were taken in the police station and interrogated until midnight.”*

The four Roma who were interrogated now face criminal charges of “failure to act according to health regulations during an epidemic”, a misdemeanour of “humiliation of a police



A Romani woman shows CIVIL Media the bruising on her arm sustained during an attack by police in Skopje.

PHOTO CREDIT: DEHRAN MURATOV

officer”, and a misdemeanour relating to non-compliance with the curfew and the Government’s recommendations for dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic (in accordance with Article 13 of the Law on Misdemeanours against Public Order and Peace).

When approached by **CIVIL Media**, the Ministry of Interior issued the following response: *“On 07.06.2020 at around 18.30 behind the PIOM building on the quay by the river Vardar, police officers from the Police Station ‘Aerodrom’ undertook measures and activities, following a report by a citizen about violations of the curfew by a group of citizens who were gathered in a public place and disturbed public order and peace by playing loud music. In that occasion, five people had a rude behavior toward police officers after which they physically assaulted the police officers, and one of them threw a stone at the police van.”*

The Ombudsman opened a case into the incident and is legally supporting the Roma who were attacked.

‘Bair’ Community, Bitola 20th June 2020:

A 25-year-old man named Doan was publicly beaten and humiliated by police officers in the informal community called ‘Bair’ in Bitola, before being taken back to the police station and further tortured in police custody. He was accused of stealing some metal.

He had reportedly been sent letters to appear before court. However, these had never arrived to his address because Bair is an informal neighbourhood without properly numbered houses, so Roma frequently do not receive mail which is sent there.

On Saturday the 20th June, at around 7pm, Doan was out socialising with friends in the neighbourhood when police officers arrived to arrest him. The officers handcuffed him without explanation before beginning to beat him, according to eyewitnesses. They then stripped him to his underwear and were recorded on **video** dragging him down the street in front of his friends, his neighbours, and his 10-year-old daughter who later went and notified Doan’s mother about what had happened.

The next morning, at around 9am, his mother went to the police station in Bitola to see her son. A police officer there told her that, based on a judge’s decision, Doan would remain in prison for eight days in Bitola, before being transferred to Ohrid. When she was finally allowed to visit him, he was in a very poor state, exhausted, and still handcuffed and chained to a metal chair. He asked his mother for help and to find him a lawyer as he had not been offered one by the police officers, nor given any medical attention. He told his mother that the police officers there were beating him and forcing him to admit to criminal offences which he had not committed.

Doan was sentenced to three months imprisonment to be served in the prison in Prilep. For the time being, his sentence is suspended until after October because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The ERRC is legally representing Doan in the criminal proceedings and has initiated a complaint against the Ministry of Interior over police misconduct.

Romania

Country Profile

FIRST RECORDED CASE:	26 FEBRUARY 2020	STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED:	16 MARCH 2020
FIRST RECORDED DEATH:	22 MARCH 2020	SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES:	16 MARCH 2020
		BORDERS CLOSED:	15 MAY 2020

PUBLIC HOSTILITY TOWARDS ROMA

Broadcast and print media commentators amplified racist tropes about ‘Gypsy violence’ and ‘Gypsy crime’ when covering incidents involving Roma and law enforcement to turn essentially localized incidents into a full-blown safety and public health emergency. As academic expert [Margareta Matache](#) noted: “The predictable result has been an outpouring over Romanian social media of hate-filled calls for anti-Roma violence, in some cases laced with approving references to Roma extermination during the Holocaust.”

When the Minister of the Interior announced the deployment of 1500 police and gendarmes in areas where ‘violent episodes’ had been reported, he stated that “the additional resource will be directed in the areas with heightened risk of criminality, communities with people who have recently returned [from abroad], and are known for criminal activities.” In response to allegations of police brutality by Roma in targeted neighbourhoods, Traian Berbeceanu, chief of the Cabinet of the Minister of the Interior, told reporters that law enforcement officers will be “intransigent with thugs”, will do whatever is necessary to restore public order, and stated that “[violence must be met with violence](#)”.

POLICE VIOLENCE AGAINST ROMA

The ERRRC recorded a number of violent attacks on Romani communities, which included disproportionate use of force, tear gassing women and children, inhumane and degrading treatment of detained persons, and police attempts to prevent NGOs delivering humanitarian aid. In response to these violent episodes, Romani CRISS and the Civic Union of Young Roma in Romania (UCTRR) in an [open letter to the president of Romania](#) called for the dismissal of the Minister of Internal Affairs and his chief of Cabinet. Romani CRISS director, Marian Mandache, condemned Berbeceanu’s “violent cowboy approach”, and reminded him that in an EU member state, it is the rule of law, and not summary justice “with a fist or guns” that should prevail when it comes to enforcement. The ERRRC expressed its concern to the Romanian authorities, and requested clarification concerning the following incidents:

- **6 April – Teliu:** Romani families who had recently returned from abroad with higher number of Covid-19 infections were required to self-isolate in their homes. After many complained that they had no food and could not remain at home, a small group

approached the Town Hall to ask for food as they had nothing to eat. Local media referred to Roma who ‘stormed’ the Town Hall. In reality this was not the case, however the mayor still called in police and gendarmes, which reportedly resulted in violence against those Roma, including elderly women. The Ministry of Interior stated to the ERRC that according to their investigations into the incident “there were no violent actions recorded, either between the participants or against other persons.”

- **9 April – Vulcan Municipality, Hunedoara County:** A group of Roma, among which were women and children, were sprayed with pepper spray by police and gendarmes. The police had been called to deal with three people who had climbed on to the roof of an apartment block while intoxicated and with signs of self-inflicted lacerations on their arms and abdomen. The people wanted to make certain issues known to the mayor and the Vulcan Town Hall. After they were successfully talked down from the roof, they verbally abused the attending police officers who claim that the Roma were inciting violence against them. According to the Ministry of Interior “in order to restore public order and safety, the persons involved were restrained and escorted to the police headquarters, and afterwards they were transported to Petroșani Emergency Care Unit, in order to receive proper medical care.” The Ministry did not address the allegation of pepper spray being used on multiple Roma present, including women and children.
- **9 April – Valea Mare, Dumesti, Vaslui County:** According to local activists the police tried to prevent an NGO, Dragoste descultă, from offering 150 aid packages to poor Romani families in Dumesti Commune, Ivănești village. The police were called by the mayor of Ivănești who reported that a number of people were distributing aid without protective equipment in the village of Valea Mare. The volunteers from the non-profit association say they were trying to respect the social distancing rules, leaving the packages outside the gates of the beneficiaries according to the ordinance which states people are allowed to carry out humanitarian actions. In a written response to an ERRC letter, the Ministry of Interior commented on the incident, stating: *“none of the respective persons was wearing any protective equipment in order to prevent the spread of SARS-COV-2 virus and hugged the elderly people, thus potentially endangering their health.”*
- **11 April – Balotești, Ilfov County:** A large police response was used to take a single Romani woman into custody for breaking her period of self-isolation and refusing to enter a state quarantine facility. An excessive number of police officers are present and visible in the **video** of the incident which was uploaded to Facebook by a witness.

The 19-year-old woman visited another address in Balotești, despite being under imposed self-isolation since 30th March. The police were called and arrived with several squad cars and at least ten officers in order to sanction her for a misdemeanour and take her to a quarantine centre in Otopeni.

- **18 April – Bolintin de Vale, Giurgiu:** Video surfaced on social media of Romanian police beating and abusing Roma as they lay face down in the dirt with their hands bound behind their backs. The screams of one victim were clearly audible, as four officers set about him, two striking him all over his body, and two others beating the soles of his bare feet. The victims – eight Romani men and one 13-year-old boy – were beaten for about 30 minutes and threatened with repercussions if they made any complaints. One police officer can be heard using racial slurs and threatening the person filming the incident. The



Roma in Bolintin de Vale were beaten by police officers while lying facedown on the ground in handcuffs for breaking social distancing measures.

wife of one victim called an ambulance, and when it arrived, the police handcuffed her. The Chief of Police of IPJ Giurgiu is one of the offending officers in the video.

In response to a letter from the ERRC, the Ministry of Interior said the officers were present to deal with reports of a fight that had broken between people living nearby to where the video was filmed. They had this to say about the incident:

“While pursuing the above-mentioned individuals, the law enforcement noticed, on an adjacent street, a group of men that had set up a barbecue on the street, drinking alcohol, and listening to music loudly. On being requested by the law enforcement personnel to cease their activities, the persons refused and continued to issue insults and threats between themselves and also to the law enforcement personnel, behaving in a hostile and aggressive manner towards the latter. The persons involved were physically restrained and transported to Bolintin-Vale Police Station.”

Following this, a criminal complaint for “abusive conduct” was made and an investigation opened by the Prosecutors Office into the incident. The Ministry added that an investigation was initiated against the Chief of Police in Bolintin, but it has been subsequently suspended pending the final settlement of the criminal case.

- **19 April – Hunedoara, Bucharest:** In the Micro 6 block, several people (both Roma and ethnic Romanians) said that they were beaten by the police as “revenge” following a previous confrontation. Publicly available footage 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 block. Police entered many homes without a warrant, and used tear gas indoors, including against women and minors. Two men were beaten by Special Forces when they wanted to file a complaint against these abuses.
- **19 April – Balotesti:** Police and gendarmerie forcefully arrested several Romani men for barbecuing and breaking quarantine. Police were called to a block of flats in Balotesti where a group of Roma were having a barbecue, dancing, and listening to music. Video evidence shows the police response was extreme and disproportionate to the situation, including one incident of an officer kneeling a handcuffed detainee.

The Ministry of Interior claim that the Roma were uncooperative with police officers and refused to identify themselves when requested. They did not comment on the disproportionate use of punitive violence shown in the video on unarmed people in custody.

- **19 April – Rahova, Bucharest:** A person known publicly as Spartacus posted a video on his Facebook page with a bruised and swollen face apologizing to the police for an earlier incident. How he sustained these injuries was not clear, nor was it clear how he could make such a post, given he was in pre-trial detention. It is alleged that this was a forced apology on video intended to humiliate Spartacus. In addition, several people, including minor children from the Rahova neighbourhood, complained that they were beaten by the police, who allegedly entered the wrong address (looking for Spartacus) and later left apologising for the confusion.
- **30 April – Zabrauti Community, Ferentari, Bucharest:** Municipal police and gendarmerie entered the Zabrauti community in several cars in pursuit of a group of young Roma who were gathered at the entrance to a block of flats. The police sprayed

tear gas in hallways and homes, forcing people to flee outdoors, and in the course of the incident a firearm was drawn.



The man known as 'Spartacus' appears with a bruised and swollen face in his apology video which is suspected to be coerced by police in Bucharest.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT OF EMERGENCY MEASURES ON ROMANI COMMUNITIES

Restrictions on freedom of movement made it impossible for Roma who are day labourers or dependent on the casual economy to travel to earn money. This had an immediate negative impact on the quality and quantity of food available for families. The operations of social canteens have also been reduced and some have been even closed, due to the limitation of movement and direct contact of public entities' workers with the public.

Community health was further jeopardized by lack of access to clean water and sanitation; scarcity of hygiene products; and cutbacks and closures of day-care centres and support services. General medical practitioners switched to online and telephone consultations making access to healthcare more difficult for Roma, especially those who lack the required digital skills or online connectivity.



A police check during lockdown in Bucharest.

PHOTO CREDIT: EPA-EFE-ROBERT GHEMENT

School closures and the move to virtual online education has proven hugely problematic for Romani children from marginalized communities, where the lack of connectivity, devices, and digital know-how has left many of the most vulnerable effectively without access to education. In addition, many thousands of poor children who were dependent on meals provided by the schools went without, as catering companies shut down operations without alternative provision being arranged.

The [UNICEF Rapid Assessment](#) also highlighted that one of the most serious barriers was the limited communication between vulnerable Roma communities and the public authorities, a lack of information about available support measures, in particular where communities are without health mediators, school mediators or Roma experts.

MEASURES TO ASSIST MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

An estimated EUR 1,5 billion was committed by the Ministry of European Funds for social, economic and medical responses to the pandemic for the entire population. There are no funds specifically earmarked for marginalized Romani communities. Some Romani communities were targeted for emergency interventions by the authorities (water and electricity supply, financial resources, and food supplies for the quarantined persons). A report published by the [European Commission](#) on the 16th April, details some of these interventions, including actions taken by voluntary civil organizations and mediators to supply foodstuffs, hygiene products, and face-masks, as well as disseminate public information. Civic groups took a lead in calling for constructive cooperation between the authorities and communities, and coordinating donor drives and distribution of urgently needed supplies.

Serbia

Country Profile

FIRST RECORDED CASE:	6 MARCH 2020	STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED:	15 MARCH 2020
FIRST RECORDED DEATH:	20 MARCH 2020	SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES:	18 MARCH 2020
		BORDERS CLOSED:	20 MARCH 2020

The lockdown in Serbia was unusually strict and saw the implementation of evening and weekend curfews, government quarantine centres, and bans on public gatherings, as well as general social distancing measures. There were several incidents of police misconduct, including violence, against Roma during the period in which emergency measures were in place in Serbia.

19th/20th April – Vidikovac Roma neighbourhood, Čukarica, Belgrade

On the night of Easter Sunday, at about 11:20pm, a 24-year-old Romani man named Darko was in front of his home chopping wood with an axe. He heard a commotion and saw several police officers running towards him. Without any warning or explanation, four officers pushed him to the ground and started kicking him. Shortly after, another four officers appeared and joined in. Darko's wife and several neighbours witnessed the beating.

The officers asked for his name; when he replied they said: "you're the one". They continued to hit him for several minutes then handcuffed him and placed him in a police car. Darko resisted because he felt there was no reason to assault or arrest him. Police confiscated his axe, as he had allegedly tried to assault officers, then took him to Rakovica Police Station where he was questioned by a police inspector. The inspector physically assaulted Darko and pressured him to confess to robbing a vending machine in front of a nearby kiosk.

Subsequently, he was placed in a cell where several police officers took turns in beating him, whilst also pressuring him to confess to the crime. Darko refused to confess as he not been involved in the crime; he had spent the entire day at home and insisted that the police show him any evidence against him. Darko told them that there were two boys in the settlement with the same name and that it could be them who the police were looking for. While at the police station, he asked for medical help but was denied under the argument that his health is good. During the approximately 10 hours he spent in custody, he was not given any food or anything to drink.

The following day, at 10:00am, Darko was taken to the misdemeanour court, although he cannot identify which one it was. He had a hearing before a judge who fined him 50,000 dinars (425 EUR) for violation of police curfew. Darko complained to the court of police violence, but the judge responded that it was not of his concern and that Darko was there only to sign documents. His shirt was torn and his body visibly bloodied while he was standing in the courtroom.



Police brutality against protestors in Belgrade is familiar for Serbian Roma who have dealt with police violence and torture for years, as well as during the emergency measures to contain the coronavirus.

Upon release from the police station, Darko was given a notice to appear before Second Basic Public Prosecutor's Office once the state of emergency has ended for the purpose of providing information in pre-investigative phase for an unspecified criminal offence; this notice did not have a protocol number and did not include the name of the prosecutor or office number where Darko should appear. The police inspector who interrogated him also wrote his phone number for Darko to call and ordered him to find out the names of boys who were involved in the theft within 24 hours.

After returning home, neighbours took Darko to the emergency room for examination. He complained of a pain in his head, neck, right elbow, and the area around his ribs on his right side. The medical report indicates that there are no visible injuries and no internal injuries. The report notes that there is an old injury on his right elbow from 4 years ago (Darko denies it is old or that or that he told the doctor anything similar), however his elbow was fixed with a bandage.

22nd April – Požega

According to information gathered on the ground by the ERRC, police officers entered a Romani neighbourhood in Požega at around 7pm to find a Romani man who was on a wanted list. According to witnesses, when they found him, four police officers severely beat him before taking him into custody.

Later at around 10pm, five police cars returned to the neighbourhood and stopped on Bana Milutina Street in front of the house of Srdjan Spasojević, the cousin of the wanted man, who had earlier tried to defend his cousin from the police attack. More than 15 police officers armed with batons entered the house, dragged him outside, and started kicking him and

beating him with their batons in front of his neighbours who came out of their homes. The officers threatened to kill him and kill his dog that was tied up in the yard.

From there he was taken to a detention unit in the town of Užice, some 20km away from Požega. A lawyer was not granted permission to see him and document any visible injuries due to restrictions the police justified by Covid-19 safety measures. Local activists say none of his family were allowed to visit him. The Belgrade Center for Human Rights provided legal aid and filed a criminal complaint while he was in detention.

10th/11th May – ‘Crvena Zvezda’ Romani neighbourhood, Niš

On the night of the 10th May, police reported noise and loud music coming from a house in the Crvena Zvezda neighbourhood. The police intervened and, according to witnesses, used excessive force to arrest a Romani man. The Niš Police Department say that officers found a 27-year-old man in front of his house, who refused to show his ID card upon request. The officers report that he then started insulting and cursing them, before attacking them when the police patrol ordered him to go with them. Officers say he punched one in the stomach, scratched the other, and tore the uniforms of both of them. As he was resisting arrest the police officers admit using force to bring him in to the police station. Witnesses dispute this version of events.

The man was brought to the station with scratches on his left arm, knee, and behind his ear. The Police Administration announced that the facts and circumstances of this event are being determined and, if omissions from the attending officers’ narrative are determined, measures will be taken in accordance with the law.

Considering the significant recent history of police brutality and use of torture in police custody against Roma in Serbia, the ERRC is interviewing witnesses to determine if the officers’ version of events is accurate.



Serbian army turning an exhibition hall into a hospital for 3,000 patients, following advice from Chinese medical advisors to the Vučić government.

PHOTO CREDIT: BNE INTELLINEWS

Slovakia

Country Profile

FIRST RECORDED CASE:	6 MARCH 2020	STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED:	12 MARCH 2020
FIRST RECORDED DEATH:	1 APRIL 2020	SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES:	16 MARCH 2020
		BORDERS CLOSED:	12 MARCH 2020

In Slovakia, aside from issues around hate speech, scapegoating of Roma, and a shocking assault by a police officer on five young children, two major concerns have been the lack of access to clean water and sanitation in many marginalized communities, and the impact of the digital divide on the right to education for Romani pupils. Our monitors found that many households do not have the space nor necessary technological equipment; and many parents and children lack sufficient access and knowledge to participate effectively in online education. Further, a [questionnaire survey](#) showed that teachers were just as ill-prepared for online education as they are for working with students from marginalized Romani communities.

HUMAN RIGHTS, HATE SPEECH, AND POLICING

Social media has been the main channel for anti-Roma racism and calls for punitive measures against Roma. The mayor of Kosice, [Jaroslav Polacek](#), posted a warning on social media that coronavirus can spread because of the behaviour of “socially unadaptable people” in Romani settlements who do not respect emergency measures. Another mayor, in an open letter to the Prime Minister, called for the lock-down of all Romani settlements to prevent mass outbreaks of the virus (see below). In other Slovak towns, inhabitants have called on the authorities to adapt punitive “special measures” against segregated Romani settlements. In eastern Slovakia, [it was reported](#) that non-Roma were shouting at Roma waiting in line outside post-offices accusing them of benefit fraud and spreading the virus.

The lockdown of Romani settlements has raised serious human rights concerns and warnings from [Amnesty](#) and other organizations, that any measures targeting entire communities, without evidence that they present a danger for public health, “are likely to be arbitrary and disproportionate, and may constitute discrimination.” As in the case of Bulgaria, authorities in Slovakia were called on to ensure that emergency measures are implemented in a manner that is non-discriminatory, responds to a pressing public or social need, pursues a legitimate aim, and is proportional to that aim.

Below are details of some key incidents:

- **18 March – Rimavska Sobota:** In an open letter to the Prime Minister, Mayor Jozef Šimko who ran as a candidate in the 2020 elections for the neo-Nazi *People’s Party – Our Slovakia* led by Marian Kotleba in the 2020 election, called for measures to be taken

against Roma. Šimko stated that there is reasonable suspicion that large numbers of people returning from abroad do not undergo mandatory quarantine: “We are also struggling with such a problem in our city, on the outskirts of which there is a Roma housing estate with 1156 permanently registered citizens. Many people from abroad have returned to it in recent days and we are worried that they could cause further spread of the disease,” said Šimko. Despite admitting that not a single positive person had registered positive, the mayor was “concerned that there may be a mass outbreak.” After the mayor published his letter calling for a lockdown of Romani settlements on [Facebook](#), a huge amount of racist and xenophobic comments and reactions surfaced online.

- **9 April – Eastern Spis region:** As reported in [Balkan Insight](#), five locations in the eastern Spis region were suddenly locked down: Bystrany, Zehra, and three separate settlements in Krompachy. Home to a total of 6,200 Romani people, they were quarantined as 31 of them had tested positive for Covid-19: “By morning the villagers found themselves surrounded by the white and green police tape, police officers, and Slovak army soldiers.” This move represented a change in the government criteria for quarantine, as authorities had previously said they would only impose lockdowns where the percentage of infected people was higher than 10 per cent.
- **12 April – Bardejov:** A violent confrontation occurred between law enforcement and Roma when a police patrol was passing through the Roma-majority neighbourhood. Whilst the details of how the confrontation began are uncertain, 30 additional police officers were called to the scene after a Romani man was spotted to be not wearing a surgical mask and the situation escalated into violence.



Police officers quarantine a Roma-majority neighbourhood in Slovakia.

PHOTO CREDIT: SEEEGY

According to videos uploaded to social media and reports from eyewitnesses, police officers used batons on a group of Roma in the course of the altercation. A service dog was also involved, and a firearm was reportedly discharged into the air in an attempt to pacify the situation. Three people were detained, one of which will be charged with having committed the offense of attacking a public official – the ERRC is providing legal defence to this person – the other two with committing an offense against public order.

The police version of events was that the situation got out of hand after a patrol car was attacked by approximately 50 people. Eyewitnesses stated that a police patrol spotted a Romani person not wearing a face mask and shouted at him; when he shouted back, the officers got out of their vehicle and began beating and kicking him, sparking a larger confrontation with bystanders.

- **20 April – Bánovce nad Bebravou:** Police were recorded using disproportionate force and a choke hold on a Romani man outside his home. He was stopped by officers while smoking a cigarette in front of his house for not wearing a mask. According to his nephew: “

The officers asked where his face mask was. My uncle answered that his mask was in his house, behind him, and that he was just smoking a cigarette. They asked for his identification, which my uncle also had in the house, and despite the fact that he gave them his information, they wanted to arrest him...

My uncle did not want to give himself up because basically they had no reason to arrest him. I would like to underscore that the officers did not use the standard arrest method of putting his hands behind his back and handcuffing him. They immediately shoved him against the car and twisted his arm. They pressed on his neck and my uncle was choking. What's more, the officers themselves weren't wearing the required face masks correctly either.”



A police officer uses a choke hold during a confrontation with a Romani man who was smoking outside his house without a mask.

PHOTO CREDIT: ROMEA.CZ

The incident was filmed by his nephew but does not show the events that led up to it. From the evidence available however, the actions of the police appear disproportionate to the situation which involved a civil matter with a single civilian outside his own home. According to the press spokesperson of the Regional Police Directorate in Trenčín, Pavel Kudlička, the police's actions were conducted as per regulations.

“The officers in this case proceeded in accordance with the regulations. The man was arrested for assaulting the officers,” the press spokesperson told [Romea.cz](#), adding that the arrested man has previously been convicted of committing felony violence.

- **29 April – Krompachy:** Four girls and a boy, aged between seven and eleven, from the quarantined Romani settlement of Krompachy, were beaten with a truncheon by the officer for playing outside the zone. In tears, one of the girls told a reporter: “We went for wood and the cop began to chase us and shouted at us that if we didn’t stop, he would shoot us. We stopped and he took us into a tunnel and beat us there.” According to the report in [Romea.cz](#), military physicians treated the children for their injuries.

In response the [Ombudswoman](#) stated that “Any disproportionate methods used by police or excessive use of force deserves to be condemned. I consider it unacceptable that violence be committed against children. Moreover, it is unacceptable for police to use force against children. Not even the pandemic can be a reason to use disproportionate policing methods.” She promised an investigation into the incident and to take a ‘comprehensive look’ at the issue of the quarantined settlements.



Truncheon marks on the legs of young children who were reportedly beaten by a police officer in the Romani neighbourhood of Krompachy, which was under quarantine.

PHOTO CREDIT: PRESS TV, ROMEA.CZ

QUARANTINES AND CONTAINMENT

In response to events principally in Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania, [Marija Pejčinović Burić](#), Council of Europe Secretary General, expressed concern at measures adopted by some governments “that could result in further compromising the human rights of Roma and hampering their equitable access to the provision of basic public services, most importantly health care, sanitation and even fresh water”. In the case of Slovakia, concerns were expressed by [Amnesty](#) and others, that without providing Roma with the means to protect themselves, targeted testing and quarantining would further add to the stigmatization and prejudice these communities already face, without reducing the likelihood of the infection spreading.

- **27 March 2020 – Gelnica:** Approximately 80 people were placed under quarantine. The announcement from the municipality stated: “The Crisis response team of the town of Gelnice received information about a breach of quarantine by a citizen from the town of Háj, who returned from abroad this week. Although the person concerned had no signs of illness, the Crisis Staff immediately acted and ordered quarantine for the entire site in which the citizen was moving around. We have also referred the case to the state police and the Public Health Office, which will fine the citizen in accordance with current measures.” State police were on hand to prevent anybody leaving the area, and municipality declared on its Facebook page: “We do everything to make the people of the city feel safe.” The [Prime Minister](#) stated that he had no knowledge about the municipality’s decision to impose quarantine, and state authorities lifted the quarantine on 29 March.
- **9 April – Spiss region lockdowns:** The government decision to quarantine five entire Romani settlements in eastern Slovakia (see above) sparked controversy. Prime Minister



A soldier guarding the entrance to a Roma-majority neighbourhood under enforced lockdown in the Slovak Spis region.

PHOTO CREDIT: MINISTRY OF DEFENSE OF SR

Igor Matovic insisted it was “not a hostile act” but one aimed at protecting people and all those who had been in contact with them. “Taking into consideration local conditions and habits, we decided to lock down some settlements,” Mikas said at the press conference, explaining the crisis staff decision. Human rights observers were concerned at the arbitrary nature of the action, and the use of soldiers, helicopters, and other military equipment in the lockdown – a move defended by Peter Pollak, the first Slovak Roma MEP.

However, **Ombudswoman Mária Patakyová** questioned the legal basis and rationale for such action, stating that it was “necessary to protect the healthy people who have been locked down in the Roma settlements in eastern Slovakia. It is not clear from media reports how crisis staff plans to protect those who have not yet been infected.”

According to **Balkan Insight**, despite their concerns local residents quickly organised themselves, establishing the “watch” that regularly toured the settlement, checking if people followed the epidemiologic orders, and in coordination with the mayor, helped supply local residents with medicine, wood, and hygienic items. People observed regulations, stayed at home, wore masks when outside, and maintained social distance.

Ombudswoman Patakyová stressed to **Balkan Insight** that one of the most controversial issues remained the fact that the government and health officials had imposed lockdowns on communities where the number of infected people was way below the threshold of 10 per cent established for the rest of the country. One month later, she was still waiting for answers from the public health authorities. Her conclusion was that these lockdowns caused a negative stigmatization of all Romani people in Slovakia, and was convinced that this could have been avoided.

STATE RESPONSE TO THE NEEDS OF ROMANI COMMUNITIES

On the 15th March, the **Slovak Government** recommended the local governments to provide unlimited access to drinking water to all persons living in marginalised communities to prevent the spread of infection. The Slovak National Centre for Human Rights issued information with official helplines and contacts at institutions for groups that may be at higher risk due to the Covid-19 situation.

MEP Peter Pollák joined the Slovak Permanent Crisis Team to address COVID-19 in Roma-inhabited localities. The government reported to the **European Commission** on the 24th April that the Office of the Plenipotentiary, in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior, was preparing a framework of initiatives financed through the reallocation of resources: ensuring protective gear, preventing the spread of the virus and in quarantined areas, ensuring access to drinking water, assistance during the distribution of material needs benefits, and publication of recommended guidelines.

Local activists and midwives disseminated vital information to prevent virus spread in 260 overcrowded segregated Romani settlements. At the outset of the crisis, Healthy Regions and *People in Need* launched a social media campaign “*Koronameterel*” (“We will kill Corona” in Romanes), with short information videos on how to prevent spread of the virus, featuring health professionals, famous Romani people, and health mediators.

Referring to the controversial measures in Romani settlements, the government reported that tests were carried out in 93 communities (three cases re-tested after being found positive): “The most exposed settlements adopted measures to stop the spread of Corona virus (compulsory quarantine, hospitalisations of tested with worsened condition) in line with Slovak health authorities’ recommendations.”

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE EMERGENCY ON MARGINALIZED ROMANI COMMUNITIES

Despite the call of **PM Peter Pellegrini** on “local governments, mayors, and municipalities to allow unrestricted access to drinking water for persons belonging to marginalized Roma communities during these difficult days” – the response was, according to our monitor, “less than adequate given the gravity of the situation.”

On the 27th April, the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic **announced another call** on access to drinking water in municipalities with marginalized Romani communities (MRK), co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund with the allocation of €10 million. What is less reassuring is the fact that **previous calls** failed to attract many applications from municipalities for two main reasons that remain pertinent: first, the managing authority lacked sufficient technical capacity to capture the complexity of infrastructural projects in the calls; and second, projects are often too ‘administrative-intensive’ and the process is too lengthy to engage less than enthusiastic municipalities.

As in other states, the closure of schools has had a disproportionately detrimental impact on Romani children. The sudden switch to online home schooling caught the Slovak system unprepared. The **Slovak NGO EduRoma**, which is monitoring distance learning during the pandemic, made the following observations:

- “It turns out that MRC students cannot or do not know how to participate in online teaching within distance education. Their households do not have the spatial, hygienic, and necessary technical equipment.
- Insufficient access to the Internet and the lack of computer knowledge of these pupils and their parents also disadvantage them in this field of education compared to the possibilities of the majority population.
- Our questionnaire survey shows that teachers were not prepared for distance education, but it also turns out that they have not been prepared for work with students from marginalized Roma communities.
- Teachers were not prepared for the crisis at the time of the outbreak to cooperate closely with parents from marginalized Roma communities.”

In terms of economic assistance for **employers, entrepreneurs, and sole traders**, the state will reimburse 80% of the employee’s salary in those companies whose operations were or are compulsorily closed; and will contribute to sole proprietors who have seen a decline in sales. For quarantined **employees and parents on care leave**, the state covered 55% of gross salary; allowed for deferrals in filing tax returns and payments. The state also allowed for the possi-

bility to defer mortgage and loan repayments by one to nine months for self-employed, small and medium-sized companies.

As far as the most vulnerable members of Slovak society, there are no targeted measures and, to date, no extra payments or increases in social welfare or support for the unemployed, or the **estimated 87% of Roma living at risk of poverty** whose situation has critically worsened since lockdowns, quarantines, and restrictions on movement effectively shut down opportunities for those dependent on casual employment to generate income to feed and support their families.

Turkey

Country Profile

FIRST RECORDED CASE:	11 MARCH 2020	STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED:	N/A
FIRST RECORDED DEATH:	15 MARCH 2020	SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES:	15-21 MARCH 2020
		BORDERS CLOSED:	15 MARCH 2020

POLICE BRUTALITY DURING WEEKEND CURFEW

Between the 23rd – 26th May, the Turkish government introduced a four-day curfew, during the weekend of Ramadan, over fears of large-scale public gatherings. During this time there were two reported incidents of disproportionate use of force against Roma who were allegedly breaking the curfew.

24th May – Mustafa Kemal Paşa, Keşan/Edirne

On May 24th police teams entered Keşan's Mustafa Kemal Paşa District responding to a group of Roma who were reportedly violating curfew restrictions. According to local news, police officers battered a group of Romani citizens and used pepper spray on people, including children.



Footage taken from a nearby balcony of a confrontation between police and Roma during curfew in Keşan.

The incident occurred at 3.20pm, in a residential area near the mosque where a group of Roma were drinking alcohol at a table in the garden outside their homes. The ensuing police violence was **captured on camera** by a witness from a nearby balcony, and shows police officers indiscriminately beating bystanders, using pepper spray on multiple people, and one officer firing shots into the air from his gun.

Witnesses say the police swore at the Roma who responded in kind, inciting violence from the officers who then used disproportionate force to escalate the incident. A witness said:

“We are people who love and respect our police. Police teams came before today and warned some of our citizens softly. Our citizens who were warned went back to their homes. However, in this incident, our young police brothers and sisters used harsh and

rough language, which strained the environment a little. However, our citizens left their homes and went to the garden, not to oppose the police, but to soften and calm the environment. But the media created a different perception of the incident. An attempt was made to create a perception that Roma citizens were attacking the police, but this was not the case. Some of our citizens were affected as a result of the uncontrolled use of tear gas and gunfire in the air by the police.”

25th May – Çorlu

On 25th May, **police officers arrested and beat two Romani brothers**, 27-year-old O. Gultas and 29-year-old M. Gultas, who were sitting in the garden of their family home in the Silahtarağa district of Çorlu, near the city of Tekirdağ. According to the testimony of O. Gultas, they were having a family barbecue in the garden when they heard a police siren and saw police officers chasing two people through the neighbourhood. They stopped their vehicles approximately 20 meters from the door to the house, so one of the brothers stuck his head out of their door and asked, “is there anything we can do to help?” At this point one of the police officers swore at them and an argument began between the police and one of the brothers.

M. Gultas described the confrontation: “So I came out, and I said, “You’re a civil servant, how can you talk to us like that? Then the officer took his radio and announced, “There’s resistance to the police, send emergency support.” And then he continued to swear. So I told him they couldn’t talk to us like that. Meanwhile, the police teams kept coming in and pepper spraying me in my eyes.”



Police arrested and beat two Romani brothers who were sitting in their garden in Çorlu.

PHOTO CREDIT: SÖZCÜ UĞUR AKAGÜNDÜZ

At the same time, officers handcuffed O. Gultas and put him on the ground while seven or eight officers attacked M. Gultas with batons to his face. The brothers were placed in separate cars and driven to Çorlu State Hospital. During the journey they were continually beaten by police officers.

“My arm is troubled by a work accident. I have a muscle tear in my arm” said M. Gultas. “I told them that my right arm is problematic, they said ‘Die bastard’, and they continued to hit me with a baton from my right arm to my shoulder until the hospital.”

At the hospital, the brothers claim that they did not receive a thorough examination, other than a visual exam with clothes on and a scan of M. Gultas’ arm. From the hospital they were taken to the local police station, put into reverse handcuffs, and made to stand facing opposite walls in the interview room. Police officers hit the head of O. Gultas on the wall during the interrogation and at one point threatened to shoot the brothers.

Later on the shift changed, and a new police team started work. According to M. Gultas they treated them well. *“They turned the reverse handcuff position into a straight one because my arm was problematic. They asked if we needed anything, and they put us in custody”* he said.

At 4:00am a representative from the public prosecutor’s officer arrived and told the police officers to release the brothers immediately. The brothers were released shortly after, following at least seven hours in custody. The Gultas family have filed complaints with the prosecutor for the treatment of the two brothers, as well as misconduct towards other members of the family at the house while they were in custody, including an 800TL fine for a brother-in-law and brutality against their sisters.

Tekirdağ Governor’s Office released a written statement after the incident stating that the police officers involved had been relieved of duty and a judicial and administrative investigation was launched against them.

After the incident the Deputy Interior Minister and Ministry Spokesman, Ismail Çataklı, also made a written statement in which he described the **images shared on social media** as “an isolated incident.”

QUARANTINE OF A ROMANI NEIGHBOURHOOD IN IZMIT

On the 13th May 2020 in the Izmit district of Kocaeli, whole streets were **put under quarantine in the Roma-majority Serdar neighbourhood**, Izmit District Health Directorate teams stated that there was a high risk of coronavirus cases in the neighbourhood and closed the entrance and exit of two streets with police barricades. It was decided to keep both streets under quarantine for 14 days until the risk of coronavirus infection had passed. Ümit Yılmaz, the local Romani leader of the Serdar neighbourhood, announced the quarantine decision and warned residents to respect the measures.

“Due to the official Covid-19 announcement the Izmit District Governorate was put under quarantine for 14 days by the decision of the sanitary council” he announced. “In this process, our citizens living in these streets should stay at home and call 112 and 153 to meet their needs. Employees are required to obtain

a report from their family doctor as they will be resting for 14 days. Even those who come out in front of the street will be punished by law enforcement officers who will work 24 hours on the streets. Stay home.”



Municipal workers disinfect benches in the public square outside the Blue Mosque in Istanbul.

PHOTO CREDIT: EPA-EFE - ERDEM SAHIN

HATE SPEECH FROM A PUBLIC OFFICIAL

In an interview shared by Euro News on the 9th April, a Romani woman in Ümraniye, Istanbul responded to the government’s ‘Stay at Home’ advice by saying it was impossible for her to feed her family and stay at home.

“You say ‘Stay’ but we have to go out... our children are hungry; how can we stay at home? Now I’m coming from begging to collect food from garbage” she said to the interviewer. “How nice they say to me, “Don’t go out, don’t go out.” I am going to have to. What happens when there is no income?”

The interview was retweeted by Nail Noğay, the deputy director of the Provincial Director of Family and Social Policies, who shared the video with the phrase “drop dead”.

Noğay, whose job description was “Nursery and Day Care Centres and Kids Clubs Unit”, deleted his tweet after about 7 hours but not before it was **picked up by local news** and received a large amount of attention.

The Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Services made a statement regarding the tweet, which stated: “Ugly sharing has attracted the reaction of our society. Unity and solidarity is a language that hurt our soul and style can never be accepted at any level of our state...The person in question was dismissed immediately after the incident and an investigation was launched against him.” On April 10th, Nail Noğay was dismissed by the ministry.

Ukraine

Country Profile

FIRST RECORDED CASE:	3 MARCH 2020	"EMERGENCY SITUATION" DECLARED:	25 MARCH 2020
FIRST RECORDED DEATH:	13 MARCH 2020	SOCIAL DISTANCING MEASURES:	29 MARCH 2020
		BORDERS CLOSED (PARTIAL):	13 MARCH 2020

A [survey](#) carried out by the Ukrainian Vox Populi Agency indicated that, during the period of emergency measures in Ukraine, 12% of people had become more suspicious of Roma out on the streets or in shops than they were before. In a country plagued by ethnic violence in recent years, the corona virus pandemic brought additional challenges for Roma who were made even more vulnerable than usual to hate crimes committed by state representatives or far-right nationalists.

ROMANI CAMP BURNED TO THE GROUND IN KIEV

A Romani family of four was attacked in the early hours of the 29th April by two young men using tear gas. The men drove the family from their tent before attacking the father of the family and setting fire to their belongings. The attack occurred on Velika Kitaiivska Street, and happened almost two years to the day since a [similar incident took place in Lysa Hora, Kiev](#), carried out by members of the far-right organisation C14.

The camp was home to Anzhela and Ruslan [names changed], who were expecting a baby, and Ruslan's parents. All of them are originally from the Zakarpattiya region of Ukraine and normally worked in Hungary. They had been forced to come to Kiev to collect scrap metals and plastics because the lockdown in Hungary meant they were no longer able to work and the family was beginning to go hungry.

According to volunteer community worker Vita Zinevich, who regularly brought the family food, Anzhela pleaded with the attackers not to use the tear gas on her as she was pregnant. They replied; "a woman such as you should be raped" and began beating her husband Ruslan, causing the rest of the family to run outside and call for help. The attackers then set fire to the tent, destroying most of the family's belongings in the blaze including their identification documents.

The local volunteer said *"what struck me most was that opposite there was a high-rise building, but no one called the police. Someone was sure to have seen a pillar of smoke."*

The police and fire fighters were eventually called by a woman working as a cleaner nearby. She said she was approached by Ruslan at 5:00am asking her to call the police because they had been attacked. The Holosiyiv Police reported that a patrol was sent to the place, but they did not open investigative proceedings because the victims did not insist on it. The Deputy Chief of the investigative department of the Holosiyiv Police, Maxim Bondarenko, said that officers are looking for

the victims to take their statements and open proceedings. Local community volunteers do not know where the victims are, as they moved immediately after the attack.



The remains of a camp where Roma from Zakarpattiya were living in Kiev, before it was destroyed in a racially motivated arson attack on 29th April 2020.

MAYOR CALLED FOR FORCED EVICTION OF ROMA IN IVANO-FRANKIVSK

The mayor of the town of Ivano-Frankivsk, Ruslan Martsinkiv, was recorded on [video](#) on the 21st April demanding to know why Roma in the area had not been evicted by police officers and deported to Zakarpattiya. Martsinkiv is a member of the far-right Svoboda party in Ukraine.

The mayor initially uses the term “tsigany” (цигани) before switching to “Roma” when asking why the Roma were still in his municipality after he had ordered them to be evicted.

“We’ve already provided a coach. Took them to Zakarpattia. Why are they still here?” asked Martsinkiv. When he was told that 12 people had refused to go when the police tried to deport them on the bus, he responded: “What do you mean, refused? Why didn’t you pack them off? 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?”

The mayor was told that after the eviction the police had handed ten Roma over to the Zakarpattiya police force, but that the others had remained in Ivano-Frankivsk, to which he replied that they “*have to make a second round*”.

His comments were greeted by **condemnation by local civil society organisations**. The US Embassy to Ukraine issued **a statement** urging “Ukrainian officials to speak out against intolerance and to ensure the protection of human rights.”

On the 23rd May the Interior Minister, Arsen Avakov, announced that the National Police had opened criminal proceedings in connection with forced deportation of people from Ivano-Frankivsk. Mayor Martsinkiv made an attempt at an apology on the same day and defended his decision to evict and deport Roma from the region.

“First, I talked about specific Roma people. Regardless of nationality (ethnicity), everyone should be quarantined. A number of Roma people in Ivano-Frankivsk were violating the quarantine: they lived in our public square, harassed people, and demanded funds, they did not keep their distance and did not have any masks. There have been a number of appeals to the police, to the hotline of the Executive Committee of the City Council. And when such work was carried out, the people registered in the Svalyava and Irshava districts of Transcarpathia expressed their desire to get help to go home because there is no public transport,” said Martsinkiv.

Romani human rights activist Julian Kondur voiced doubts as to whether the Roma asked to be sent to Zakarpattiya, and criticised the mayor’s follow up statements.

“Martsinkiv is saying that this is how they and the police helped the Roma to get home. But honestly, I have doubts that the Roma have really asked for it. Instead, I’m curious what the local authorities have done to help them in accordance with their rights. Obviously, if the Roma live on the streets, they are poor. It is interesting how the authorities interacted with them, whether the human rights defenders were involved, what social assistance they provided or offered...” said Kondur.



The Mayor of Ivano-Frankivsk, Ruslan Martsinkiv, who ordered Roma to be deported from his municipality.

PHOTO CREDIT: IVANO-FRANKIVSK CITY, MVK.IF.UA

Conclusion and Recommendations

This report provides ample evidence from 12 European countries that the state of exception, and the emergency measures enacted to respond to the pandemic, allowed for human rights abuses by state actors against Roma. The acute vulnerability of impoverished and rights-deprived Romani communities, which is a direct consequence of structural racism, was exacerbated by hate speech blaming Roma for the spread of the virus.

Anti-Roma racism, which manifested itself in violence, intimidation, and inflammatory rhetoric, has been a feature of the policy response to Covid-19 in many states. A significant number of actions taken by law enforcement in ‘policing the pandemic’ clearly violated the principles of non-discrimination and equality, and constituted cruel and inhumane behaviour.

The danger for marginalized Romani communities was highlighted by Marija Pejčinović Burić, Council of Europe Secretary General, who expressed concern at measures “that could result in further compromising the human rights of Roma and hampering their equitable access to the provision of basic public services, most importantly health care, sanitation, and even fresh water”; and her worry that “some politicians blame Roma for the spread of the virus.” Two UN Special Rapporteurs were moved to protest at the overt support of Bulgarian state officials for discriminatory measures imposed on Roma “on an ethnic basis” as part of the broader efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19.

Evidence gathered in this snapshot report clearly shows that Bulgaria is far from the exception when it comes to discriminatory restrictions, police brutality, hate speech, and racist scapegoating of Roma. The ERRC echoes the concerns previously expressed by UN Special Rapporteur Fionnuala Ní Aoláin of the dangers of executive overreach in a state of exception; how extraordinary powers made available to governments under emergency legislation can become part of the ordinary, normal legal system, rendering the protection of rights “increasingly fraught and difficult.”

It is clear that in this recent period, the protection of Roma rights has already been rendered ‘increasingly fraught and difficult’. The ERRC strongly urges that international bodies do their utmost to ensure that emergency measures do not become normalized and routine; and that national and local authorities devise post-pandemic recovery plans that are fully inclusive, and implemented in a manner that takes full account of the rights and dignity of Roma and all other racialized communities across Europe.

Recommendations for States

- The ERRC urges European states to ensure that all emergency measures adopted to protect public health are implemented in a manner that is proportionate and non-discriminatory; and that lockdown measures and coercive action to enforce them do not target Roma and/or other racialized communities;

- States should ensure there is no further forced and discriminatory quarantining of Romani settlements; but rather the authorities should focus efforts to ensure that people living in segregated settlements have access to medicines, testing, and immediate access to clean water and sanitation;
- States must do all within their powers to combat anti-Roma racism, prohibit discrimination, and take decisive action, including prosecution where applicable, to counter hate speech and incitement to racial hatred, especially when the perpetrators are holders of public office, or indeed members of government;
- Law enforcement must comply with UN international standards on the use of force, and states must ensure that police officers only use proportionate force where necessary, and in pursuance of a legitimate aim;
- State authorities should define and prohibit racial profiling by law and provide for a body which is independent of the police and prosecution authorities entrusted with the investigation and monitoring of alleged cases of racial profiling;
- Complaints concerning alleged brutality and unjustified use of violence by police officers, including complaints with a possible racial motive, should be investigated by fully autonomous and adequately resourced bodies which are outside the structures of government ministries or law enforcement. Victims or witnesses of police brutality should be provided with protection against harassment and victimization.

Recommendations for the European Commission

- There is wide consensus among observers, including the EU's own Fundamental Rights Agency, that full transposition of the Race Equality Directive (RED) into domestic law has not translated into effective action against anti-Roma discrimination. The experience of racism during the pandemic, and the evidence of discriminatory actions against Romani communities, served to reiterate that the RED is unfit for purpose. The scope of Article 3 needs to be broadened so that the RED can be used to challenge the most common forms of discrimination against Romani people, namely: forced evictions, discriminatory actions by law enforcement, and public authorities responsible for health, housing and social welfare, all of which should be considered as relating to the provision of public services.
- The Commission should do all within its competence to step up support and capacity-building to set minimum professional standards and operational mandates for equality bodies across the European Union and accession countries to allow them to function effectively. In many states, the Commission should similarly help to address the lack of capacity and the plain ignorance of many responsible authorities by supporting anti-discrimination for law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, public service providers, and other relevant duty bearers.
- The Commission should be vigilant, especially in the case of Member States known for democratic backsliding, that temporary emergency powers assumed under cover of the pandemic do not become permanent fixtures; and further, be prepared under the current Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) to suspend the flow of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs) where a Member State does not uphold the rule of law.

