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Review Article: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Minority Communities in Germany, Poland, Portugal, and Spain: Was There a Specific Minority Angle to the Public Health Emergency?

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Mindretallet under Corona-pandemien 2020-2021.

Mogens Rostgaard Nissen (ed.), Dansk Centralbibliotek for
Sydslesvig, 2022, 52 pp.

*Discriminación y Comunidad Gitana – Informe Anual FSG
2021. A Fondo: El Impacto de la Pandemia en la
Discriminación y el Antigitanismo.*

Cristina de la Serna et al., Fundación Secretariado Gitano,
FSG, 2021, 228 pp.

Newsletter ObCig (Observatório das Comunidades Ciganas),
24 de junho 2020.

*Organizacje mniejszości narodowych i etnicznych w dobie
pandemii.*

Piotr Kwapisiewicz (ed.), Żydowskie Stowarzyszenie
Czulent, n.d., 23 pp.

Introductory remarks

As the articles collected in the present special issue of the *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* (JEMIE) convincingly illustrate, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant and largely negative effect on the Roma communities in non-EU countries in Eastern Europe. An instinctive response to such findings would be a set of questions pointing towards other minority situations. Namely, how did the pandemic affect Roma communities in other countries, but also what was the experience of other minorities? Has the pandemic affected them differently than in the case of majorities? The present text is an attempt to respond to such queries. This will be achieved through a concise discussion focusing on a set of reports produced in response to the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic by various organizations working with or representing minority communities.

The present review includes three reports focusing on particular minority communities, with those being the Danish minority in Germany (the scope of the report: the general effects of the pandemic), the Roma minority in Portugal (the effects of the pandemic on Roma children in primary and secondary education), and the Roma minority in Spain (the impact of the pandemic on anti-Roma discrimination), as well as one report aiming at giving a broad overview of the situation of national and ethnic minorities in Poland during the first phase of the pandemic. The discussed outputs are clearly driven by scientific methods (both qualitative and quantitative), whereas format-wise a clarification is necessary: with the exception of the Portuguese case, the documents are typical reports, addressing a given issue through a clearly structured single text. The aforementioned exception is a case apart in such a sense, given that the situation of the Roma community in Portugal vis-à-vis the pandemic is presented across several newsletters published by the Observatório das Comunidades Ciganas (The Observatory of Roma Communities; hereinafter: ObCig). Here, one of those is considered which discusses the thematic area mentioned above.

There is no doubt that that the selected pool of examples creates a challenging landscape when a comparative perspective is applied to it. The considered communities differ in a demographic sense (e.g., a relatively large and dispersed Roma community in Spain, as opposed to a much smaller and geographically more compactly settled Danish minority in Germany), as well as in relation to, for example, their socio-economic situation (similarly, a largely affluent Danish minority in Germany compares very positively vis-à-vis the Roma community in Spain, whose members not infrequently face economic difficulties linked to

precarious forms of employment) or the broader institutional context (to continue with the same communities: the presence of active and financially stable kin-state in the context of the Danish minority and the absence thereof with regard to the Roma community in Spain).

Despite those differences and the fact that they should by no means be ignored, such a concise analytical snapshot of the aforementioned reports makes sense for three reasons. First, it creates a possibility for observing how the same challenge (i.e., the pandemic) has affected minorities living in diverse contexts, and whether in fact those differences had an influence on their responses to the situation of a public health emergency. In that sense, therefore, it is a response to the questions formulated in the opening paragraph above. The second reason is somewhat more prosaic: the reports considered here are published in languages other than English, and are therefore less accessible to the international academic audience. In this context, the pragmatic aspect of the present considerations must be also mentioned. The selection of the discussed cases has been obviously influenced by the author's linguistic abilities, and thus only reports accessible in this sense are covered, which at the same time also suggests the limitations of the present text: there is much more beyond. Ultimately, and again in reference to the comparative approach, the communities covered here very rarely (if at all) are discussed next to each other, mostly because of the structural differences previously referred to. Nevertheless, the methodological question remains: perhaps by avoiding comparisons which at first sight seem to be too radical, something of high social and scientific relevance is lost from sight?

In terms of the final introductory considerations, it is important to mention that the reports are discussed in alphabetical order following the name of the country in focus, whilst their contents are presented as several highlights, which in the opinion of the author most adequately illustrate the situation of a given minority community during the period of the pandemic.

1. The Danish minority in Germany

The report 'Mindretallet under Corona-pandemien 2020-2021' ('The minority during the Corona pandemic 2020-2021')¹ is the result of cooperation between the research department of the Dansk Centralbibliotek for Sydslesvig (The Danish Central Library for South Schleswig) and the *Flensborg Avis* newspaper. Both can be considered as belonging to the core institutional pillars of the Danish minority in Germany. The first of them is not only the largest within the minority's network of libraries but also functions as a research centre focusing on the history

and the contemporary situation of the community, whereas the latter is the only media outlet of this group and thus plays a crucial role as a forum for intra-community debates, whilst keeping members informed about broader local, regional, and national developments as well. In the context of the discussed report, the Library was responsible for the scientific aspects in the shape of a research project analysing the situation of the Danish minority during the period of the pandemic, with the second partner offering a selection of previously published newspaper content (the editor-in-chief Jørgen Møllekær's leading articles) discussing various pandemic-related issues. For the purpose of the present considerations only the scientific part of the Report is considered.

The data discussed in the report was collected through a digital questionnaire in April 2021, analysed in July, and presented in September of that year. In the section of the report collecting some of the authors' methodological reflections, it is highlighted how crucial it was to conduct the actual research during the pandemic period, so that it was possible to understand what actual effects it had on the everyday life of members of the Danish minority. To do this in the period following the relaxation or lifting of restrictions was considered as potentially resulting in a smaller pool of respondents and less comprehensive answers. Ultimately, the online questionnaire was fully answered by 284 people, with 75% of them being female.² In terms of age group, as the authors point out themselves, those aged under 35 are underrepresented as they make up only 1/5 of all respondents. Furthermore, the parallel intention to collect more qualitative data through personal reflections about the period of the pandemic largely failed, with only a limited number of respondents offering such content. As a result, it was decided to carry out individual interviews with several members of the community. The report, therefore, certainly has some shortcomings; however, these should not be considered as defeating the purpose of the original research idea.

The collected data is presented across six thematic areas, with the first of them concerning the institutional life of the Danish minority as affected by the pandemic. Overall, c. 64% of the respondents missed 'much' or 'very much' the possibility of participating in the activities organized by different organizations operating within the community, with a further 18% missing such activities to a certain degree. Similarly, c. 84% were either 'very happy', 'happy', or 'happy to a certain degree' to be able to take part in these kind of activities once again. In the accompanying analysis, those results were interpreted as corresponding with the answers to the question concerning what the respondents missed the most during lockdowns, with well over 80% of them highlighting social life involving family and friends.

In relation to personal concerns and experiences, it was interesting to see that c. 90% of the respondents were not afraid of losing their job because of the pandemic, whilst c. 75% of them were not concerned about their economic situation or that of their family. It is a clear indication of the general economic wellbeing of the community.

With regard to the lockdowns and the correlated issue of isolation, the report identified an interesting gender-related dynamic, with female respondents more frequently indicating a higher level of feeling isolated (10% difference in the bracket 6-to-10 on a 0-to-10 scale). The authors of the report do not offer a clear explanation of this phenomenon, whilst at the same time they approach this rather cautiously by mentioning the potential risk of statistical uncertainties resulting from the issues discussed above.

The section of the report discussing the attitudes of the Danish minority towards the authorities during the pandemic offers a rather comprehensive set of statistical data. In terms of trust in various institutions in the context of the pandemic, 60% of the respondents mentioned high or very high levels of trust in the scientific community. This contrasts with much lower results reported for the health authorities (c. 48%), the police (c. 47%), the government (c. 33%), and the media (c. 20%). This apparent scepticism towards various institutions, however, was not translated into a widespread opposition to the specific anti-pandemic measures introduced by the authorities, with a strong support for mask-wearing, cancellation of public events, and lockdowns in general (all at the level of around 75%) etc. The only aspect assessed less favourably by the respondents concerned the closures of schools and universities, with the level of support c. 10% lower. Similarly, 78% were ‘absolutely against’ or ‘against’ the protests expressing dissatisfaction with the anti-pandemic measures introduced by the German government. Overall, these results are consistent in relation to those discussed in the section concerning vaccination, with c. 79% of the respondents ‘in favour’ or ‘strongly in favour’ of being vaccinated.

In terms of the broader meaning of the pandemic, the survey resulted in an interesting finding from the point of view of the kin-state vis-à-vis host-state dynamics. When responding to the question ‘To what degree are you optimistic with regard to Denmark’s/Germany’s ability to get the coronavirus under control in the near future?’, c. 50% of respondents expressed high or a very high level of optimism in relation to Denmark, with around half of that number saying the same about Germany. According to the authors of the report, the reason behind those figures can be explained, among others, by the lack of direct knowledge of the situation in the kin-state

and thus over-reliance on media coverage highlighting Denmark's successful handling of the pandemic, whilst at the same time being a reflection of the attitudes mentioned above with regard to the dynamics involving trust in different types of institutional actors.

2. National and ethnic minorities in Poland

The report concerning the situation in Poland entitled 'Organizacje mniejszości narodowych i etnicznych w dobie pandemii' ('Organizations of national and ethnic minorities in times of the pandemic') is the result of cooperation between the Jewish Association Czulent (primarily focused on advocacy, with the aim of strengthening tolerance and openness towards various minority communities, as well as condemnation of antisemitism), the Zustricz Foundation (which works towards Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation and supports the integration of Ukrainians residing in Poland) and the Art Foundation Jaw Dikh (involved in educational, creative, social, and political initiatives, whilst aiming at the creation of an international network of activists and artists of both Roma and non-Roma origins). This took place in the context of the project 'Nationality, Ethnicity, and Coalition Building: Agenda Setting as a Mechanism for Collaboration Among Minority Groups in Poland', which was financially supported by the Stiftung 'Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft' and the Dutch Jewish Humanitarian Fund. Importantly, the project also benefited from the involvement of the communities participating in the Joint Commission of the Government and National and Ethnic Minorities.

As opposed to the other reports discussed in the present review article, the ambition of the actors mentioned above was broader, in the sense that their work covers not a single community but instead provides a broad overview of the situation of minorities living in Poland in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the authors of the document inform, their primary intention was to address three questions: What kind of impact did the pandemic-related crisis have on the day-to-day work and broader functioning of the organizations of national and ethnic minorities? What were the needs of such organizations during that period? What support measures and systemic solutions were expected by these actors during the crisis?

In terms of the basic methodological parameters, the report explains in its introductory parts such aspects as: the timeframe of data collection (May-June 2020), the definition of the category organization of national and ethnic minorities, the criteria behind the list of potential participants, the contents of the questionnaire (it consisted of both open-ended and closed

questions), as well as technical aspects concerning invitations to take part and the distribution of the survey. Overall, invitations were sent to 143 organizations, with 87 of them participating on behalf of 13 national and ethnic minority communities (Armenian, Belarusian, Czech, German, Jewish, Karaite, Lemko, Lithuanian, Roma, Russian, Slovak, Tatar, and Ukrainian). 10 out of the 87 survey forms returned were incomplete; nevertheless, the answers provided in them made up part of the final analysis.

The impact of the initial phase of the pandemic is clearly visible throughout the report. 75.9% of the organizations indicated that their plans for 2020 included activities which were not implemented due to the pandemic. At the same time, 69% of them reported that they were already carrying out or were planning to carry out their tasks through remote work. The change of day-to-day work-related practices, however, was not always straightforward: 44.8% of the surveyed organizations reported a lack of adequate equipment at their disposal or a lack of it on the part of their beneficiaries, 42.5% highlighted beneficiaries' inadequate knowledge with regard to the use of digital technologies, whereas 41.4% of the organizations also mentioned lack of access to the necessary software. Some of the organizations involved in the survey mentioned infrastructural deficiencies as well, with 23% reporting such issues as inadequate internet connection speed.

In such a context, it is hardly surprising that 47.1% of the organizations either tried to renegotiate or were planning to renegotiate the terms and conditions of their grant agreements with their funders: 36.8% benefited from or were planning to apply for governmental funds supporting entities affected by the pandemic, and a further 19.5% benefited or were planning to benefit from the support for non-governmental organizations provided by the local authorities.

Within the crucial field of education, the impact of the pandemic in the public education sector between March and June 2020 was similarly evident. As high as 69% of the organizations (in this particular case, out of the 42 which claimed to have knowledge concerning developments within this area) indicated that, during the pandemic, the approach to teaching minority languages and other subjects of importance for minority communities (like history or culture) was not similar to other school subjects. Furthermore, 19% highlighted that the teaching of a given minority language was suspended, with the same number reporting the suspension of history and culture lessons without offering a digital alternative. Another area of culture and identity-related impact of the pandemic was that of extracurricular activities, with

45.2% of the organizations reporting the discontinuation of hobby groups or art ensembles at schools. Those developments were succinctly summarized in the comment provided by one of the organizations participating in the survey: ‘The teaching of the minority language was marginalized. The scale of the problems concerning the teaching of core subjects resulted in a lack of time to teach the minority language’.

Although 69% of the organizations participating in the study responded to the tendencies mentioned in the preceding paragraph with informal educational initiatives of their own, the context in which these took place was challenging due to inadequate digital connectivity. 24.14% of the organizations themselves were not able to provide any online education due to practical or technical obstacles, whereas on the students’ side, 32.1% of them did not have the equipment necessary to participate in online education, whilst 30% were affected by limited access to fixed-line telephones, inadequate or lacking mobile phone reception, or substandard internet connections.

When asked about their expectations with regard to the pandemic-related challenges, 70.1% of the surveyed organizations mentioned financial support to help cover their operational running costs, while 62.1% mentioned such support as a way to purchase software necessary for switching to remote work and the simplification of procedural aspects concerning the introduction of modifications to grant agreements. At the same time, optimism concerning the near future was rather limited: 63.3% of the organizations expected their financial situation to deteriorate in 2021, with 56.4% expecting the overall condition of their organization to get worse in the period after the pandemic. To a certain extent this was relativized by answers concerning employment, as 55.2% of the organizations expected this to remain stable in 2021 and a further 10.3% foresaw increases. Furthermore, 55% of the organizations mentioned that in spite of the pandemic-related challenges, they were still able to realize most of their tasks. Within that group, 19% were able to carry out all or almost all of their tasks. To put that into perspective, 36% of them had to suspend most of their activities.

In combination with the expertise of the actors responsible for its preparation, the findings of the report provided a basis for a set of recommendations focused on adequate support for the organizations representing national and ethnic minorities during crisis situations. These were divided into two broad areas: education and governmental subsidies. Regarding the former, it can be mentioned, for example, about the need to make digital versions of textbooks available so that they can be easily used in remote education. Within the latter area, the focus

was primarily on the technical and procedural aspects, concerning such issues as the digitalization of the circulation of documents related to governmental grants or the facilitation of bookkeeping procedures and the amending of grant agreements in times of crises.

3. The Roma minority in Portugal

As already mentioned, the text concerning the Portuguese setting is structurally somewhat different than others discussed here. Nevertheless, it bears the characteristics of a report-like contribution: it is clearly designed in research terms (the analytical angle is well-defined: school education; data was collected through the typical scientific method of interviews), plus it is clearly inspired by the willingness to record and reflect upon the situation of a particular minority community in the context of the pandemic. From the perspective of the present special issue of JEMIE, this has an obvious added value since it focuses on members of the Roma community and thus offers a possibility for comparative considerations. As already mentioned, the report (as a part of a broader series) was put together by ObCig, an informal unit operating within the Alto Comissariado para as Migrações (High Commission for Migration). The Observatory's broader role is defined as a contribution '(...) to the implementation of some of the measures of the National Roma Communities Integration Strategy, for the social recognition of Roma people, families and/or communities, and consequently for the deconstruction of disqualifying myths, representations and stereotypes'.³

Unlike in the case concerning, for example, the Danish minority in Germany, ObCig's report offers exclusively qualitative data in the shape of seven interviews conducted either in writing or online (recorded and afterwards transcribed), depending on the interviewee's preference. Importantly, all took place between May and June 2020, and therefore collect impressions concerning the earliest stages of the pandemic. The interviews were published in the Observatory's newsletter in late June 2020. In terms of the gender balance, the sample includes four female and three male participants, with all of them being parents of schoolchildren, who in four cases participated in the interviews as well. With regard to the specific topic of school education during the COVID-19 pandemic, the discussed aspects included among others: the organization of the educational process in relation to timetables; available workspace; access to the necessary equipment or relations with school administrations and teachers.

As the interview with Licínio Fernandes illustrates, some members of the Portuguese Roma community were hit particularly hard by the initial shock of the pandemic:

In Famalicão there is also a camp, this is the camp where I live, people live there without water, without electricity. People live there in extreme poverty. Some were market traders and no longer are, because there are no fairs. Some were collecting scrap metal and I think it [the scrap yard - SB] hasn't opened yet either. There we have serious problems within the Roma community. Because when one worked, one earned something to feed the children. Now the world has completely stopped. Market traders have complained, because there are no fairs. And the truth is, when the fair returns, it will not be the fair as it was four or five months ago. Obviously not. First, there must be a limit of people. Then there are people who are afraid of going to the fair, so as not to mix with other persons.

It is hardly surprising that such circumstances immediately translated into day-to-day difficulties affecting schooling. In this particular case, the lack of a computer at home resulted in the children not being able to participate in online lessons, with the only available alternative being homework which was distributed and subsequently collected by hand. The phenomenon was broader, as according to the same interviewee, in his area many people either did not have access to the necessary technology or were not able to use it.

Even though the pool of interviewees also included members of the Roma community with a more stable economic situation, and thus less dramatically affected by the pandemic, such households struggled with the challenges of digital education as well. As Sónia Matos highlighted:

Well, we have two computers, one of them is mine, but it's very old, but it is enough to listen to the classes. I use this one and João [10 years old, the son of Sónia Matos - SB] another one, because he prefers it as sometimes he has to do work live with the teacher. On the days when João and I have classes in the morning [Sónia Matos is a teacher – SB], my husband tries to do his work more in the afternoon and evening, to try to share the equipment. (...) Not to mention that our country was not prepared for such a huge demand for internet use either. Therefore, it was frequently down.

The necessity to share electronic equipment and the associated complications were also mentioned by some of the schoolchildren interviewed. When asked whether they were able to follow classes and do the activities suggested by the teachers, one of Toya Prudêncio's

daughters responded positively, whilst at the same time mentioning that it was difficult as the only tablet available in the household had to be shared with her sister. The fact that both of them had to deal with significant amounts of homework resulted in a situation in which both were struggling with deadlines.

Importantly, logistical difficulties were not limited to access to electronic equipment only, with lack of suitable space constituting another challenge. This aspect was mentioned, for example, by the above-mentioned Toya Prudêncio, who pointed out how difficult the periods were when family members had overlapping online activities.

In terms of more positive aspects of the situation, several parents stressed the fact that the teachers were generally available and able to help schoolchildren with their homework and other tasks (also when the parents were not able to do so). This was mentioned, for instance, by Lindo Cambão and Guiomar Sousa. It is needless to say that such positive attitudes and actions on the side of the teachers were of high importance, especially in the context of households with parents who had low or relatively low levels of education.

4. The Roma minority in Spain

For the case of Spain, the present comparative analysis briefly covers the report ‘Discriminación y Comunidad Gitana – Informe Anual FSG 2021. A Fondo: El Impacto de la Pandemia en la Discriminación y el Antigitanismo’ (‘Discrimination and the Roma Community - FSG Annual Report 2021. In Depth: The Impact of the Pandemic on Discrimination and Antigypsyism’)⁴ compiled by Fundación Secretariado Gitano (hereinafter: FSG), which can be considered the most influential Spanish NGO dealing with issues concerning the Roma community. As with all previous editions of the report, the authors’ goal was to give visibility to the cases of discrimination and violation of the right of equal treatment concerning members of the Roma community who reside primarily in Spain (the situation in other countries is described very briefly as well, e.g., in Bulgaria or Slovakia), whilst at the same time reporting on FSG’s initiatives countering such developments. Importantly, the report in its entirety is available only in Spanish, with the English version being much shorter and not including the detailed list of the cases of discrimination. As a result, the former version consists of 228 pages in total, whereas the latter is only 86 pages long. Consequently, the original (and longer) version forms the basis for the present considerations, as it offers a better opportunity

to highlight some of the cases of discrimination faced by members of the Roma community which were related specifically to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A total of 364 cases were identified in 2020, 58 fewer than in the preceding year. The decrease was due to the pandemic-related limitations concerning some of the FSG's monitoring activities. Importantly, far from all of the registered cases were pandemic-related; however, according to the report, this particular context created an additional set of reasons for the intensification of anti-Roma discourses, which linked the community to the transmission of the virus and lack of respect for the preventive measures introduced by the authorities. In terms of the specific areas of discrimination, the categories with the highest number of overall cases pertained to media content (129); access to goods and services (64); housing (31); and anti-Roma hate speech on social media (29; as the authors of the report mention, this was only a fraction of the actual anti-Roma social media content). Importantly, cases of intersectional discrimination were reported as well (27), combining, for example, such factors as ethnicity and gender. Furthermore, the identified cases were divided into two groups, with 142 concerning individuals and 222 being of a collective nature. Gender-wise, female Roma were affected more frequently than male (148 against 109), whereas in terms of age groups, those most frequently impacted were in the age brackets 16-30 (97) and 31-45 (87).

Among cases of discrimination reported in the field of media, content specifically related to the pandemic was published in outlets such as ABC de Sevilla (e.g., an interview with a nurse containing several negative stereotypes about persons of Roma origin, expressed in a broader context discussing the impact of the pandemic in the neighbourhood of Tres Mil Viviendas) or Salamanca 24 Horas (Roma people as specifically contributing to the increase in the COVID-19 infection rate due to irresponsible social behaviour). Although in general the amount of pandemic-related discriminatory content in the media was not particularly high, what draws attention is the fact that not all the outlets responsible for such negative publications were willing to take them down following the intervention of the FSG. For instance, neither of the two mentioned above did so. In view of such practices the small amount of published anti-Roma content could be considered as a sign of general progress, however, with a clear room for improvement remaining.

It is hardly surprising that the realm of social media was not free of anti-Roma incidents linked to the pandemic. For example, in Granada offensive comments connecting Roma persons with the spreading of the coronavirus were published on a Facebook page.

Interestingly, the FSG's intervention resulted in the city authorities informing police about the matter which opened a formal investigation. Obviously, not all such situations resulted in (at least relatively) positive reactions from the authorities or those directly responsible for the moderation of content published on a given social media platform. The outlet *Mediterráneo Digital* published several discriminatory posts on Facebook and Twitter, for instance highlighting the alleged disregard of Roma persons for anti-pandemic measures. As the so-called 'trusted flagger', the FSG was able to get such content removed from Facebook. Twitter, on the other hand, decided not to react. A similar outcome concerns the situation involving a TikTok video uploaded by a user of Roma origin, making fun of excessive shopping for basic goods during the pandemic. It provoked several racist comments from other users. Although the platform was informed about the situation, the problematic content was not removed.

Further instances of pandemic-linked discrimination included the case of a Roma woman not being offered a COVID-19 test by the hospital staff in Córdoba despite having several symptoms, whilst similar tests were made available to people consulted after her (the affected person decided not to press official charges); a Roma man being exposed to discriminatory remarks from pharmacy staff in Jaén when queuing to buy masks (the owner of the pharmacy offered apologies after a formal complaint was made) or the appearance of anti-Roma graffiti in one of the neighbourhoods in Asturias which had many Roma families who were infected with COVID-19 at that time (the graffiti was quickly removed, following the intervention of a local non-Roma resident and the FSG).

In some situations, the actions of the forces of law and order resulted directly or indirectly in instances of discrimination. In Toledo, for instance, the towing away of cars without valid technical inspection certificates led to protests by the affected Roma people from the underprivileged El Paredón neighbourhood. This provoked a flurry of anti-Roma comments on Facebook and Twitter, with some of them using overtly pandemic-related phraseology and describing the local Roma community as the real "virus". In terms of the examples of direct discrimination, two undercover police officers verbally harassed a Roma male of Romanian origin in Pamplona, first by falsely accusing him of violating the lockdown regulations and subsequently through comments concerning both the man's ethnicity and nationality. Similarly, in situations reported in Cáceres and Jaén, police officers interpreted lockdown rules arbitrarily and to the disadvantage of Roma persons relating to justified outdoor activities such as paying bills or withdrawing money from a cash machine.

As was already emphasized, not all the cases of discrimination discussed in the FSG's report were directly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless — as Cristina de la Serna and Selene de la Fuente of FSG argued in one of the interpretative commentaries accompanying the report — the state of the health emergency had a particular Roma dimension. Certainly, the harsh experience of losing members of one's family to the virus, economic hardships resulting from the introduction of lockdowns, or uncertainty and psychological exhaustion arising from social isolation were not unique to the Roma community. At the same time, members of the majority did not have to face the additional burden of suspicious neighbours, hate speech targeting the community distributed via social media or WhatsApp, or excessive control from law enforcement agencies and the violation of various individual rights. As a result, instead of facing the challenge by increasing levels of social solidarity and openness across social, economic and ethnic cleavages, the pandemic only confirmed how deeply entrenched anti-Roma attitudes are within Spanish society.

Concluding discussion

Returning to the question posed in the title of the present review article – was there indeed a specific minority angle to the COVID-19 pandemic? – the four analysed reports seem to suggest a definite 'yes' as an answer. At the same time, it is also obvious that the impact of the pandemic was certainly not identical across all the cases considered.

In the context of Spain, the pandemic contributed to adding a visible new layer to the previously existing patterns of discrimination of the Roma community. As with many other previous crises, the recent period of prolonged and widespread social insecurity again enhanced antigypsyist attitudes. Consequently, some Roma people were exposed directly to new discriminatory situations, whilst the community as a whole was affected by media and social media content linking it to irresponsible behaviour exposing non-Roma persons to increased risk of infection. Even if figures for pandemic-related discriminatory incidents reported by the FSG were not dramatically high, it is obvious that situations such as those mentioned above must have contributed to increased anxiety levels within the Roma community, which was already exposed to the pandemic in ways frequently unknown to the majority due to the legacy of continuous discrimination and socioeconomic marginalization.

That negative legacy was also in the spotlight in the ObCig's report focusing on Roma families in the context of primary and secondary education in Portugal. Although many of the

interviewed parents mentioned adapting relatively successfully to the new reality of digital education and work, things were never straightforward due to the lack, at least initially, of necessary devices or workspaces etc. even in the context of better-off households. This level of coping with the unexpected challenges was hardly achievable for families living under more difficult economic circumstances, as clearly exemplified by the interview with Licínio Fernandes. Their problems were dramatically enhanced by abrupt unemployment resulting in severely limited income, as well as persistent educational deficiencies making it impossible to support children during this period of atypical schooling.

When it comes to the situation in Poland, the difficulties faced by the surveyed organizations of national and ethnic minorities were also substantial. Again, what comes to the fore are technological limitations: many organizations were either unable to function in the new online reality due to lacking the necessary hardware and/or software, or work with their beneficiaries was impossible due to similar limitations on their side. Furthermore, the pandemic has clearly left its mark (the question is how lasting?) in terms of access to minority education. The disruption affecting the educational system as a whole has sidelined such classes as minority languages and culture, sometimes resulting in teaching being entirely suspended. Similarly, extracurricular activities linked to minority identities stopped as well due to the lockdowns. Minority NGOs obviously tried to step in and fill the pandemic-induced void. This, however, was complicated by the technical and infrastructural aspects mentioned above.

Against such a backdrop, at first sight the situation of the Danish minority in Germany during the pandemic seems to be relatively uncomplicated; in particular, when attention is turned to, for example, personal economic-related aspects, such as fear of unemployment or concerns in relation to the overall economic well-being of the respondents' families. This is clearly correlated with the general prosperity of the host-state and the community, whilst at the same time suggests high levels of integration and education etc. And yet, even this apparently less problematic case features aspects pointing to the minorities' increased exposure to the impact of the pandemic. This is primarily related to participation in events and activities coordinated by minority organizations. In minority contexts this is crucial, as through such activities members of the community do not just participate in social life but also do so in their own language, whilst maintaining contact with the culture. The absence of such possibilities undoubtedly creates more negative dynamics than in the case of the majority population.

Despite the pre-existing contextual differences concerning the analysed communities and the methodological plurality of the discussed reports, it is evident that during crisis situations minorities are faced with challenges unknown to the majorities around them. When commenting on the Portuguese Roma's access to education during the pandemic, Maria José Casa-Nova, Sónia Pereira, and José Reis made reference to persistent (however sometimes ignored) inequalities and disadvantages faced by this minority, which the shock of the pandemic brought to the forefront. The actual scale of these issues in relation to various minority communities differs from case to case but basically never entirely disappears.

Therefore, several dynamics covered in the present review article are not dissimilar to those discussed in the articles resulting from the research project 'Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe' presented in this issue of JEMIE. Despite obvious differences in terms of the economic potential or international status of the countries of residence (for instance, EU member states versus those based on its external south-eastern fringe), in the educational context some members of the Portuguese Roma community had to face obstacles resembling those reported in Marta Anzilotti's text (like digital exclusion) and clearly related to the longstanding negative structural conditions. Within the same community vulnerabilities resulting from the abrupt loss of income were also highlighted – a situation reflected in the findings discussed in Craig Willis's article on the pandemic-related economic challenges within various Roma communities. On the other hand, Andreea Cârstocea's contribution on the emergence of a moral panic centred upon Roma as spreaders of the virus results in an interesting interplay with the cases of the anti-Roma discrimination reported for Spain: examples of media discourses singling out Roma as disproportionately responsible for the spreading of the virus due to the alleged disregard for lockdown measures were also identified there. Although it is difficult to establish a clear causal link, it can be argued that such discursive practices have been reflected in several instances of anti-Roma discrimination within public spaces such as hospitals and pharmacies, or the unacceptable behaviour of the police officers, thus increasing the probability of the existence of a vicious circle involving negative (social) media coverage and discriminatory responses within various contexts. Finally, when perceived through Raul Cârstocea's scalar approach, the reports analysed here clearly indicate that different minority communities were not affected by the pandemics in equal measure. The fact that Roma communities were hit the hardest both in Eastern and Western Europe seems to reinforce his argument that this is rooted in longstanding race and class prejudices. On the other hand, this

also allows one to put into perspective the impact of the pandemic on other minority communities. Although much less dramatically impacted than Roma, during the pandemic even economically prosperous communities such as the Danish minority in Germany had to face certain difficulties hardly present in the everyday reality of the majority, such as severely limited access to cultural activities relevant from the point of view of minority identities.

In that sense, taken together, the reports discussed here and the research articles published in the present special issue of JEMIE send a clear signal: next time, when another crisis comes, we should be better prepared with regard to the protection of minorities and guarantee them unhindered access to their basic rights (such as education), as this is crucial for maintaining their cultures, languages, identities and broader wellbeing.

¹ Unless stated otherwise, the titles of reports and quotations from them were translated by the author.

² In this review article, percentages are presented both with and without figures after the decimal point. This reflects the way data was presented in the discussed reports.

³ See <https://www.obcig.acm.gov.pt/en/-/boas-vind-1>

⁴ This is the official English translation of the report's title by the Fundación Secretariado Gitano.

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