



Eurac Research Webinar Briefs

# Minorities and COVID-19

## #3 Covid-19 and Roma

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*The Roma are the largest minority group in Europe and present in virtually all European countries. Under this umbrella term, they comprise millions of individuals and communities, including for instance Sinti, Travellers, Kalé, Gens du voyage, whether sedentary or not. It is acknowledged that most Roma populations face considerable obstacles to the full enjoyment of their fundamental rights and that the Covid-19 pandemic intensifies existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. In this brief, three experts on Roma rights share their insights into these challenges.*

**Roberta Medda-Windischer: Neda Korunovska, as co-author of the comprehensive report “Roma in the Covid-19 crisis: An Early Warning from Six EU Member States”, you are in an ideal position to give us a short overview of the major results of the report, especially on access to health and labour.**

**Neda Korunovska:** The [report](#) documented the inadequate support and measures that were not adjusted to the conditions of extreme poverty and many systemic disadvantages that Roma face, such as lack of statutory health insurance or access to basic infrastructure, such as clean water and sewage. Soldiers, police personnel and drones have been more present in Roma communities in Bulgaria and Slovakia than nurses, doctors and medical supplies. Disinformation by the far right and others, in combination with excessive security measures and police abuse, framed the Roma as a public health threat, which reinforces and politicizes hatred.

The most dramatic and long-lasting impact of the pandemic is on Roma workers and entrepreneurs, many of whom worked in the informal economy, in low-skill and low-wage jobs, or in the arts and culture industry, and who are not included in social and economic recovery plans. Even the new [EU SURE program](#) aimed at “protecting citizens and mitigating the severely negative socio-economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic” provides support for the existing Member States’ measures (mostly focused on wage subsidies), missing an opportunity to provide coverage for the most vulnerable citizens.

**Roberta Medda-Windischer: In the economy, the slogan “Never let a crisis go to waste” is often used to refer to the fact that a crisis should be used as an opportunity to do things you previously could not do. After the pan-European Decade on Roma Inclusion that was supposed to eradicate poverty and bring tangible improvements in the lives of the Roma population in Europe, and 10 years after the adoption of the EU Roma strategy, which lessons can we learn from these ambitious initiatives that may serve in the post-pandemic scenario to transform, effectively, a crisis into an opportunity?**

**Lorant Vincze:** In the ten years that the European Union’s Roma strategy has been in place, the situation of Roma has not improved significantly. All the data show that their situation has worsened; in Central and Eastern European countries Roma intergenerational poverty remains, access to education, public services and the job market is hindered, and basic infrastructure is missing. In Western Europe, Roma discrimination and antigypsyism have intensified. The European Parliament has adopted a revised strategy, which focuses more on inclusive education, better access to the labor market and facilitation of political participation of Roma. The pandemic has brought to the fore the flaws of the current program: there is a lack of good national programs, while local good practices are not promoted. A study conducted at the level of the Federal Union of European Nationalities with the support of the European Parliament’s Minority Intergroup has shown that half of the minorities did not have access to general health care information in their mother tongue

and especially Roma lack access to online education. We have to transform the crisis into an opportunity, and we need stronger legal acts to make the Member States take measures. Coordination is not enough; we need an EU Directive.

**Roberta Medda-Windischer: A deficit of mutual trust and dialogue seems to be a recurrent problem in many European countries in the relation between public authorities (and part of the non-Roma population) and many Roma communities. How do you evaluate the impact of the pandemic on the Roma community from this perspective?**

**Zora Popova:** Covid-19 tested the societal systems and their functionalities and exposed their deficits. The crisis revealed that the lack of trust exists both ways – from governments to communities and from communities to governments. Although the following two illustrative examples are from Bulgaria, this does not mean that this is only a Bulgarian problem. The so-called “anti-epidemic measures”, such as imposed curfew and strictly controlled social isolation through introduced checkpoints from and to the Roma neighbourhoods, are examples of the lack of established cooperation and communication mechanisms between public authorities and stakeholders resulting in use of force to ensure compliance. The Covid-19 patient who ran away from the hospital to his home village (infecting other people as a result), clearly demonstrates the pattern: lack of trust in the institutions and expected support from the family. In both cases, the signal is the same: This is not an integrated society and before mutual trust is achieved, individuals belonging to different communities will maintain the separation between the communities. The important role that Roma mediators played during the crisis – providing medical support and information or serving as negotiators to reduce tensions – emphasised the perpetuating communication gap between Roma and the general population.

**Roberta Medda-Windischer: Looking toward the future, can you give us a recommendation on the ‘way forward’ for a better future for the Roma communities?**

**Neda Korunovska:** Our primary recommendation is that the European Commission and the EU’s financial institutions— for example, the European Investment Bank — should take responsibility for complementing the measures of national governments, both in the short and long term. Such direct approach should especially target cities, towns and districts with a higher share of Roma population and be carried out in partnership with innovative and capable Roma-led organizations and businesses. Unfortunately, at the moment the new EU Roma strategic framework – expected to be promoted in October 2020 – is decoupled from the policy debates on the new EU budget (the Multi Annual Financial Framework) and the Resilience and Recovery’ Plans under the Next Generation (NGEU) . The upcoming recovery – similarly to the post-2008 – risks leaving Roma further behind, missing an opportunity to reimagine the future which builds on the potential of the youngest and largest minority in Europe. If that happens, we can expect a humanitarian catastrophe among the Roma, higher trends of migration towards Western Europe and strengthening of anti-Roma politics that is a danger for democracy and rule of law. In sum, we argue that to recover from Covid-19, the EU cannot afford the cost of inequality.

**Lorant Vincze:** Education is the key. Everything starts with education, as this is the only way to get Roma children out of intergenerational poverty. Families need to be motivated to keep their children in school, all involved stakeholders need to work on reducing school drop-out rates and schools need to put higher emphasis on providing quality education so that children would have better academic results. Afterschool programs with hot meals, combined with adult learning programs with Roma parents are promising. The majority population also needs to be educated in order to deconstruct prejudices. Discrimination and xenophobia persist in society, and Roma are one of the most targeted communities. Discrimination negatively impacts school attendance, access to social services, education and health care, vocational education and ultimately access to the labour market.

**Zora Popova:** Increasing trust is a two-dimensional process, which requires the active involvement of all actors involved. Trust is the end result of a process that starts with rapprochement, open and constructive dialogue, respect for the other, willingness for cooperation, and a vision for a common future. To overcome the problems that Covid-19 revealed, and to prevent them from happening in the future, targeted efforts to establish mechanisms for direct communication between Roma communities and the general society and public authorities, as well as platforms for interaction are needed. A possible step forward is the transformation of the Roma mediator into a public service position. The involvement of Roma communities in decision-making processes as a regular practice would allow the development of joint plans for action in extraordinary situations such as the pandemic. Such an approach would not only enable the reduction and possible elimination of existing democratic deficits but also enable mobilization of support for overcoming future crises.

Watch the full webinar [HERE](#)