

Alarming situation of Roma communities in the Western Balkans and Turkey through the COVID-19 pandemic

Roma in the Western Balkans and Turkey are seriously threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Poverty risks, famine and racist violence pose a serious danger to the Romani communities and to the overall societies as well.

We call upon the national governments in the Western Balkans and in Turkey, the European Union and individual EU Member States to urgently address the situation of the Roma.

The impact and risks of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma communities

Poverty and unemployment risks:

Many Roma face extreme poverty risks as a result of previous precarious working conditions as well as lack of income and resources to rely on in this crisis situation. The large majority relied on precarious self-employment, irregular daily work, collecting recyclable material or on other sources of income which now due to crisis measures are not available anymore. Shutdowns and impediments to freedom of movement further deteriorate the situation. People were and are not in a position to build up stocks and often do not have possibilities to store supply at home. Thousands of families were already relying in the past on civil society or humanitarian organisations who were providing them (or the children) regularly with food. Social assistance in most countries is not sufficient to make a living or many Roma cannot access social benefits due to a lack of identity documents. Further we can anticipate an increase in the prices of food and basic needs articles. Already today we can find communities not having enough food. When humanitarian aid is distributed too late when larger communities are already starving, this can lead to severe consequences and violence.

Health risks:

There is a high danger of spreading the virus with no possibilities to contain the virus due to the overcrowded living conditions of the vast majority of Roma, the limited access to water in the dwellings, to hygienic articles and to health services. The health status of Roma is in general already worse than within the majority population.

The risk of racist violence against Roma:

So far we can observe only some cases of irresponsible media reporting (conventional and social media) on Roma in the COVID-19 crisis. In case of mass-scale infection within a Roma community, the virus would not only spread fast within the community, but other parts of the town could be infected which could lead to racist mob violence against Roma. However, with an overall more tensed situation we can expect an increase of scapegoating of Roma and probably even violence. Spreading rumours or fake news via social media can have a horrible impact. In the last 20-30 years, we saw massive violence against Roma already, including more recent cases when fake news spread via social media led to direct violence against individuals. In addition to violence we could experience lock-in situations of whole communities in case of infections in Romani settlements (which happened already that whole settlements were closed when a person returned recently from Western Europe), meaning that police or mobs will not allow Roma to leave neighbourhoods.

Educational risks:

Due to the living conditions, children have difficulties to participate in distance-learning and home schooling. Overcrowded houses are not conducive to learning, many have no computers at home or parents are illiterate or attended only a few classes in school and cannot help the children. CSO-led educational centres are closed or require the necessary means for online education. We can anticipate tens of thousands of children losing track in schools and high drop-out rates in near future.

We call upon the national governments in the Western Balkans and in Turkey, the European Union and individual Member States of the European Union to urgently address the situation of the Roma.

Emergency and contingency

- Urgently, authorities have to address the specific situation of Roma in any contingency and emergency planning at both national and local level. Authorities have to introduce measures which directly target Roma as marginalized groups as well as to secure all mainstream measures to reach Roma and their settlements.
- National as well as local contingency and emergency response or crisis teams have to include Romani representatives.
- Authorities in cooperation with civil society have to conduct needs assessments at community (neighbourhood) and municipal level, detailing the number of inhabitants of neighbourhoods according to gender, age and medical needs (online or via phone if necessary). The information has to be channelled to the national and local crisis response teams.
- Authorities should urgently develop and secure economic measures during the crisis or provide financial aid to vulnerable groups working as informal market sellers or daily workers, as well as workers which will lose their job or income due to the crisis.
- Authorities have to ensure equal treatment of Roma when adopting and applying preventive measures.

Humanitarian Assistance and Security of Roma

- **Supply of food and hygienic articles:** Taking into account that the majority of Roma is now without any income possibilities, a humanitarian assistance programme focusing on the most vulnerable people has to be implemented urgently across the region, involving all vulnerable Romani communities. This requires a regular and well organised distribution of humanitarian assistance (food and hygiene). A regular and scheduled distribution scheme can help to avoid violence during distribution.
- **Access to water, electricity and infrastructure:** Urgently, all possibilities have to be explored to provide better access to hygiene. This means in particular providing access to water and needed infrastructure. This could be done via reconnecting families or settlements which have been cut off from water or electricity supply or via regular bringing water with lorries to the settlements. Romani settlements should be fully included in disinfection measures.
- **Access to health care system and medicine:** A non-discriminatory, equal access to the health system and the supply with medicine have to be ensured for everybody.
- **Ensure security of Roma:** Law enforcement has to ensure security of Roma from racism and violence. Neither state authorities and law enforcement nor local communities should be allowed to introduce measures of “collective punishment” against Romani communities.
- **Education:** Alternative, creative ways of home-schooling have to be developed for children in vulnerable families.

Participation and contribution of civil society

- **Role of civil society:** Authorities should be in charge, and should not leave the responsibility to the civil society, e.g. regarding humanitarian assistance. Civil society can assume other important tasks such as regular awareness-raising within the communities, assessing the needs in communities and informing authorities and donors, monitoring the equal inclusion of Roma in humanitarian assistance and their equal access to medical service (e.g. phone/online counselling).
- **Awareness-raising:** Authorities in cooperation with Roma and pro-Roma civil society have to conduct awareness-raising programmes.
- **Safety and protection of community assistants:** Roma health mediators, teaching assistants, coordinators or members of NGO working with communities have to be equipped with the necessary protective materials (masks, gloves, disinfectants). These persons should be provided with information on protective measures and assist people as much as security allows.
- **Detect fact news and hate speech:** Civil society should set up close cooperation with law enforcement institutions and monitor social media in order to detect rumours and fake news to avoid violence against Roma.
- **Monitor equal treatment:** Human-rights watchdogs have to monitor in order to ensure equal treatment of Roma, including in the field of freedom of movement, and in the distribution of humanitarian aid.
- **Psycho-social support programmes:** As all other individuals Roma face the psycho-social consequences of the crisis which could create additional problems such as depression or domestic violence, in particular when considering the overcrowded living conditions and the lack of financial resources. Relevant institutions should reach out to Roma to include them into psycho-social assistance programmes. Civil society organisations could establish relevant counselling hotlines.

Post-pandemic time

- **Prepare for post-COVID 19 pandemic time:** The crisis will not be over after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Long-term measures in housing and infrastructure development, economic participation (employment and self-employment), access to education, etc. have to be developed already now. The post-crisis policies have to solve the most crucial problems of the Romani communities. In case, governments or the European Union start with the post-crisis planning, representatives of the Romani communities and civil society organizations should be involved.
- **Monitoring and assessment of the socio-economic impact:** Support should be provided to the CSOs to monitor and assess the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on the Roma community during the pandemic itself, so that required disaggregated data (according to gender, age and vulnerability) would be available for post pandemic policy design. Monitoring and assessment exercise should mainstream gender. Special attention should be paid to possibility of growing gap between the Roma communities and society in general.

A joint statement of Roma Active Albania, Otaharin (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians (Kosovo), Advancing Together (Kosovo), Phiren Amenca (Montenegro), RROMA (North Macedonia), Romalitico/Romaversitas (North Macedonia), Forum Roma Serbia (Serbia), Association of Coordinators for Roma Issues (Serbia), Zero Discrimination Association (Turkey), Central Council of German Sinti and Roma (Germany), ERGO Network (Belgium).

Annex: Background information on the living conditions of Roma in Western Balkans and Turkey

Structural antigypsyism – the specific form of racism towards Roma – pushed the vast majority of the Romani communities to the edges of society. Hundreds of thousands are living in “substandard” settlements, some of them comparable to slums with limited or no access to electricity, running water or any infrastructure.

Due to antigypsyism Roma are cut off from equal opportunities, including on the labour market. The vast majority of Roma is forced to make their living with precarious jobs with no regular and very low income. Due to antigypsyism and its consequence such as lower formal education levels, very few Roma are employed in public or private sector, but have to rely on informal “precarious self-employment”. The COVID-19 pandemic makes it impossible for them to perform their economic activities and they are not included in state-sponsored support programmes for employees or small and medium entrepreneurs.

Roma are often confined to overcrowded neighbourhoods or mahallas with limited access to infrastructure, including limited access to clean water and sewerage. This situation was not addressed by all governments in the last decades. The formalisation of settlements with providing access to infrastructure has not been done though governments were obliged to do so.

Large numbers of poor families live in overcrowded small houses, often sharing one or two rooms with many people. However, not only the houses, but also the poor neighbourhoods themselves are overcrowded with limited free or open common space. In case of infection these conditions do not allow any “social distancing”.

Average household size	Albania	BiH	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Roma	4.04	4.12	5.07	4.81	4.11	4.81
National	3.88	2.90	5.24	3.13	3.77	3.13

All data are from [UNDP Regional Survey 2017](#)

Distance learning and home-schooling makes use of internet and is often done via computers. However, some Romani families have no or limited access to electricity and many do not have internet or a computer; thus, these barriers do not allow children to participate in “distance learning” programs/schooling.

Pupils from primary schools, e.g. in North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania and Turkey work with the help of TV programmes which are more accessible. However, also primary school children have to learn now in one-room flats or huts in which many other persons are spending their time.

In some families, parents are illiterate and cannot help the children, making “home-schooling” often impossible. We can anticipate that many children will lose the school year or might even fully drop out from school.

Households with computer	Albania	BiH	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Roma	7%	25%	33%	17%	46%	17%
National		58%	72%	54%		54%

In addition to “social distancing”, strict hygienic rules should prevent spreading COVID-19; however, these hygienic rules cannot be followed without access to sanitation, clean water or water at all as in the case of many excluded Roma settlements. The difficulties to follow social distancing in overcrowded Romani neighbourhoods have been raised. In Albania, less than half of the Roma have access to piped water in their own dwelling.

Access to piped water in the dwelling	Albania	BiH	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Roma	48%	87%	85%	72%	90%	72%
National	72%	91%	98%	98%	99%	98%

Only a small part of the Roma in the Western Balkans are actually employed. The large majority relies on precarious self-employment, irregular daily work or on other sources of income. According to UNDP, the employment rate of Roma ranged between 11% (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and 22% (North Macedonia).

Employment rate	Albania	BiH	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Roma	18%	11%	13%	14%	22%	14%
National	56%	40%	29%	52%	49%	52%

People cannot make their living anymore. People with small businesses often did not register them which would exclude them from possible support now provided by governments to small and medium enterprises. Social welfare in most of the Western Balkan countries is very limited, as well as many Roma without identity documents are not social welfare beneficiaries.