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## **Roma and the First Wave of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Income Loss and Its Effects Across Roma Communities in Seven Non-EU Countries**

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### **Abstract**

This article focuses on income loss and its knock-on effects experienced by Roma communities in seven non-EU states during the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown measures in the first half of 2020. Roma communities in Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine were all facing socio-economic exclusion and marginalisation before the COVID-19 pandemic, thus international organisations were warning very early on that Roma communities were at serious risk during lockdowns, including in the fields of employment or loss of income. This article uses primary data collected across the seven states from a survey of 440 Roma individuals and 53 in-depth interviews with Roma stakeholders, in order to add empirical evidence to an under-researched area. The main findings include that almost 73% of those surveyed experienced a reduced income, and the major reason for this was due to access to or demand for informal work which was hindered by the lockdowns. The knock-on effects of this included 32% of those surveyed declaring an inability to afford food and everyday essentials or to pay bills. Most Roma who needed to borrow money did so through private means (family and friends) rather than through official or state institutions. Finally, there was some geographic variance between the seven countries, with Roma communities in Albania and Ukraine faring worst.



**Keywords:** Roma, COVID-19, pandemic, socio-economic exclusion, employment, income loss.

## Introduction

It has been long documented that across the Council of Europe area Roma<sup>1</sup> have faced and continue to face serious issues of economic deprivation, as well as discrimination in the labour market and reliance on informal and unregulated sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a huge shock to the economic system, particularly in the first wave during Spring 2020, when many national economies were effectively closed down for a few months by strict lockdown measures. The combination of these two factors caused immediate concern that Roma could be excluded from any official counter measures to replace income loss with drastic effects on the ability to afford everyday essentials and bills. This included statements around International Roma Day (8<sup>th</sup> April 2020) from the Council of Europe Secretary General and the European Commissioner for Equality, stressing that the serious problems of inequality and discrimination that Roma continue to face were accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Council of Europe, 2020a). Their statement included socio-economic factors such as access to welfare, provision of food aid, and general access to public services. This was echoed by a similar statement from the OSCE (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2020) and in a report from the EU Commission (2020). Subsequent research and reporting later in 2020 began to detail this in more quantifiable terms, yet much of this was focused on Roma within EU member states and much less so in the areas beyond Brussels' influence – particularly in a comparative context. Given that roughly half of Europe's 10-12 million Roma live outside of the EU (European Commission, n.d.) and thus mostly in economically less prosperous areas, there is a particular gap in reporting and it becomes apparent that further data is necessary. Accordingly, this article uses primary survey and interview data collected as part of a research project which focused on seven countries, namely: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine.<sup>2</sup>

The article begins with an overview of the situation of Roma in Europe, focusing on economic precarity and exclusion, including a focus on the Advisory Committee to the Framework Convention (ACFC) monitoring of the seven countries in focus. This is then followed by the economic effects of the pandemic, first broadly on the countries themselves and then summarising research on other minorities across Europe and beyond, before examining what

has been reported on the issues faced by Roma and during the pandemic specifically. The methodology details the background of the research project through which the data was collected, outlining the specifics of the survey and interviews. Section four outlines the results, separated into reasons for and direct effects of reduced income, and the consequent measures taken to address this (borrowing, government welfare), before an analysis places these findings within the broader context of issues faced by Roma. The conclusion then recognises the limitations as well as recommending areas which could benefit from further scrutiny.

## **1. Background: Roma, minorities and COVID-19**

### ***1.1 The situation of Roma in Europe***

As the introduction initially raised, Roma communities across Europe continue to face a number of issues around long-term exclusion, poverty and discrimination. This subsection aims to provide an overview of how this has been monitored and addressed on a pan-European level, highlighting some of the initiatives but also reports published by international institutions and NGOs on issues faced by Roma. This subsection therefore includes a particular focus on economic issues, given the thematic scope of this article, then briefly outlines the empirical situation of Roma in the seven states surveyed, focusing on ongoing economic-related issues, using primarily the most recent Opinions of the ACFC.

Despite the long history of economic issues faced by Roma communities across almost all states in Europe, significant efforts to tackle these have only relatively recently begun to be organised on a pan-European intergovernmental level. This takes place predominantly on the Council of Europe level, but there are also EU institutions and working groups. The Council of Europe has been at the forefront since the early 1990s, when the then Group of Specialists on Roma/Gypsies (MG-S-ROM) was set up in 1996, around the same time as the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (ECRML) in 1992 and the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* (FCNM) in 1995, which provided a stronger layer of protection at the state level and were subsequently monitored by the ACFC. Renamed and expanded eventually into the Ad hoc Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (CAHROM) and then the Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (ADI-ROM), the various guises of this body have been composed of members designated by governments of member states and appointed rapporteurs to assist in monitoring ongoing issues (Council of Europe, 2018, 2019). Whilst their scope is broad, economic aspects are frequently

mentioned in relation to segregation, exclusion and discrimination, highlighting the barriers faced by Roma in the labour market and accessing income, with obvious links to poverty and inequality. One of the largest and most high-profile attempts to improve this was through the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 (Roma Decade), adopted by 12 European governments and supported by various organisations including the Council of Europe (Regional Cooperation Council, n.d. a). Employment was one of its four priority areas, but the impact of the Roma Decade was limited and did not achieve what was originally hoped (Regional Cooperation Council, n.d. b; Rorke & Matache, 2015), with ongoing projects such as the Roma Integration 2020 continuing similar aims such as reducing the socio-economic gap between Roma and non-Roma (Regional Cooperation Council, n.d. b).

Much of the Council of Europe work has involved all seven countries in the focus of this article, but to varying degrees; the former Yugoslav countries have received arguably more focus than Albania, Moldova and Ukraine, particularly on a comparative level. An example of this is the recent World Bank report on ‘Breaking the Cycle of Roma Exclusion in the Western Balkans’, which focuses on ‘labour markets’ as one of its core thematic areas, and states that low labour force participation and high unemployment are an issue across the Western Balkans and are a particular problem for Roma women (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019). Moreover, they provide some statistics which show that employment rates for Roma are much lower than for non-Roma populations and the EU-28 average.

Although the issues within each of the states vary, a lot of the economic challenges faced are present in all areas, albeit to varying degrees of severity. Exclusion from social and economic life, high unemployment rates and discrimination in the labour market are all frequently mentioned issues in ACFC monitoring across the seven countries (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2018a, p. 2; Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2018b, p. 2; Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2017, p. 6; Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2019a, p. 2; Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2016, p. 16; Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2019b, p. 1; Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2018c, p. 2)<sup>3</sup>. Other literature and reports have also reported similar economic exclusion issues individually in the cases of: Albania (The World Bank, 2018), Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (Robayo-Abril

& Millán, 2019).

It is thus apparent that socio-economic problems are long embedded in the everyday reality for Roma persons across Europe, including and especially in the seven non-EU countries in focus where issues for Roma are compounded by a broader lack of economic opportunities and low GDP. Issues such as higher unemployment rates, over-representation in informal and precarious work, exclusion from social policies (further hindered by low registration numbers), remain problematic despite the numerous international and national action plans to combat this. Thus, Roma communities and individuals were already in a difficult, marginalised position before the COVID-19 pandemic. Before looking directly at the effects of COVID-19 on Roma, the next sections consider the broader scope of COVID-19 in the seven states as well as for minorities in Europe and beyond.

### ***1.2 The COVID-19 pandemic***

Following the onset of the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic which reached Europe by early March 2020, the reaction of states was somewhat mixed with regard to lockdown measures. Whilst states in western Europe were the first to experience a spread of the virus and consequent lockdown measures were enacted by mid-March, eastern European states began to enact lockdown measures quickly before a significant spread of the virus (Walker & Smith, 2020). The consequence of this was that regardless of the number of cases, lockdown measures were mostly quite similar across the continent during these few months. Therefore, it is not possible to judge the severity of the pandemic in economic terms by examining the case numbers, a factor which has become even more clear with hindsight where we have seen higher numbers of infections in the second wave but less of an economic effect due to the relative 'normalisation' of the pandemic. In short, the first wave caused the most economic and social destruction even if it was not the most vigorous in terms of case numbers. This is of course relevant for the seven countries in focus which lie at the EU's eastern and south-eastern borders, because although the case numbers were comparatively low during the lockdown period between approximately March and June 2020, the economic effects could have been just as severe as those in western Europe. Moreover, given that these seven states have lower GDP per capita figures than the majority of the EU countries, their economies were in a more vulnerable position going into the lockdown period. Therefore, already on a comparative state-by-state level, the Roma communities in these seven states were likely to be at a disadvantage.

In terms of the seven countries which this article is concerned with, there were of course a

number of measures put in place to combat the economic effects of COVID-19 – although these were largely generic and not targeted at Roma, with the result of the same ineffectiveness mentioned in section 2.1 above. The OECD have released a series of country reports detailing how and when each country took lockdown or state of emergency measures, which outlines the economic support measures taken as a consequence (OECD, 2020, a,b,c,d,e,f,g). The reports show that the timeline across the seven countries was broadly very similar: late March to early June were the heaviest lockdowns, whilst some economic measures lasted further on into the summer. The lockdowns typically involved closure of all non-essential business and schools, as well as curfews and restrictions on movement. Such economic packages were often targeted at businesses, particularly in compensation for closures in tourist-reliant sectors, or the formally employed / registered unemployed, and thus often criticised for having a low take-up rate / not reaching Roma (ibid.; Jusic, 2020; Kaludjerovic, 2020; Gervoska Mitev, 2020; Pejcin Stokic, 2020).

To summarise, the seven states mostly followed a similar timeline in terms of enacting states of emergency and lockdown measures in the first wave; beginning in mid-March and being largely reopened by June 2020. The cases are therefore broadly comparable, as although certain states had stronger measures in place in terms of general support, it seemed mostly directed at employees or at best the registered unemployed – leaving an obvious gap when it comes to Roma. Before detailing reports and research on Roma specifically, the next subsection first discusses the wider context of minorities in the pandemic.

### ***1.3 The COVID-19 pandemic and minorities***

Statements of concern that the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures would have exponential effects on minority communities began to emerge rather quickly in Spring 2020. Academic literature showing evidence that marginalised minorities were being hardest hit, medically, socially and economically, then began to follow later in 2020 and during 2021. Most of these statements and literature were quite generalised and did not necessarily focus on Roma communities specifically, but they are useful to demonstrate how widespread the concern was with regard to marginalised groups, as this provides further emphasis on the severity for Roma as one of the most marginalised minorities.

Regarding the initial statements of concern, on the international level the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2020) and UNICEF (2020) both highlighted the disproportionate effects on minorities, including concerns of economic damage and the

consequent long-term effects of this. European organisations such as the European Network Against Racism (2020) provided case study examples showing that racial and ethnic minorities (including Roma) were more likely to experience “financial insecurity as a result of government measures” and to find themselves without income during such lockdown measures. Moreover, academic institutes including the Institute for European Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Ajayi & Westerveen, 2020) and Eurac Research (2020) discussed the economic aspects of the lockdown measures, suggesting that pre-existing socio-economic inequalities faced by minority communities were exacerbated by lockdown measures.

Academic literature also began to emerge on similar topics related to inequality and its exponential effects on minority communities. A vast array of literature focused on the exponential health risks and death rates that were faced by ethnic minorities in particular, and whilst this can be linked to socioeconomic status, it is not the primary focus of this article and the literature is too vast to summarise adequately here. However, some research has specifically looked at economic effects of the lockdown measures: in the cases of the United States (Fairlie et al., 2020), Canada (Hou et al., 2020), and the United Kingdom (Blundell et al, 2020; Witteveen, 2020), non-white populations were shown to be more likely to face economic hardship or become unemployed. This was said to often be due to the sectors that ethnic minorities commonly worked in, such as service industries and thus being less likely to be able to continue working online. Moreover, concern was expressed over the long-term effects this income reduction could have on such communities. Further research also identified effects on a number of broader areas related to minorities, including economic concerns for minority language media outlets (Bober & Willis, 2021).

#### ***1.4 Roma communities and COVID-19***

In addition to the statements mentioned in the previous subsection which identified Roma as a specific risk group, there were also similar sentiments expressed by Roma organisations, mostly on a broad pan-European level. The European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network produced a Position Paper based on data collection with its members during May 2020 (European Roma Grassroots Organisations, 2020). Socio-economic issues such as loss of income and high unemployment rates were highlighted and concern was expressed that Roma were “often not reached by mainstream inclusion measures and initiatives” (pp. 3-4). Leaders of Caritas Europa expressed similar fears that the vast majority of Roma would not be reached by employment-based social measures, due to the high numbers working in the informal sector,



suggesting that thousands of Roma would therefore be left “without the means by which to purchase food” (Pfohman & Hackl, 2020). The Open Society Roma Initiatives Office produced a report focusing on six EU countries, highlighting economic pressures and the exclusion from welfare for returning migrant Roma workers (Korunovska & Jovanovic, 2020).

Europe’s largest international organisations such as the EU, Council of Europe and OSCE were also vocal on the situation of Roma during the first wave of lockdowns, albeit to varying degrees. The EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies programme produced a report in May 2020 which highlighted issues and state responses across the bloc (European Commission, 2020). Its conclusions stated that the pandemic had widened existing poverty for Roma communities and large numbers had been “cut from any source of income and (formal or informal) economic activity, leading to rising unemployment and poverty” (Ibid., p. 1) and thus without the means to purchase essentials such as food. Another EU publication followed in September 2020, which covered the entire first lockdown period and detailed in much greater depth the issues which Roma communities had faced across the 15 EU states in focus (European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). Its key findings echoed previous concerns, declaring that lockdowns were affecting Roma and Travellers disproportionately in terms of their ability to work and gain an income, as well as knock-on effects on poverty and malnutrition. The Council of Europe and the OSCE reporting was more limited, with statements containing reminders of the issues faced by Roma communities appearing on International Roma Day or coinciding with certain relevant committee meetings (Council of Europe, 2020b; OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2021). There has, however, been little in-depth analysis on the state level, which is perhaps something that may be picked up in future monitoring cycles of the FCNM.

State-level research from both organisations and academic literature did also emerge after the first lockdowns. The well-known and active Roma association in Spain, Fundación Secretariado Gitano, conducted a telephone survey of 11,000 Roma people at the end of March 2020, finding that 40% were having problems accessing food and 34% were finding it difficult to pay their bills (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2020). On unemployment, their survey found that over one third had already lost their jobs within the first full month of the pandemic, another third had been temporarily laid-off, plus 71% of those self-employed were in the informal sector and thus ineligible for official government support (ibid.). A study on Roma and Travellers in Ireland contained some economic aspects alongside its mostly health-focused qualitative approach, with data from a dedicated Traveller COVID-19 helpline showing that



the second highest reason for calling the hotline was due to economic challenges affecting health – such as not having funds for food and medicines (Villani et al., 2021).

### **1.5 Summary**

It is quite evident that Roma communities across Europe were already in (often extremely) marginalised positions and faced generational social exclusion across a number of areas including employment and access to welfare systems, even pre-March 2020, something which was very much the case in the non-EU countries at the borders of the bloc – even if there was comparatively less data and monitoring than inside the EU. Furthermore, studies had begun to show exponential effects on minority communities during the pandemic with regard to income reduction, including in the case of Roma across the EU as well as detailed research in Spain and Ireland. Thus, the grave concern expressed by Roma NGOs and other international organisations already in April 2020 had begun to be evidenced. However, most of this data was from EU countries and the focus on Roma communities in the areas beyond the EU's borders has been missing – particularly in a comparative context. Indeed, as section 2.1 outlined, the Roma communities in the seven countries covered by this research also went into the pandemic in very marginalised positions and, as section 2.2 demonstrated, focused most of their economic response on those in formal employment or directly to businesses – areas which were likely to miss Roma communities. Given this lack of data on Roma communities in these seven countries, certainly comparatively, the research gap this article intends to shed light on becomes apparent. The general research question therefore is: 'how have Roma communities in Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in economic terms?'. Given the known low levels of formal employment amongst Roma going into the pandemic, focus is placed on sources of income, income lost during the lockdown, and then the numerous knock-on effects this loss could have.

## **2. Methodology**

As part of a larger research project 'Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe'<sup>4</sup> conducted by the University of Leicester and the European Centre for Minority Issues, data was collected through a series of local research assistants in each of the seven states studied (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine). Each local

research assistant was responsible for the three types of data collection, based on a methodology designed by the core researchers, including the present author. These were a survey, expert interviews and desk research, thus employing a mixed methods design. This article primarily uses quantitative data in the form of the survey, but also compliments this by using some of the qualitative data from the interviews in order to provide further context.

The survey was implemented through Online Surveys<sup>5</sup> and translated into each of the local state languages. This was distributed to a minimum of 50 persons identifying as Roma in each of the seven states, however this number was exceeded in some cases. As such, the final number of valid respondents was 440<sup>6</sup>. Given the unique circumstances of the pandemic, the surveys were distributed online or via phone in order to limit physical contact between the researchers and survey respondents. On top of this, a number of semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with stakeholders of the seven Roma communities.<sup>7</sup> There were between 5 and 10 interviews per country, depending on availability, leaving a total of 53. The research assistants identified persons of interest and then conducted the interviews via phone and sometimes via email, in local languages, before transcribing these and then translating them into English. The aim of these interviews was to give more detail and depth to the surveys, attempting to paint a broader picture of the whole community and comment on any government measures to address such issues, thus attempting to understand in detail the communal effects rather than just the individual elements that the survey was aiming to cover.

It is perhaps useful to briefly unpack the details of the survey and interviews in more detail and also in terms of what was most relevant for the economic focus of this article. Regarding the survey, the first questions related to demographics such as age group and gender, from which 60.1% were female and 39.9% male, and the age breakdown was measured by 10-year intervals.<sup>8</sup> In terms of content, the survey was designed with 32 questions across the themes of employment, education, healthcare, and housing. For the purposes of this research paper, the section on employment is of most interest, but questions of relevance can be also found within those covering housing, healthcare and education. The interviews followed a similar thematic breakdown, structured through the four core themes of education, employment, healthcare, and housing, plus specific questions on gender and hate speech. As with the survey data, this article is primarily concerned with the employment theme but also considers aspects related to income in other sections of the interviews.

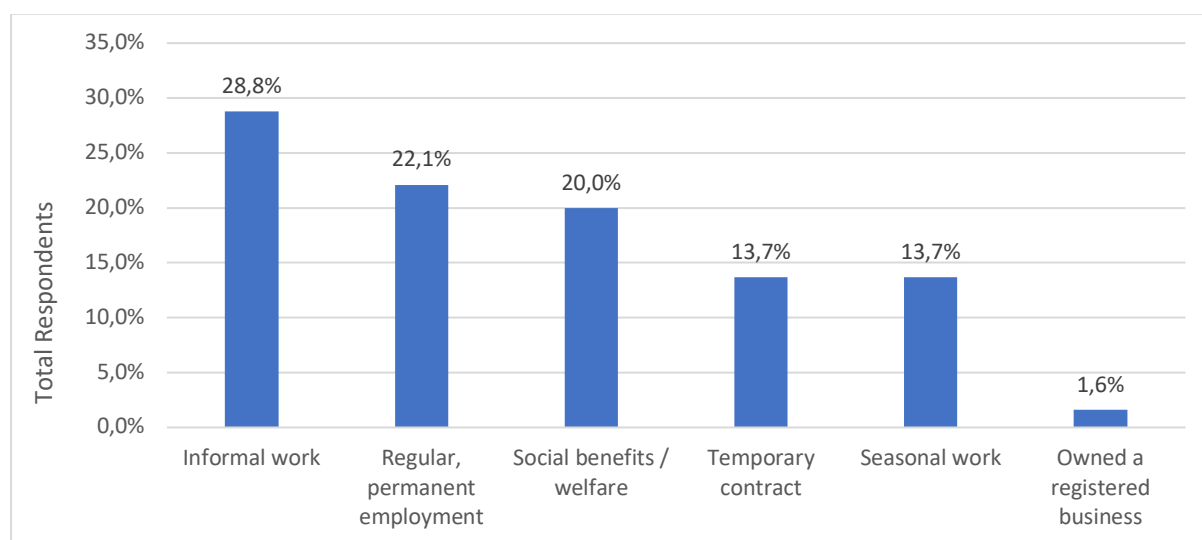
### 3. Results

This section provides the results of the economic-related questions in the survey, which are summarised in the Appendix, as well as relevant aspects of the interview data. This is broadly separated into two sections; reasons for and direct effects of reduced income, and the consequent measures taken to address this (borrowing, government welfare).

#### 3.1 Income loss: Reasons for and effects of

To ascertain an idea of the respondents' most important source of income before the pandemic, an initial question directly asked this – the results of which are shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Most important source of income before the start of the pandemic



Source: Author's own table, using data from the 'Marginality on the Margins of Europe Project'

Notes The total number of valid respondents to this particular question was 430.

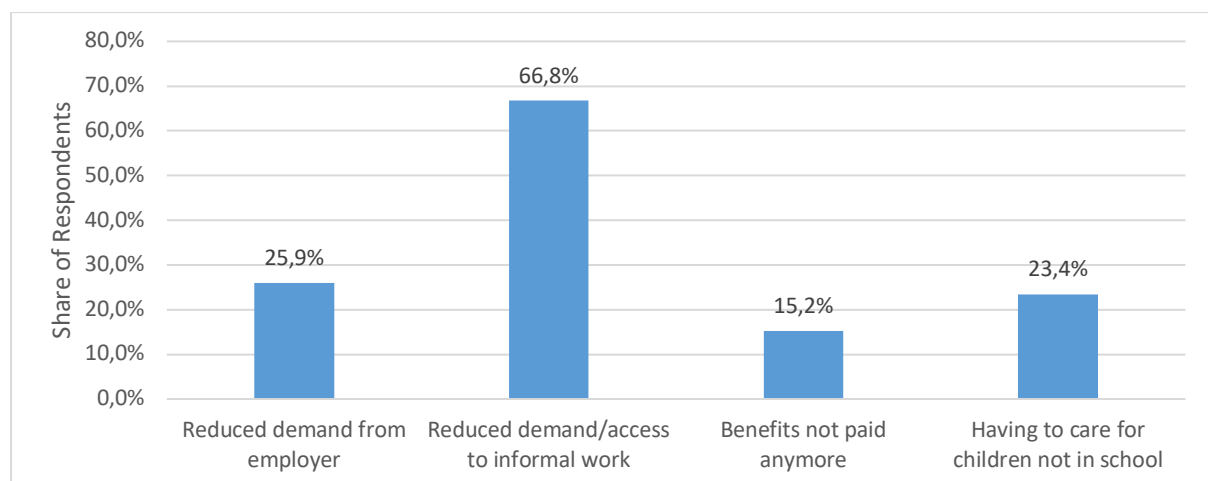
As can be observed, just 22.1% of the respondents were in regular permanent employment and this figure was similar in each of the seven states individually. 56% relied most on what can be termed as precarious income – temporary contracts, seasonal work or informal work – whilst 20% relied mostly on social benefits. The interview data further confirmed this, where it was frequently remarked that formal unemployment (as a consequence of lockdown) was often not the most pressing issue in many communities because so few Roma were formally employed going into the pandemic. Those that were formally employed were often in factory jobs and typically with short-term or seasonal contracts – including those who migrate temporarily to neighbouring countries. The larger issue lay with not being able to go out and conduct informal work or even in some cases the possibility to go out and beg – an element sometimes mentioned in relation to how the lockdowns had differing effects by gender; women (and children) in

some cases provided a supplement to income by begging and lockdown rules were preventing this.

Thus, on the question of income loss in the interviews, almost unanimously across all 53 interviews the interviewee highlighted this as a major issue in Roma communities, to varying degrees per country. The survey data further demonstrates this in numerical terms, with 71% of respondents agreeing that the lockdown limited their ability to work, whilst 72.8% agreed that their income had been reduced. Moreover, there was little geographical variance on this either; all seven countries had high figures of income loss both in the survey data and in the interviews.

The reasons for this are shown in Figure 2, which again demonstrates the reliance on the informal market.

Figure 2. Reasons for reduced income



Source: Author's own table, using data from 'Marginality on the Margins of Europe Project'. Notes: total number of respondents answering this question stating their income was reduced was 316, however respondents could select more than one answer.

Roma who were already receiving welfare benefits largely continued to do so but this is usually not the sole form of income and thus the ability to work was having the largest impact. One of the interviewees in the case of Ukraine suggested that typically 80% of income comes from work and 20% from welfare and thus in many cases household income was therefore reduced by 80%. Other interviewees suggested that quite often Roma families were left with completely no income at all. The interview data also offers more context to the category of 'reduced demand / access to informal work', summarising the typical income sources of Roma, including selling goods at markets which were then closed during lockdown periods, or collecting scrap or raw materials which was either (indirectly) prohibited by lockdown rules or faced a collapse

in demand from buyers during this time. Although not affecting every Roma worker, these informal or self-employed industries constituted the income for very high percentages of the community and thus had a huge individual but also community effect on reducing income.

Such large reductions in income had significant knock-on effects during this period. The survey asked a question on the ‘ability to afford food and household essentials’, and the figure across the seven countries was 31.9% stating that they could not. This fits with the general expressions from the interviewees who always stated it was an issue but often remarked that it was to a varying degree and not a unanimous factor for every family; nonetheless the issue of poverty was highlighted time and time again. Further cost-related questions concerned education and health, whereby 34.1% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘remote learning has increased costs for the household’ and 20.2% of those needing medical assistance had to offer extra payments to doctors to be consulted. Interview data suggested that Roma access to medicine or healthcare was also (in some countries) affected by not having health insurance, often due to not being in formal employment / registered unemployment. This was not the case everywhere though, as other interviewees suggested this was not an issue because most Roma in their area had health insurance – for example, this was the case in Serbia.

There was some geographical variance with regard to the inability to pay bills, with the highest figures in Albania (48%) and Ukraine (44.9%) being much higher than the seven-country average of 31.9%. The interview data for these two countries offered some further context to this. In the case of Albania, interviewees repeatedly remarked on families’ inability to pay bills and stated that there were known cases of families without food, particularly in the first few weeks of the lockdown, and this had led to increased demand for food packs from NGOs. In the case of Ukraine, one interviewee quoted their own organisation’s data which indicated that “71% of their respondents said that paying utilities was the biggest problem to tackle during the quarantine” and suggested that often the solution was just simply to not pay. Another Ukrainian interviewee suggested a figure of 30% not being able to pay their bills. Although we cannot verify such secondary data statistically, the interviewees – particularly in the case of Ukraine – were unanimous in their feelings towards the breadth and severity of this issue.

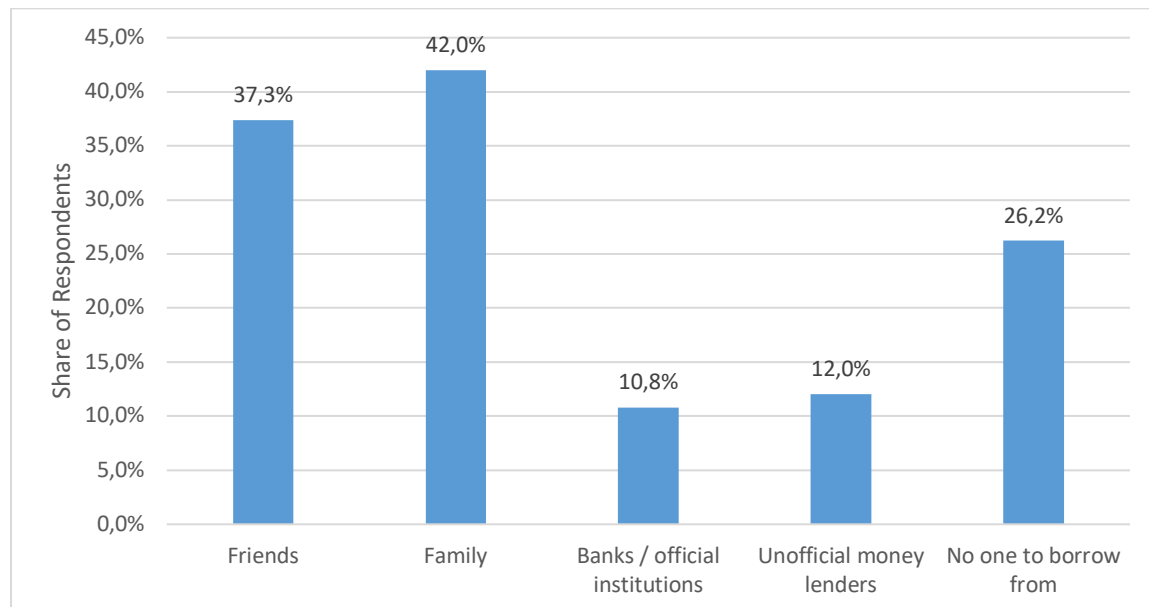
In terms of the knock-on effects of not being able to pay bills, the survey asked questions on utility cut-offs and evictions. The survey showed that 8.5% of respondents had been cut off from a utility service due to non-payment, again with a significant geographical variance; Ukraine (26%) and Albania (16.7%) with significantly higher percentages than the other five

countries. One of the Ukraine interviews mentioned knowledge of electricity having been cut off, whereas most interviewees spoke more about threats and fear due to debt. On evictions, 3.7% had been threatened with eviction and 1.4% had been evicted during lockdown, although several interviewees stated that evictions had been banned during the lockdown period and this may explain the low figures, nonetheless it seems the fear of eviction in the future was common.

### ***3.2 Income loss: Measures of replacement***

Regarding the measures taken to compensate income loss, the survey asked a number of questions regarding the need for borrowing money or applying for government financial assistance /welfare. Only 27.2% stated that they did not need to borrow money during lockdown and thus 73% by implication did need to borrow money. Moreover, needing to borrow money was a very common theme across the interview data, suggesting many Roma needed to take loans, sell valuables such as gold, or borrow money from family. The survey data provides details on this, with Figure 3 highlighting the sources (or lack of) which this 73% (almost three quarters of survey respondents; 324 persons) had had to turn to. As can be observed, just over one-quarter had no source to borrow money from, even though they stated that they needed to. Of those who needed to borrow, the primary sources were private (family and friends), with just one in ten borrowing money from banks.

Figure 3. Sources of borrowing



Source: Author's own table, using data from 'Marginality on the Margins of Europe Project'. Notes: total number of respondents answering this question stating they had to borrow money was 324, however respondents could select more than one answer.

With regard to government assistance, only 35.6% were aware of any such schemes and only

23.8% of total respondents applied. This latter figure fluctuated vastly between countries, with 91.8% of respondents in Serbia receiving government assistance but only 3.8% in Bosnia and Herzegovina or 11.3% in Montenegro. Finally, only 6.6% applied for housing benefit or social housing across the seven regions. This is consistent with the interview data, where it appears that specific government assistance was made available in some countries but not in others, or Roma communities were not aware or not eligible for such schemes. This was particularly the case in Serbia, where interviews consistently stated that many Roma were at least able to receive the extra government one off-payment that was made to everyone in the country, and which did seem to reach most Roma. On the contrary, interviews in most of the other countries often remarked about the lack of government assistance, with a particular barrier being the need to have been in employment or formal unemployment, and thus leaving Roma falling through the cracks in the system. Interview data did report many instances of local NGOs distributing emergency support including food packages, so it seems some basic assistance was there but often not in financial form.

#### **4. Analysis / Discussion**

Following the same structure as the results, the first aspect in focus is the most important source of income going into the pandemic. The broad picture of Roma across Europe, demonstrated in section 2.1, suggested that Roma rely mostly on informal work and have low figures of formal employment. The survey across more than 400 members of Roma communities in the seven states found that just 22.1% were in permanent employment, a figure lower than the 43% recorded for the EU in 2016. When adding together the survey responses for informal work, seasonal work and temporary contracts, the figure stands at 56% of respondents being in a precarious form of work, plus 20% on social benefits. Moreover, the interviewees unanimously stated that informal work was the most typical form of income, to the extent that in some communities there were almost no known Roma in formal employment before the pandemic. This is also consistent with the prior concerns regarding precarity and informal work that have been mentioned in ACFC monitoring cycles and international reports on Roma covering the seven countries. Thus, the findings are also coherent with the concerns expressed in March and April 2020 by international organisations that Roma communities had gone into the lockdowns in an already precarious and vulnerable position. Therefore, the next logical step was to examine whether such precarious positions did manifest themselves in a loss of income during



these extreme lockdowns of Spring 2020, as much of the international reporting was warning would happen and that had emerged in data from inside the EU. The survey found that almost three-quarters of respondents (72.8%) stated that their income had reduced and that this figure was fairly similar across all seven countries individually too. Likewise with the interview data, every one of the 53 interviewees mentioned knowledge of widespread income reduction amongst Roma, including sometimes to the extreme of having zero income. These findings offer empirical evidence to the concerns expressed by ERGO and Caritas, who specifically mentioned that the informal work sector would be a prime reason for a reduced income – the survey showed that of the respondents who had less income, 66% of these was due to reduced demand or access to informal work. Again, this was fairly consistent across the seven countries individually and thus a broad conclusion of income loss can be stated. However, there was geographical variance with regard to the consequences of this loss of income. The survey showed 32% stating that they could not afford food and household items, a similar overall figure to the research conducted by Fundación Secretariado Gitano in Spain. Yet these figures were much higher for Ukraine and Albania, whilst much lower for Serbia and North Macedonia. A similar geographical difference could be seen with the statistics on being cut off from utilities for not paying bills, or being evicted – Ukraine and Albania fared worse, whilst Serbia in particular fared better.

In terms of how Roma were compensated for income loss, there seems to be broadly three strands; government assistance, borrowing money/selling valuables, or simply not having the funds for essentials. 73% of the survey respondents stated they needed to borrow money, but over one-quarter had no one to borrow from. The majority of borrowing was from friends and family, although the interview data shows that oftentimes valuables were sold and emergency supplies from NGOs were utilised. Unfortunately, the survey did not ask further questions on the friends and family category because these funds may well have been obtained through remittances from abroad, an aspect which was mentioned by interviewees. Given the well-documented patterns of exclusion and discrimination which Roma face, it is not particularly surprising that only just over 10% borrowed from banks or official institutions. A particularly alarming statistic is that only 23.8% of respondents applied for government assistance, although this varied enormously between states. Given that the figures for those with a reduced income and those needing to borrow money were similar at around 73%, it seems illogical that only 23.8% would willingly apply for government assistance. One explanation is that the average figure across the seven countries is slightly distorted by the high figure of almost 92%

in Serbia. However, the low figures of government support taken in many of the other countries offer empirical evidence in support of the concerns made by Caritas that government schemes to address the economic effects of COVID-19 would not reach Roma.

The geographical variance here does seem to fit together between questions. In Serbia, whilst the percentage of Roma losing income was similarly high as elsewhere, the figures for not affording essentials or being cut off from utilities was much lower. The reason for this could well be the widespread government assistance that was made available, particularly this universal one-off payment, which seemingly 92% of the survey respondents possibly took up. At the other extreme, Ukraine and Albania had high figures of income loss and also the highest figures for the inability to afford essentials and pay bills, combined with a low percentage of government assistance. Thus the lifeline that was possible in Serbia made a difference. That is not to suggest there was no financial and physical suffering in the Serbian case, but rather it shows that government assistance can soften the effect of income loss if it is able to reach the most vulnerable.

## **Conclusions**

This article has aimed to provide empirical evidence towards the concerns expressed by international and local organisations that the pandemic-induced lockdowns would severely impact the income and ability to afford essentials of Roma communities. Moreover, it aimed to fill a gap in the areas of Europe that due to being outside of the EU receive less focus than those countries within the EU, broadly speaking. At the comparative level, the data was based on surveys with individual Roma and a series of interviews with key Roma stakeholders, and showed that income loss was widespread and affected an average of around 70% – a figure reasonably consistent across the seven countries. The knock-on effect of this towards the ability to afford essentials and pay bills was where more variance was observed, and this seems to be linked to the government assistance that was in place or able to be reached by Roma. Moreover, the reliance on informal work was clearly a key factor in this collective income loss and this highlights the need for government support during such extreme circumstances. The article also evidenced that this government support was not always available or often did not reach / was not applicable to Roma.

This article therefore succeeded in its broad aim, demonstrating that existing precarities and socio-economic exclusion influenced the outcome of the pandemic for Roma in income loss

terms. It offers tangible evidence which backs up prior statements of concern, for areas of Europe which lacked and continue to lack data. What is clear, though, is that there is variance here and thus individual country analysis is needed in order to unpack in further detail the difference between states as well as within, something that was beyond the scope of this article. Moreover, there are of course further limitations to the research, including sample size and representation, but also timescale. This research focused on the first wave of lockdowns, but the pandemic has stretched to almost two years, at the time of writing, and the longer-term effects and severity of subsequent lockdown measures in late 2020 and 2021 are unknown. Further research is therefore necessary, but this should not take away from the importance of the findings of this research project – including the other articles in this special issue – in providing tangible evidence in an under-researched area.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article follows the Council of Europe's explanatory note on the term Roma or Roma and Travellers. The Council of Europe uses this to "encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term Gens du voyage, as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies." (Council of Europe, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> See the methodology section for further details on the research project. The seven countries in focus are all signatories to the FCNM and have recognised Roma has a national minority in their territories, although size estimates of Roma populations vary and each country often has different communities of Roma using different names. See further the various FCNM state reports or the country profiles in the directory by Minority Rights Group International (n.d.) for more details.

<sup>3</sup> References listed in the alphabetical order of the seven states, starting with Albania and ending with Ukraine.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ecmi.de/research/equality-and-inclusion/social-justice-in-multiethnic-societies> - henceforth 'Marginality on the Margins of Europe Project'.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/>

<sup>6</sup> When subtracting respondents who answered no to agreeing to participate.

<sup>7</sup> Some of the interviewees asked to remain anonymous and so in order to be consistent this article will not use any interviewee names or institutional / organisational affiliations. It is sufficient to state that these stakeholders represented a mix of Roma NGOs, community leaders, representatives on municipal councils, and similar positions, allowing them the knowledge to speak about a community or neighbourhood rather than just their individual experience.

<sup>8</sup> This article does not utilise the gender or age breakdowns in its statistical analysis.

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***Appendix. Survey questions of relevance for this paper.***

Sub-theme	Question	Possible Answers
Education	Remote learning increased costs for the household budget.	Strongly Agree; Agree; Neither Agree nor Disagree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree.
Health	Did you, or others in your close family have to offer extra payments to doctors in order to be consulted?	Yes; No; Don't Know/Won't Say; I did not need medical assistance.
Employment	What was your most important source of income before the start of the pandemic?	Regular permanent employment; Temporary contract; Seasonal work; Owned a registered business; Informal work; Social benefits / welfare.
Employment	Lockdown measures have impacted on my ability to work and gain an income.	Strongly Agree; Agree; Neither Agree nor Disagree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree.
Employment	My overall income has been reduced since the introduction of lockdown measures.	Strongly Agree; Agree; Neither Agree nor Disagree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree.
Employment	I could afford food and household essentials during the lockdown.	Strongly Agree; Agree; Neither Agree nor Disagree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree.
Employment	What are the reasons for your reduced income? Tick all that apply.	Employer does not need you as frequently / at all; There was reduced demand / access to informal work opportunities; Benefits / welfare payments not paid anymore; Having to care for children not in school; My income was not diminished.
Employment	I have had to borrow money during lockdown from the following sources. Tick all that apply.	I did not have to borrow money; From friends; from family; from banks or other similar official institutions; from unofficial money lenders; there was no one to borrow money from.
Employment	Were you aware of any government financial assistance available during the pandemic?	Yes; No; Don't Know/Won't Say
Employment	I have applied for government financial assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Yes; No; Don't Know/Won't Say
Housing	My household has been cut off from a utility service due to non-payment since the start of the pandemic.	Yes; No; Don't Know/Won't Say
Housing	I have had to apply for housing benefits or social housing during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Yes; No; Don't Know/Won't Say
Housing	I have been threatened with eviction since the start of the pandemic.	Yes; No; Don't Know/Won't Say
Housing	I have been evicted from my property since the start of the pandemic.	Yes; No; Don't Know/Won't Say