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Introduction to Special Issue “Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe”

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The articles included in this special issue are based on the data collected for the project ‘Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe’, funded by the University of Leicester’s QR Global Challenges Research Fund (Research England) and developed by the University of Leicester in partnership with the European Centre for Minority Issues.

The primary aim of this project was to assess the overall impact of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic on Roma communities across seven non-EU countries in Eastern Europe: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine. These are all countries situated on the border of the European Union, all with fairly large Roma communities. As non-EU member

states, their institutional capacity and policies with regard to the Roma are more limited than those of their EU neighbours, while state capacity for providing economic relief to mitigate the impact of prevention measures taken against Covid-19 is relatively limited. Additionally, research on the impact of the pandemic on minority groups in these countries is comparably less developed than similar research carried out in EU countries. Consequently, this project contributes to a better understanding of how the pandemic affected the lives of the Roma in this part of the world.

Roma communities are among the most discriminated minority groups in present-day Europe. As communities living mostly in rural or deprived urban areas, having a much higher poverty rate than the majority population, and often experiencing very poor housing conditions, including overcrowding and limited access to clean water, the Roma have been much more vulnerable to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pervasive racism and stereotyping against Roma were reflected in the allegations about their poor hygiene and lack of compliance with social distancing rules, with the result that this ethnic group was oftentimes scapegoated for allegedly spreading the disease.

As the first wave of the pandemic unfolded across Europe, there was little information concerning the impact of the pandemic on this vulnerable community. NGOs working in the field did indeed sound the alarm about the dire situation some of these communities found themselves in but could not provide a comprehensive picture across the region. Our project aimed therefore to contribute to an evidence-based understanding of this impact, with a view to informing policies designed to mitigate it. Given the multiple vulnerabilities of Roma communities on account of their poverty, social exclusion, and pervasive racism targeting them, the project was driven by two main research questions. The first question sought to clarify the impact of the pandemic and of the related measures intended to contain its spread on the ability of Roma communities to access healthcare services, participate in education, maintain their employment status and housing conditions. The second question focused on the emergence of acts of discrimination, racist incidents, and hate speech targeting Roma communities in the context of the pandemic and the responses of the local and national authorities to such incidents.

The data collection was carried out with the help of seven research assistants hired locally in each of the countries covered, and included a desktop research component, a survey, and stakeholder interviews. The desktop research covered the developments regarding the

pandemic since the beginning of the outbreak until 31 July 2020, on national, regional, and local levels, focusing on the main legislation and policies instituted to prevent the spread of the virus, as well as on media reports that referred to the Roma community. A second component of the mixed methods approach in our methodology involved researchers interviewing local stakeholders, including leaders of Roma communities, representatives of relevant NGOs active in the field of minority or human rights, as well as public officials, both Roma and non-Roma. These stakeholders were identified by the research assistants, who then conducted the interviews via phone or email, so as to obey the social distancing and / or lockdown rules in place at the time; they transcribed and then translated the interviews into English. Between 5 and 10 interviews were carried out per country, depending on availability, so that a total number of 53 interviews were carried out across the seven states during the data collection period. The third component of the research design was an online survey comprising 32 questions structured along the main themes of the project (education, healthcare, employment, housing, and discrimination), translated into each of the local state languages. The survey was distributed by the local research assistants to a minimum of 50 persons identifying as Roma in each of the seven states, resulting in a total number of 440 valid responses. As in the case of the stakeholder interviews, participation in the survey took place remotely, in keeping with existing social distancing and /or lockdown rules. While most of the respondents used the online version of the survey, in several situations, due to limited access to the internet or due to a lack of IT skills, the research assistants conducted the survey by phone.

Overview of project results

Following the thematic structure outlined in the methodology above, this section provides a broad overview of the results of the research – across the three data types. This aims to give the reader a general picture of the situation during this time, allowing the individual articles to proceed in greater depth on specific chosen areas corresponding to the authors' expertise. It also points towards certain overlaps and interrelations between multiple impacts on different policy areas, as well as considers some of the significant country variations that were identified in our research.

All three data types collected indicated that Roma children faced significant difficulties in continuing their education during the first wave of the pandemic. According to the data collected by desktop research, all countries covered by the project instituted policies for some

type of remote learning, whether in the form of online schooling, through mass-media (e.g., TV programmes), or via the distribution of printed homework. Interestingly, 86.5% of the respondents to our survey, across the seven countries, stated that remote education was not available to them (there was significant variation among countries, with Serbia faring best at 50% and Ukraine worst at 100% of all respondents). This indicates a high likelihood that policies instituted at national level were poorly implemented locally, possibly due to a lack of institutional capacity and/or the unavailability of essential IT infrastructure. Stakeholder interviews referred to the lack of computers and/or the lack of an adequate internet connection as some of the most important barriers to participating in remote education, in those places where this was available. This was corroborated by the data obtained in the survey, where 55% of respondents indicated the lack of a computer and 43% the lack of an adequate internet connection as the main barriers to remote learning, for those who were offered this service. Relatedly, 34.1% of the respondents across the seven countries agreed or strongly agreed that remote learning increased costs for the household – this was particularly pronounced in Albania, at 43% of respondents.

The parents' ability to help their children with homework and to support them during periods of school closures was another issue that was raised by our interviewees, who mentioned that sometimes parents did not have the time or the knowledge to help their children. Our survey addressed this issue as well, with less than 50% of the respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they could help their children with home schooling, across the seven countries. However, when looking at a country level, strong variation was encountered was once again – for example, the percentage of parents who stated they were able to help their children was lowest in Ukraine, at just 14%.

Overall, the data collected indicates that Roma parents generally felt that the quality of education experienced by their children was poor, whether due to problems in accessing remote education, or due to the teachers' difficulties in delivering this kind of education. Overall, only 32% of the survey respondents declared they were satisfied with the quality of education during the lockdown period. While aware that the limitations of online schooling affected the population at large, not just the Roma, our survey additionally indicated that 18% of respondents indicated that they felt their children were discriminated against during the lockdown period in relation to their access to education.

Access to healthcare, as experienced by the Roma communities covered by the project, appears

to have been significantly impacted as well. 44% of the survey respondents felt their access to general and specialist healthcare worsened in the first months of the pandemic; concerning the quality of services for pregnant women, 77% felt it was acceptable or good, with the worst results being reported in Albania at 33%. Interviews with stakeholders, as well as media reports across the countries covered by the project revealed several instances where people of Roma background had their treatment delayed or were outright refused access to hospitals, possibly due to fears of contagion. As shown in the article by Andreea Cârstocea in this special issue, at the time the media was constructing an image of Roma people as ‘virus spreaders’. Some 19% of the respondents to the survey declared they felt discriminated in their access to medical services, whilst 20% stated that they had to offer extra payments to doctors to be consulted. Interviews suggested that this was often due to a lack of formal health insurance for Roma, who as a result resort to cash payments made directly to the doctors – a particular issue in Moldova. At the same time, 53% of survey respondents stated they avoided medical attention due to fears of getting infected with the virus, a figure that was highest in Moldova (77%) and Albania (62%). Regarding health outcomes, 31% of respondents felt their health had declined during this first lockdown period, although this again fluctuated by country, with Ukraine having the highest figure, at 56%, and North Macedonia the lowest (18%).

Concerning employment, this topic is covered in depth by Craig Willis’ article (this issue), which outlines the two broad themes of income loss and its subsequent effects. As the article details, the headline takeaway is that 73% of the survey respondents experienced a reduced income during the first months of the pandemic, the major reason for this being the fact that access to or demand for informal work were hindered by the lockdowns. Knock-on effects included 32% of respondents experiencing an inability to afford food and everyday essentials or to pay bills, whilst 73% stated they needed to borrow money, most of this being from private channels (family and friends) rather than banks. There was some geographic variance between the seven countries, with Roma communities in Albania and Ukraine faring worst on most measures.

With regards to housing, both the interviews and the survey questions were structured along two strands of enquiry, concerning on the one hand physical space and on the other financial issues relating to housing. In terms of physical space, interview respondents indicated that many homes did not have sufficient space for obeying social distancing rules, while lack of space also constituted an obstacle to children’s access to education, in that they did not have adequate space for attending remote education without being disturbed. This was confirmed by

the survey, where just over 50% of the respondents indicated they had adequate space to obey lockdown rules. However, 65.4% agreed that there was a tense atmosphere in their home and 73% felt they had experienced higher anxiety – suggesting the lack of adequate space. Regarding the financial effects, these are covered in Craig Willis' article (this issue) and demonstrate relatively low figures of households being cut off from a utility (9%) and even lower numbers of families evicted from their homes (1%); however, the number of households cut off from utilities was much higher in Ukraine (26%) and Albania (17%). The very low number of evictions was explained by the interviewees through the fact that many states prohibited evictions in those lockdown months; as a result, the main issue for most Roma was affording food bills and utility costs.

Overview of the contributions

This special issue comprises four articles based on the data obtained from the project 'Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe', as well as a review article covering reports concerning the impact of the pandemic on other national minorities across Europe.

The articles offer in-depth analyses of the impact of the pandemic on the access to education of Roma children (Marta Anzilotti) and on the employment status of people of Roma background (Craig Willis). Another article (Andreea Cârstocea) makes the case for the emergence of a moral panic constructing the Roma as spreaders of the virus, while Raul Cârstocea places the impact of the current pandemic on Roma people in the wider context of historical pandemics. Finally, Sergiusz Bober's review article *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Minority Communities in Germany, Poland, Portugal, and Spain. Was There a Specific Minority Angle to the Public Health Emergency?* offers a broader context to these articles, as it focuses on the impact of the pandemic on selected ethnic groups in three EU countries in western Europe.

The first article in the special issue, *Roma and the First Wave of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Income Loss and its Effects Across Roma Communities in Seven Non-EU Countries*, authored by Craig Willis, examines the income loss and the effects deriving from it on Roma communities in the first months of 2020 in the countries covered by the project. Most Roma communities in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine were already facing socio-economic exclusion and marginalisation before the COVID-19 pandemic. This prompted domestic and international organisations to warn very early on of the serious risks facing these

communities during lockdowns, including in the fields of employment and loss of income.

Willis' article provides empirical evidence towards these concerns and demonstrates that income loss was widespread within Roma communities and affected an average of around 70% of the persons surveyed, a figure reasonably consistent across the seven countries. The knock-on effects of the loss of income included an inability to afford food and everyday essentials or pay bills for 32% of the survey respondents. Some geographic variance between the seven countries is noted, with Roma communities in Albania and Ukraine faring worst. Willis argues that this variance is linked to the government assistance that was in place, and which Roma were informed of and could access. Income loss across Roma communities in the seven countries analyses is directly linked to the reliance on informal work, a key factor which highlights the need for government support during such extreme circumstances.

In her article *Understanding the Impact of the First Wave of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Access to Education of Roma Communities in Ukraine Using Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Theory*, Marta Anzilotti takes a closer look at the structural issues affecting the Roma community in order to understand the challenges faced by Roma children in receiving education during the pandemic. Her article engages in the broader structure-agency debate through the lens of Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory, Foster's enhancements of it, and Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality. Anzilotti argues that underlying structural issues, such as underfunded and segregated schools with non-inclusive curriculums, intergenerational inequality, the digital divide, language barriers, intersectionality, and the pandemic's negative impacts on Roma parents are some of the causes that played a critical role in the quality of the education provided to Roma children, sometimes determining if education was available at all. The author additionally emphasises the importance of also considering the agency Roma individuals have in choosing how to respond to structural oppression, demonstrating the harmful impacts of stereotypes that deem a culture to be innately resistant to education.

The third article in this special issue, *Going Viral: The Moral Panic Constructing the Roma as a Threat to Public Health during the First Wave of the Covid-19 Pandemic*, written by Andreea Cârstocea, focuses on the heightened anti-Roma rhetoric which became noticeable across much of Europe in the first months of the pandemic. Using the literature on moral panics as a framework of interpretation, this article aims to shed light on the processes leading to high levels of social consensus as to the alleged threat to public health posed by Roma communities

in these countries. Cârstocea argues that the intense and disproportionate mass-media focus on instances of coronavirus infections in Roma communities contributed to the creation of a state of panic regarding the alleged threat posed by this ethnic group. The reactions of the elites across the seven countries greatly contributed to this narrative, as public officials and authorities instituted harsh measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus in these communities, while relentlessly highlighting the unruly character and unhygienic habits of Roma people. The article outlines the narratives disseminated in mass media, as well as the subsequent narratives and policy responses employed by public authorities, demonstrating how the latter legitimised the alarming reports publicised by the former, engendering a strong societal response which the author argues conforms with the framework of a moral panic.

The fourth article in this special issue, *War against the Poor: Social Violence against Roma in Eastern Europe during COVID-19 at the Intersection of Class and Race*, written by Raul Cârstocea, positions the social violence against Roma in Eastern Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic in historical perspective. While solidly grounded in the primary data derived from the project, particularly on analysis of the in-depth interviews carried out with relevant stakeholders, this article provides a broader context with the help of secondary literature on historical epidemics and pandemics, as well as societal responses to them, with a particular focus on the ensuing scapegoating of minorities in certain cases. The author argues that hate speech and racist incidents against the Roma in the context of the pandemic are better understood by factoring in the intersection of race and class, where the long-standing racialisation of the Roma in Eastern Europe is shaped by both. Zooming out from the case study under consideration to consider other instances of ‘Othering’ encountered during historical pandemics, the article draws attention to the different scales at which exclusion operates, and to the advantages provided by an awareness of the multiple spatial and temporal layers constitutive of such a scalar approach. Cârstocea argues that this broader perspective constitutes a safeguard against either ‘exceptionalising’ the ongoing pandemic or reifying some putative cultural characteristics of the Roma minority.

Finally, Sergiusz Bober’s review article *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Minority Communities in Germany, Poland, Portugal, and Spain. Was There a Specific Minority Angle to the Public Health Emergency?* broadens the perspective of this special issue by expanding the analysis of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Danish minority in Germany, the Roma minorities in Portugal and Spain, and on national and ethnic minorities in Poland. This selection of case studies offers useful insights into how the pandemic was

experienced by ethnic groups outside Eastern Europe and provides the premises for a comparison between the fate of Roma communities in non-EU countries in Eastern Europe, as analysed by our project, and that of Roma communities in two EU countries in western Europe.

This special issue contributes to the knowledge concerning the impact of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic on Roma communities in Eastern Europe by presenting original data and new perspectives on the fate of these communities in the first half of 2020. Our findings point towards a devastating impact in terms of income, access to education and public services, all made worse by the generalised scapegoating of Roma communities for allegedly spreading the virus. While the pandemic undoubtedly affected negatively the lives of everyone, Roma communities were already in a vulnerable position when it broke out, exposing them even more to the difficulties arising from lockdowns and social distancing rules. The policy responses at the time were marked by a certain unpreparedness for a pandemic of this scale, and therefore were often insufficiently concerned about the impact of these preventive measures on vulnerable groups. One hopes that based on the experience gained – and on research like the one presented in this special issue – future policymaking would be better tailored to serve the needs of everyone.