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Going Viral: The Moral Panic Constructing the Roma as a Threat to Public Health During the First Wave of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Following the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns, heightened anti-Roma rhetoric became noticeable across much of Europe. This article focuses on the narrative according to which Roma communities represented a threat to public health and which will be analysed through the lens of the theoretical work on moral panics. The empirical data used in this paper was obtained in the framework of a project investigating the impact of the pandemic on Roma communities in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine, between March–June 2020.

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 threat to public health posed by Roma communities in these countries. To do so, it outlines the narratives disseminated in mass media, as well as the subsequent narratives and policy responses employed by public authorities, showing how the latter legitimised the alarming reports publicised by the former, engendering a strong societal response which conformed with the framework of a moral panic.

Keywords: Moral panic; Roma; pandemic; Covid-19; exclusion.

Introduction

Soon after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 and the immediate lockdowns that ensued across much of Europe, an increase in anti-Roma rhetoric across the media and social networks became noticeable. A report published by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020) found that in all but two of the 15 countries surveyed, discriminatory attitudes against Roma were on the rise as reflected in media reports, social media exchanges, and statements by politicians. In some cases this culminated in acts of physical violence against Roma communities. The reason for this increase in anti-Roma rhetoric and attitudes was the alleged non-compliance of the Roma with the lockdown rules instituted at the time, which – according to mainstream and social media, politicians, representatives of public authorities, and elites generally – represented a threat to public health owing to the risk of infection spreading throughout societies.

In those first months of the pandemic, mainstream media published sensationalist narratives and depictions of lawlessness and criminality (Chiruță, 2021), and intensely publicised cases of alleged breaches of the lockdown and social distancing measures by Roma communities. Media reports claimed that migrants of Roma origin returning from countries with high rates of coronavirus infections brought the virus with them and then spread it further (OSCE/ODIHR, 2020). Other media reports highlighted the poor sanitary conditions in which Roma communities lived and the presumed high risk of virus transmission in such circumstances (FRA, 2020). It was not only mass media that employed these narratives; social media quickly picked up on these reports and amplified their reach, boosting negative ethnic stereotypes regarding the Roma as well as the hostility of the general population towards them (Berta, 2020). Some politicians did not shy away from making statements laying the blame for the spread of the virus squarely on Roma communities, further stoking the panic and presenting the Roma as a collective threat to the general population (Amnesty International, 2020).

These narratives and the subsequent heightened anti-Roma rhetoric that circulated in both mass media and on social media soon had real-life consequences. Attacks on persons of Roma background were documented across Europe, alongside cases of police abuse and occasionally police violence (OSCE/ODIHR, 2020), while, as will be shown later in this paper, access to public services – particularly healthcare – became more difficult for Roma people. Many authorities instituted disproportionate measures targeting whole Roma communities, including roadblocks and policed checkpoints of Roma settlements, or mandatory self-isolation for whole Roma settlements, which confirmed and legitimised the panic spreading in the media (Amnesty

International, 2020). As shown by the dataset used in this paper, at times this occurred even in the absence of any confirmed cases.

Across a set of seven non-EU Eastern European countries, this article focuses on the narrative (and the events associated with it) according to which Roma communities represented a threat to public health, and which emerged during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. These will be analysed through the lens of the theoretical work on moral panics. The empirical data used in this paper was obtained in the framework of the project ‘Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe’¹, an inquiry into the impact of the pandemic on Roma communities in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine between March – June 2020. Using the literature on moral panics as a framework of interpretation, this article aims to shed light on the processes leading to the high levels of social consensus as to the threat to public health posed by Roma communities in these countries. To do so, it will outline the narratives disseminated in mass media, as well as the subsequent narratives and policy responses employed by public authorities, showing how the latter legitimised the alarming reports publicised by the former, engendering a strong societal response, which conforms to the framework of a moral panic. While most of the available literature on the subject focuses on the scapegoating of Roma in several EU countries (predominantly Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia), this article will show that this phenomenon is much more widespread, and that articulating it along the lines of a moral panic allows for identifying a degree of transnationality, in that it identifies common tropes and social reactions across borders, therefore indicating exchanges, borrowings and translations of media reports. In turn, through interviews realised in the framework of the ‘Marginality on the Margins of Europe’ project, this article contributes to the literature on moral panics by the significant weight it attaches to the voice of the so-called ‘folk devil’. Moreover, by focusing on the case study of an ethnic group that has long been subjected to discrimination and social marginalisation, this article will highlight how old stereotypes are selectively employed to serve new purposes, thus contributing to the creation of a moral panic among the general population.

1. About moral panics

As a sociological concept, moral panics and the literature focusing on the phenomena concerned have been around ever since Stanley Cohen’s book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*

appeared in 1972, which coined the term and proposed a theoretical framework for analysis. By way of a definition of moral panics, Cohen described them as

A condition, episode, person or group of persons [which] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight (Cohen, 1972, p. 9).

A key characteristic of moral panics would therefore be a disproportionate social reaction to an event, be it a minor one, a significant one, or even one which might not have happened at all (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Cohen's analysis demonstrates that whether a certain event objectively took place is mostly irrelevant in terms of its impact on social life; instead, what matters decisively is the public's perception, which will influence subsequent processes of social reactions (Cohen, 1972). In one of the most important texts on moral panics, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), further identify five key features of a moral panic:

- i. concern - some reported conduct or event sparks anxiety;
- ii. hostility – the perpetrators are portrayed as folk devils;
- iii. consensus - the negative social reaction is broad and unified;
- iv. disproportionality - the extent of the conduct, or the threat it poses, are exaggerated;
- v. volatility - the media's reporting and the associated panic emerge suddenly, but can dissipate quickly too (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, pp.156-158).

The present article is embedded in this approach to the phenomena described as moral panics, and focuses therefore on the construction of the Roma as a folk devil, rather than on the objective events (or lack thereof) that gave rise to this construction.

So, if the objective event itself is of lesser relevance in the emergence of a moral panic, then what can be said about the second element of Cohen's theory, the 'folk devils'? According to Cohen, they are constructed in response to the exaggerated concern described above, through stereotypes associated with deviance identifying the source of the threat, the 'enemy', as selfish, evil wrongdoers who are responsible for the trouble (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p.156). While the classic studies on moral panics stemmed from criminology and as such

focused respectively on youth gangs (Cohen, 1972) or on young Afro-Caribbean males (Hall et al, 2013) as embodiments of folk devils, recent literature has broadened the scope of contemporary folk devils to include refugees, technocrats, Roma, hipsters, LGBT groups, right-wing politicians, sorcerers, economic migrants, tourists, mobile criminals, and even sugary foods (Frederiksen and Harboe Knudsen, 2021). The construction of Roma as folk devils has been previously addressed in the academic literature in several contexts, e.g. the *campi nomadi* in Italy, where the construction of the Roma as folk devils led to their being subjected to permanent and ever-increasing policing (Ivasiuc, 2021); the construction of Roma as ‘inadaptable’ in the Czech Republic by negatively associating them with migration, crime, and overreliance on social welfare benefits (Slačálek, 2021); or the construction of Roma and Travellers in the United Kingdom as folk devils by the British media (Richardson and O’Neill, 2021).

Finally, as an agent of moral indignation, the glue that brings together all the elements outlined above is the media², which plays an important role in defining and shaping social problems (Cohen, 1972). Mass media does not effectively communicate complex, nuanced information; as such, it requires a simplification of details, or a reduction of the ambiguous and often confusing nature of actual situations. In doing so, the media orchestrates the contours of social problems, generating an impulse for social reaction (Innes, 2002). This, however, is not the only interpretation of the role of mass media in initiating or amplifying moral panics. Using the Gramscian concept of hegemony, Stuart Hall et al. (2013) demonstrated how the 1970s moral panic in the United Kingdom – concerning a set of criminal activities that were suddenly labelled ‘muggings’ – was the result of collaboration between public officials and mass media. Read in this way, the moral panic around muggings contributed to the creation of social conditions which consented to the construction of a society more focused on law and order. This was set against the background of the liberalism of the 1960s, diverting attention from the growing economic recession at that time. The moral panic therefore acted as an envoy for the dominant ideology (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995).

2. Roma as a threat to public health – the making of a moral panic

Much of the literature that has emerged in relation to the rise of anti-Roma attitudes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has focused on the racism and discrimination directed at this ethnic group, examining the increase in racist incidents and hate speech (Berta, 2020;

Magano and Mendes, 2021; Matache and Bhabha, 2020; Plainer, 2020; Pop, 2021). Analyses of the representation of Roma communities in the media showed that the media exploited the sensationalism of episodes involving Roma, while also employing a logic of polarization to assist the authorities in retaking control of the pandemic (Chiruță, 2021). Further studies considered the securitization of Roma communities in the context of the pandemic (Berescu, Alexandrescu, and Anghel, 2021; Kovács Szitkay and Pap, 2022; Trupia, 2021), showing that an increase in surveillance and policing of Roma communities also occurred in the first stages of the pandemic.

This article builds on this existing body of work by proposing an analysis of the events and rhetoric targeting Roma communities through the lens of the literature on moral panics; in doing so, it will give significant weight to the ‘folk devils’ themselves, thus addressing one of the most frequent criticisms of analyses of moral panics: i.e., that the voice of those being demonised is rarely heard. Additionally, this analysis will make reference to old stereotypes used anew in the context of the pandemic. It will also identify common tropes used in public discourses across borders, as well as pointing towards some transnational aspects of this particular moral panic.

3. Data and methodology

The data used in this article originates from the joint research project ‘Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe’, carried out in the summer of 2020 by the European Centre for Minority Issues and the University of Leicester. The project sought to explore the perceived impact of the pandemic and the related restrictions on Roma communities in the areas of education, healthcare, employment, and housing. An additional focus of the project was on the pandemic-related increase in cases of hate speech, discrimination, and racist incidents against this ethnic group.

The data collection took place in seven non-EU countries in Eastern Europe – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine – and was carried out with the help of local researchers. The data was collected along three dimensions: desk research, online surveys, and stakeholder interviews. The desk research focused on collecting media reports, governmental and non-governmental assessments of the impact of the pandemic, as well as the relevant legislation and governmental policies for the period March–

June 2020. The survey was distributed using the snowball method throughout selected Roma communities in the seven countries. It included some 40 questions structured along the main lines of enquiry described above; a total number of 493 respondents completed the survey across the seven countries. Finally, research assistants in each country were asked to identify relevant Roma stakeholders (such as leaders of Roma NGOs, Roma community leaders, Roma mediators, or officials working in relevant institutions) and carry out semi-structured interviews in the local languages which also covered the main research areas identified above. A total number of 53 interviews were thus carried out, and subsequently transcribed and translated into English.

The data collection took place in June 2020, under lockdown conditions and with strict social distancing rules in place in all seven countries. This meant that there were certain limitations (i.e., accessing respondents), which had to be overcome using alternative solutions. As an example, where respondents were unable to fill out the survey online (e.g., due to lack of technology, internet access, or literacy issues), the research assistant had to call the respondents over the phone and, while maintaining their anonymity, read out the questions to them and simultaneously complete the online survey on their behalf. Similarly, some of the interviews were carried out online or over the phone; in some cases, the only possible method was via email. These limitations also had a bearing on the final data obtained in the project. It must be acknowledged that the data collected across the seven countries is of unequal quality, and that comparisons between the countries covered by the project need to be made with caution. This is due to the different pandemic-related limitations concerning data collection, but also due to the different situations of Roma communities in the countries concerned.

4. The making of a folk devil: the Roma during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic

The Roma are the most discriminated ethnic group in Europe, often living in conditions of dire poverty, with limited access to education, healthcare, employment, and adequate housing. Hate speech, violent attacks, police abuse and structural discrimination against Roma have all been documented in countless reports issued by international bodies and non-governmental organisations (e.g., ERRC, 2021; FRA 2009; FRA 2014; World Bank 2014)

Negative stereotyping and prejudice against people of Roma origins are widespread and persistent; McGarry (2014, p.760) acknowledges the historical roots of the representation of Roma as a problem community and tentatively puts together a (declaredly non-exhaustive) list

of some of the most common stereotypes associated with this ethnic group: ‘nomads, migrants, underclass, poor, backward, parasitic, marginal, anachronistic, criminal, deviant, insular, musical, work-shy, beggars, threatening, victims and dangerous’.

Of the many stereotypes referring to this ethnic group, two in particular have been intensely emphasised and instrumentalised with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, namely that of Roma as a lawbreaking, unruly people who do not follow the laws of the societies they live in; and that of the Roma as dirty and not adhering to social norms regarding hygiene. These two stereotypes have been covered by the academic literature and have been shown to be both widespread and with a long history (see for instance Rowe and Goodman 2014; Thornton, 2014; Lobnikar, 2013). The following analysis will show how the mass media constructed an image of deviance along these two axes, repurposing two of the most circulated stereotypes of people of Roma origin.

As the first cases of infection with COVID-19 started to be reported in the region under analysis, the emergence of cases in Roma communities was amply reported by mass media. An example of such intense reporting was an outbreak in a Roma community in the village of Nerubayske, in Odessa region in Ukraine, which became the focus of multiple reports in regional and national media outlets (Novoye Vremya, 2020; TSN, 2020; Ukrinform, 2020; Ukrayinska Pravda, 2020). Three main elements related to these media reports stand out. First, in most of the reports, the Roma community in question is described as a ‘Roma camp’, suggesting a settlement made up of temporary homes, usually associated with dire poverty and unhygienic living conditions; this emphasises both the social distance between the majority and this ethnic group, as well as the risk of the virus spreading due to presumed poor conditions in the ‘camp’. Second, many of the reports (and in particular their titles, e.g. the title in *Novoye Vremya* ‘An outbreak of coronavirus occurred in a Roma camp near Odessa, 11 people fell ill, including five children’) do not mention the exact location of the outbreak, instead referring vaguely to it taking place ‘near Odessa’. While this may simply be a case of journalistic oversight, it induces the idea of an imminent threat (in the form of contamination) posed by an outbreak near a large, important city where many people could become infected. Third, the reports quote a representative of public health authorities who confirms the outbreak as well as the measures to be applied to the 1,500 people in the respective Roma community, thus singling them out as carriers and potential spreaders of the virus.

Another trope emerging in the media in the context of the pandemic focused on Roma culture as a reason for violating lockdown rules. As such, media reports described social events such

as marriages, christenings, or funerals attended by large numbers of Roma people. In Moldova, a funeral attended by allegedly over 100 persons of Roma background was reported in the national media. The title of a news report (Jurnal.md, 2020) outlines from the outset the contrast between the majority population in Edineț, the town where the funeral was organised, and the Roma: 'Edineț in self-isolation; The mayor is alarmed after the death of a man from Briceni: "About a hundred Roma were at the funeral"'. According to the report, , alarmed by the funeral procession attended by over 100 Roma people, the mayor of Edineț decided to place the whole town in self-isolation, despite having limited legal scope to do so. The news report includes a lengthy statement from the mayor, in which the association between Roma culture, disrespect for rules, and the risk of the virus spreading due to their actions becomes evident:

The Roma are very noisy, now more have returned from abroad. There used to be about 400 of them, now there are over 1000 [Roma] people. They do not follow the rules at all, they linger on the streets, they are not aware of the danger of this pandemic. We try to reason with to them, but it's hard. These last days they had a funeral, they buried their dead with music, over a hundred Roma were in the deceased's yard, can you imagine? And half of them came from abroad, so we expect a surge of infections (Jurnal.md, 2020).

In speaking from a position of authority, the mayor legitimized the alarmist statements in the article; furthermore, the policy he implemented as a defensive measure lent additional legitimacy to the alleged threat coming from the Roma community. His statements and the subsequent order for self-isolation are a clear illustration of Costache's (2020) argument that the blaming of Roma for the spread of the virus is simultaneously based on power and structural inequalities, and at the same time contributes to the reproduction and deepening of those inequalities.

A theme which the report above hints at, and which has been a recurring theme in several countries in the region like Romania and Bulgaria (Berta, 2020), is the return of persons of Roma background from abroad, particularly from those countries which were perceived to have higher infection rates. The media reports emphasise both the risk of transmission due to these higher infection rates, but also the Roma's apparent negligence and disregard for rules.

This alleged disregard for rules is very often linked to the portrayals of Roma culture across the countries covered by the project. In Montenegro, a television report highlighted that Roma had breached a self-isolation order in the settlement in Vrela Ribnicka, identifying the reason as that the Roma 'are not used to being locked up' (RTCG, 2020). In North Macedonia, a

television report identified a Roma settlement in Skopje as being the area where measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus were least respected; the report included an interview with the then Minister of the Interior, who corroborated this information and further confirmed increased police controls in the settlement (Makpress, 2020). Panic concerning the spread of the virus by Roma in Serbia was related to the collection of refuse from waste containers, which some Roma relied on as a source of income. A news report on Radio Television Serbia, during one of the most-watched national news programmes, showed a Roma person coming out of an underground waste container, while a journalist commented: ‘However, even scenes like these are possible. Some people know how to unlock the city’s underground containers and don’t care if they will infect themselves and the others’ (RTS, 2020), thus both stigmatising Roma as carriers of the virus and at the same time implying their disrespect for measures to contain its spread.

The examples outlined above were aimed to show how, in the context of the first wave of the pandemic, the media contributed to the creation of a ‘folk devil’ responsible for the spread of the virus. A relentless focus on COVID-19 outbreaks in Roma communities, the emphasis on a lack of respect for the rules aiming to combat the spread of the virus, and the alarmist focus on already-infected Roma returning from abroad all contributed to the perception of a threat posed by these communities. As outlined in the literature on moral panics, the extent to which these reports reflect reality is ultimately less relevant. In the making of a folk devil, what matters most are perceptions, and the ways in which media chose to single out the Roma community for alleged misdemeanours contributed to creating a perception of the Roma as sources of spreading the virus.

Very importantly, the authorities – as interviewed and quoted in news reports – and the media appear in agreement over the threat posed by Roma communities. As shown above, many of the media reports quote representatives of the authorities emphasising the Roma’s alleged lack of respect for lockdown rules, as well as the need for special measures (additional police presence, and the self-isolation of whole communities) to address the threat posed by them.

Negative reports in the media concerning Roma communities did not go unnoticed by those they referred to. When asked about their potential exposure to hate speech, respondents from Roma communities remarked both on the power of the media to shape public opinion, but also on the biased reporting targeting them:

Since the pandemic started, luckily no Roma were infected with the virus in the first

months, but still the mainstream media (...) is the trigger for the hate speech in the general public, they always go in the Roma communities, they portray them in a different way [saying] that they pose a risk towards the health of the others, and this is what actually triggers the hate speech (Interviewee 2, North Macedonia).

The Mukachevo channel [stated] that a Roma woman had coronavirus. They specified it was a Roma woman. Published data. One person fell ill - and it is already indicated that she is from the Roma population. (...) And there are a lot of such accusations (Interviewee 3, Ukraine).

For example, if it is said that one Roma is infected in a settlement, then there comes hate speech on social networks: "Here it is, now they will infect us all ..." Here are the conditions in which we live, in fact it could be very dangerous for us. (...) God forbid that two or three families get sick now, I have no doubt that it will be the Bulgarian scenario, that the whole settlement will be blocked. I have no doubt. It is possible (Interviewee 5, Serbia).

Several of the respondents expressed their relief that at the time of the interviews there were no cases of people of Roma origins infected with the virus, as they worried about how such an occurrence would be reflected in the media and what the consequences would be for them. One could also include here the adamant insistence of members of Roma communities in Moldova – widely reported in the media – that no Roma had been infected with the virus: 'Roma say they are not afraid of the novel coronavirus because they have immunity. They proudly state that no Roma in the country has been infected with COVID-19' (Nordnews.md, 2020). The interpretation the media gave to such statements was that this was the (cunning) way in which Roma tried to justify their disregard for lockdown rules; another possible interpretation is that the Roma were aware of the claims made against them and tried to defend themselves against further media attacks and their possible consequences.

All these, however, did not come about unexpectedly. As already mentioned, the Roma are among the most discriminated ethnic groups in Europe, with large parts of the population holding deep prejudices and negative stereotypes about them. Through their relentless negative depictions of the Roma, the media reports outlined above imply a deep contrast with the majority population, signifying the high degree of othering of this ethnic group. In this respect, a media report from Moldova quoting the opinion of a passer-by is quite eloquent:

They are a hotbed of COVID-19. They don't follow any rules. Ordinary people are fined, old women, but what happens to them? No action is taken against them. They

can urinate in the park. I am outraged, there are people who tell me that they are afraid to walk on the street. Neither [Roma] children, nor adults over 40, wear protective masks. I try to stay away from crowded places (...) (Nordnews.md, 2020).

The perceived contrast between the majority and the Roma is spelled out here: the passer-by constructs the non-Roma as law-abiding, mask-wearing, and abiding by social distancing rules; we can also see a sense of injustice (reminiscent of the white injury discourses elsewhere), as the interviewee protests the (presumed) case of an old lady being fined for a minor misdemeanour whereas the Roma, who disregard so many laws, get away with it all.

The social consensus over the stereotype of Roma as dirty and disrespectful of the law and social norms has been long present in the countries covered by our project. In the context of the pandemic, these old stereotypes were used to construct an image of Roma as deviant, as responsible for the ultimate evil of spreading the virus. In this way, the othering of this group was reinforced and even deepened. In a sense, the elements for creating the folk devil were there, so all that was needed was an event – the pandemic – to spark its creation.

5. Responding to the crisis: authorities' legitimization of the panic

So far, several characteristics of media panics as identified by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) and outlined above appear confirmed in this case: the *concern* of the general public was sparked by media reporting the reckless conduct of Roma communities; a certain amount of *hostility* towards them becomes evident, as the perpetrators are portrayed as folk devils; the media *disproportionately* depicts both the extent of the misconduct and the seriousness of the threat it poses.

It would therefore be interesting to examine the extent to which there was a consensus in society concerning the media's interpretation of Roma communities not conforming to lockdown rules and the consequent threat of the virus spreading. In this respect, the statements of politicians and representatives of public authorities are particularly relevant, as well as the kinds of policy measures taken during those first months of the pandemic.

Across the seven countries covered by the project, statements made by politicians and representatives of public authorities with regard to Roma communities reflect the tendency of the mass media to blame them for breaches of lockdown rules and for poor hygiene, and to see them as a threat in terms of spreading the virus.

The incident that received the widest media coverage in the region was a call for the forced eviction of Roma which was issued by the mayor of Ivano-Frankivsk in Ukraine on 21 April 2020. Ruslan Martsinkiv, a member of the far-right Svoboda party in Ukraine, was videoed demanding to know why Roma in the area had not already been deported to Zakarpattya, as he had arranged. The recording caused uproar, including internationally, and sparked a criminal investigation into the mayor's actions. The mayor then justified his actions publicly by claiming the Roma had themselves requested to be sent to Zakarpattya, and by linking the deportations to a series of alleged quarantine violations by the Roma in Ivano-Frankivsk: 'they lived in our public square, harassed people, and demanded funds, they did not keep their distance and did not have any masks. There were a number of appeals to the police, to the hotline of the Executive Committee of the City Council.' By depicting the Roma as a threat to the public – including as a public health threat, Martsinkiv contributed to the legitimization of the perception of the Roma as a source of infection and a threat that needed to be dealt with. Notably, this incident is also one of the very few which sparked a public reaction against such statements and led to an investigation by the relevant authorities (Rorke & Lee, 2020). Whether the reaction against the mayor's statements and actions indeed had an effect on lessening the public perception of Roma as a threat is doubtful; as one of the respondents emphasised, 'that [incident] definitely linked Roma-ness and Roma themselves to the threat of the spread of the virus' (Interviewee 9, Ukraine).

While the incident in Ukraine is both extreme and carries clear racist overtones, it should be seen in the broader context of how authorities and public figures expressed their attitudes towards Roma during the first wave of the pandemic. We have seen above how the mayor of Edineț in Moldova, alarmed at the threat of the virus spreading in the context of a funeral attended by Roma people, linked their culture to an alleged disregard for rules. In Serbia, a leading epidemiologist, a member of the Serbian Crisis Centre, made a similar link by declaring that he had 'worked with Roma for years. Certain hygienic conditions and certain habits change very slowly there. That certainly won't change in these few weeks' (Insajder, 2020). In this case, Roma culture appears to carry the blame for poor hygiene.

The lack of reaction on the part of authorities can appear to legitimate the perception of Roma as a threat. Following the publication of a video on social media, in which Albanian police physically abuse a Roma person for recycling materials from a public wastebin – and so finding himself in breach of the lockdown regulations – local NGOs requested the mayor to take appropriate measures and to make a public statement condemning the police's abuse of the

Roma person in question. The mayor, however refused, thus indirectly legitimating the actions of the police (Interviewee 6, Albania).

In terms of policy-making, the most common type of intervention emerging across the region was the imposition of self-isolation orders on entire Roma communities. These orders often only targeted those parts of town inhabited by Roma, thus emphasising the perceived threat emerging from this ethnic group, and were usually triggered by the emergence of one or more COVID-19 cases. An example of this was the situation in Konik, Montenegro, where after it emerged that a person from the Roma settlement had tested positive for the coronavirus, the authorities imposed a quarantine on the whole settlement. As a result, 243 families (c. 1,000 people) living in 23 buildings could not leave their homes (Interviewee 3, Montenegro; Vijesti, 2020). This would therefore be an illustration of the disproportionate measures taken to combat a perceived threat; but it should be noted that there were also cases – such as the one of the Roma community in Edineț, Moldova, outlined above – where the self-isolation orders could not be justified by any cases of infection; instead, the authorities justified these orders through the Roma breaching the social distancing measures.

Evidence of disproportionate measures targeting persons of Roma background also emerged in North Macedonia, where a group of some 200 people were stopped from crossing the Deve Bair border with Bulgaria. Following checks, the only ones to be held and quarantined institutionally were a group of nine Roma musicians, despite not showing symptoms and having signed a declaration agreeing to compulsory self-isolation at home (Rorke & Lee, 2020; Investigative Reporting Lab Macedonia, 2020).

Most of the measures outlined above were enforced with the help of the police, and in a context where it appears that a consensus had been reached between media and the authorities concerning the unruly behaviour of the Roma and the potential threat of infection they presented. Reports of police abuse abound in all of the countries included in this present research. For instance, in Serbia, a Roma man chopping firewood in front of his home was beaten, taken to the police station, and fined for violating the curfew although the regulations allowed people to be in their backyards during curfew hours (Interviewee 4, Serbia). Abuse in the form of excessive fines for breaching curfews was reported in several countries (Interviewee 2, North Macedonia), while in Ukraine, police in Nizhyn used the situation to take Roma men to police stations and fingerprint and photograph them without any explanation (Interviewee 7, Ukraine).

6. Reaching consensus: mobilising against the threat

In a moral panic, it is not just the media and authorities that reach a consensus that a particular folk devil represents a threat; society – or significant parts of it – also agrees and take part in constructing this narrative. In our case, the extent to which societies at large agreed with the view that the Roma represented a threat of infection due to their lack of respect for rules and their poor hygiene can be illustrated through the social reactions targeting them. In this respect, the project offered us the possibility to glean information from Roma communities in each of the countries surveyed; this is a significant development in the study of moral panics, as most previous studies have relied exclusively on media analysis and media reports, court documents, and policy documents.

Our survey included a question through which we tried to assess the extent to which Roma people were directly subjected to accusations of spreading the virus: ‘Were you, or others in your close family, blamed by others for spreading the virus (e.g., by not obeying the lockdown rules strictly enough)?’. 30% of respondents in Albania answered positively, followed by 17.9% in Bosnia, 17.4% in Moldova, 8.2% in Ukraine, 8% in Serbia, 7.5% in North Macedonia, and 7.4% in Montenegro. While we can observe wide variations among countries, which can be partly explained by a combination of local conditions and methodological issues, the positive response rate is generally high. It should be noted that the question asked about personal experiences, thus excluding hearsay or mass-media reports the respondent might have been exposed to.

While not a specific focus of our project, it emerged through the interviews and desktop research that was carried out that social media was a very important means for transmitting and amplifying hate speech against the Roma. Many of the people interviewed remarked on the dramatic increase in abuse being circulated on social media, and also pointed towards the countless racist comments being made online in response to media articles depicting Roma as a health threat. Verbal attacks also appear to have been common, such as the verbal attack on a Roma woman on a bus in Albania who was accused of spreading the virus although she was wearing a mask and respecting social distancing rules (InFormim, 2020).

The social response to the panic raised by the mass-media and reinforced by the elites’ reactions was not limited to hate speech and verbal accusations. Instances of violent attacks were also mentioned by interviewees; in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a Roma mediator mentioned several

incidents which took place in his own neighbourhood: ‘One was where a man who did not have a face mask was attacked by non-Roma and told that he would infect them all because he is sick. No one asked him if he had the money to buy a face mask’ (Interviewee 8, Bosnia and Herzegovina). The response includes a justification for disobeying the regulations concerning mask wearing (poverty), which directly contradicts the media and elite narrative of a cultural explanation.

Fear of the Roma as potential spreaders of the virus also manifested itself in the everyday interactions between Roma and public institutions, generating an exacerbation of already existing systemic discrimination. In North Macedonia, a Roma woman and her baby died during childbirth on 31 March 2020; the mother had been waiting for the results of a coronavirus test for over six hours outside the doors of the hospital. She had already spent three days since her waters had broken waiting for doctors to accept her at another gynaecological clinic and deliver her child (Rorke & Lee, 2020). An interviewee from North Macedonia who was familiar with the case emphasised the effect the fear of Roma being carriers of the virus had had on the quality of medical care: ‘... she was not treated enough, that is, she was left alone, I think it was irresponsible of the staff, because she was left to develop sepsis, right... because the medical staff was afraid to give her treatment because [they feared] she was positive’ (Interviewee 1, North Macedonia). In Montenegro, difficulties also arose in cooperating with public institutions. A Roma activist in Montenegro shared his experience in contacting the police in the context of trying to offer protection to a victim of human trafficking:

This was a case related to human trafficking, where I and the victim stayed until morning, waiting for the police to react in order to find the victim a safe place. This is nothing unusual when members of the Roma and Egyptian populations are involved, as they usually say “these are Gypsy things, so let them be there, let them wait until morning”. We waited, me and the victim and her baby from eight in the evening until five in the morning. And then they tried to write a criminal complaint against me because I violated the curfew, because I didn’t want to leave the victim and the baby by themselves (...). And since I still couldn’t find her a place, I tried to place her in hospital, but they said “she needs to go in quarantine”. I then came back again in front of the police and the policeman came out [saying] that I violated the self-isolation measures, and they again left me with the woman in the street’ (Interviewee 6, Montenegro).

Fear of potential infection through interaction with a Roma person also had an impact on the ability to earn a living for many persons belonging to this ethnic group. Roma who collected

waste materials from villages were no longer welcome there (Interviewee 5, North Macedonia), while those buying or selling produce in villages were no longer able to do so, because 'potential buyers did not react very well, saying: "You are Roma! It's the quarantine, what are you doing? Have you come here to spread the infection? We don't know where these potatoes came from. Leave our village."' (Interviewee 4, Ukraine).

By articulating these findings from the countries covered by the project, it emerges that the events in question indeed follow the pattern of a moral panic. The last element identified by Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994) as a characteristic of moral panics – volatility – can be verified as well, as once the first wave of the pandemic passed, there was a marked decrease in the media attention and policy focus on Roma communities and their alleged misdeeds. While beyond the scope of this article and the data set available, it can be noted that with the arrival of subsequent waves of infection, elements of the moral panic re-emerged, only to become subdued once again.

Conclusions

Using the theoretical framework on moral panics, this article has demonstrated the emergence of such an event relating to the perception of the Roma as a threat to public health across the seven countries covered by the project 'Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe'. Previous research and more intensive media coverage had already hinted towards such a phenomenon in Central and Eastern European countries which are part of the EU (in particular, but not exclusively Romania and Bulgaria); however, no research to date had covered the sharp increase in hate speech and violence against Roma communities outside of the EU during the first wave of the pandemic.

The paper has outlined the intense and disproportionate mass-media focus on instances of coronavirus infections in Roma communities, contributing to the creation of a state of panic regarding the alleged threat posed by this ethnic group. The reactions of the elites across these 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.

Seen through this lens of moral panics, the tropes used to construct Roma communities as a threat to public health – and the subsequent measures and public reactions – appear quite

similar in the seven countries. The two main tropes that emerged as dominant following our project characterized Roma as being disrespectful of rules and regulations as well as lacking in their hygiene. As briefly discussed above, these tropes could also be encountered before the pandemic, but in the context of the pandemic they were brought to the fore and overshadowed the multiplicity of other widespread stereotypes concerning the Roma.

The similarity of the tropes and of the social reaction to the crisis in the countries covered in our research point towards a certain transnationality of this instance of moral panic. Certainly, our respondents were aware of and closely monitored what was happening in other countries. They often expressed feelings of apprehension as to what the future may hold in store for them, after hearing of the abuse and violence in other neighbouring countries. However, beyond simple similarities, certain transfers appear to have also taken place from one country to another. As an example, one of our interviewees in Ukraine described the circulation of a racist publication accusing Roma of being responsible for the quick spread of the virus, which according to him was translated from Slovak rather than written by Ukrainian authors: ‘It was a publication [appearing] in Transcarpathian online media, but it was not authentic material, it was translated from a Slovak source. What we can probably be talking about is imported racism rather than locally produced. But this happens often enough’ (Interviewee 9, Ukraine). This is an important and quite under-researched aspect – both from the perspective of moral panics and even more so from the perspective of how anti-Gypsyism is a transnational phenomenon, with transfers, similarities, and communication between actors across borders and languages.

All this is not to say that there are no differences in the intensity of the reactions of the actors involved to the crisis, or that there is a complete similarity of the tropes used in all seven countries. One of the striking paradoxes arising from the data collected refers to the situation in Albania; while over 30% of our respondents confirmed they or their close family had been accused of spreading the virus, there was limited evidence of the role of mass media in constructing the Roma as a folk devil. While some of the incongruity may be explained through the methodological difficulties arising from conducting surveys during periods of lockdown, there may be two additional explanations. One relates to the fact that the vast majority of Roma communities in Albania live in rural settlements, where contacts with majorities are close but media coverage is minimal. A second possible explanation was offered by one of the interviewees, who noted a disproportionate use of social media in spreading hate speech and negative stereotyping: ‘in the media the hate speech is used [to some extent], and there have been discriminative connotations, targeting Roma recyclers as people who spread the virus. It

[just so] happens that in Albania hate speech is practiced only online.’ (Interviewee 6, Albania). In terms of the tropes and even literary devices used, there are local specificities. For instance, in some of the countries covered, the use of humour (more specifically sarcasm) appeared quite prominent; this was the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina of an intensely circulated picture of a group of Roma people bearing the caption ‘How long will we wash our hands for, do you know?’ , thus implicitly contrasting one of the pandemic-related recommendations of washing hands often with the Roma’s alleged lack of hygiene practices.

As already mentioned, the moral panic surrounding Roma as a threat to public health did not come out of nowhere and should be seen in the context of the widespread and deep-seated prejudice against them. Based on the discussion above, what has emerged during the pandemic is a new use for old tropes which have been employed to construct the Roma as a folk devil and blame them for the spread of the virus. One of our Roma interviewees in North Macedonia reflected on how the stereotypes before and during the pandemic remained essentially similar, concluding that ‘The fear (...) towards the Roma community, because of their appearance and because of their hygiene, [it] is the same as before as it is during the pandemic, so I think that both sides are connected, the fear is [now] in question’ (Interviewee 5, North Macedonia).

Finally, and related to the above, this article has contributed to the body of literature on moral panics by giving a voice to the ‘folk devil’, by asking Roma interviewees to reflect and comment on the rhetoric and related events in which they unwillingly played a central part. This has enriched and given depth to the analysis of this case of moral panic, showing the extent to which the Roma themselves were aware of, observed, and interpreted these events while also fearing their consequences.

Notes

¹ The research project ‘Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe’ (2020) was a collaboration between the European Centre for Minority Issues and the University of Leicester, with funding from the University of Leicester’s QR Global Challenges Research Fund (Research England).

² Cohen (1972) and Hall et al. (2013) published their seminal works on moral panics well ahead of the emergence of social media, and therefore their analyses focus exclusively on the influence of mass media in the initiation and amplification of moral panics. The data collection this article builds on includes only limited information on social media reactions during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic; as such, the main tenets of the theory on moral panics outlined above do not reflect recent works analysing the role of social media. For detailed discussions on this issue see for instance: Ingraham, C., & Reeves, J. (2016). New media, new panics. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 33(5), 455-467; and McRobbie, A., & Thornton, S. L. (1995). Rethinking “Moral Panic” for multi-mediated social worlds. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 46(4), 559–574.

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