



**Economic Effects of the COVID-19
Pandemic on Roma Communities in
Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina,
Moldova, Montenegro, North
Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine**

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Economic Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Roma Communities in Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine

This Research Paper focuses on economic effects experienced by Roma communities in seven non-EU states during the COVID-19 pandemic and states' consequent lockdown measures in the first half of 2020. Roma communities in Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine, were all facing socio-economic exclusion and marginalisation before the pandemic and international organisations were warning very early on that Roma communities were at serious risk during the pandemic, including in the fields of employment or loss of income. This research paper uses primary data collected from a survey of 440 Roma individuals across the seven states in order to add empirical evidence to an under-researched area. The main findings include that almost 73% of them experienced a reduced income and the major reason for this was due to access to or demand for informal work was hindered by the lockdowns. Moreover, most Roma who needed to borrow money did so through private means (family and friends) rather than through official or state institutions.

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1. Introduction

It has been well documented that across the Council of Europe area, Roma¹ have faced and continue to face serious issues of economic deprivation as well as discrimination in the labour market. On top of this, the COVID-19 pandemic is having a dramatic economic effect on national economies as a result of the lockdown measures imposed to various degrees from March 2020. Roma communities were therefore already in a vulnerable position due to existing marginalisation, compounded by the lockdown

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



as well as the various types of discrimination they face – from public and private sectors. Whilst the situation of Roma communities varies greatly across the 41 Council of Europe member states in which there is a Roma population, it is recognised that there are common issues of exclusion and marginalisation across the continent. As such, there have been various attempts to monitor and address such issues at an intergovernmental, pan-European level, including through the Council of Europe since 1996 (Council of Europe, 2018). A joint statement on the International Roma Day (April 8th 2020) by the Council of Europe Secretary General and the European Commissioner for Equality, stressed the serious problems of inequality and discrimination that Roma continue to face were accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Council of Europe, 2020a). Their statement included socio-economic factors such as access to welfare, provision of food aid and general access to public services. This was echoed by a similar statement from the OSCE (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2020) and in a report from the EU Commission (2020). Whilst research is being undertaken on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma communities, much of this is within the EU or concentrates on health aspects. A review of the existing research is provided below, but it becomes apparent that further data is necessary, particularly for eastern European, non-EU states. Accordingly, this research paper uses primary survey data collected across seven countries.

The research paper begins with information on the background situation and existing research, firstly on Roma issues at large (including in the seven states in focus), then on the COVID-19 pandemic economic effects (again also with a focus on the seven states), plus a subsection on existing research conducted already on Roma during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is followed by an explanation of the methodology and data sources in section 3, before section 4 outlines the results.

2. Background Situations of Roma and COVID-19

2.1 Roma Issues in Europe

As the introduction initially raised, Roma communities across Europe continue to face a number of issues around long-term exclusion, poverty and discrimination. This subsection aims to provide an overview of how this has been monitored and addressed on a pan-European level, highlighting some of the initiatives but also reports published by international institutions and NGOs on Roma issues. This subsection therefore includes a particular focus on economic issues, given the thematic scope of this research paper, plus then outlines the empirical situation of Roma in the seven states surveyed. Due to the scope of this Research Paper, these latter state subsections are brief, focusing on official status, population estimates and summaries of the ongoing economic-related issues, using primarily the most recent Opinions of the Advisory Committee to Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC).



Despite the long history of Roma communities across almost all states in Europe, significant efforts to tackle the issues they face have only relatively recently begun to be organised on a pan-European intergovernmental level. This takes place predominantly on the Council of Europe level, but there are also EU institutions and working groups as well, of which a brief introduction is provided here.

In the Council of Europe, an initial set up of a Group of Specialists on Roma/Gypsies (MG-S-ROM) in 1996 came at a similar time as the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (ECRML) in 1992 and the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* (FCNM) in 1995 had come into force providing Roma communities official recognition and a stronger layer of protection at a state level, additionally monitored at the Council of Europe level. The MG-S-ROM was renamed in 2002 and 2006 and then reorganised as the Ad hoc Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (CAHROM) in 2011, reflecting the changing and increased scope of the group (Council of Europe, 2018). CAHROM monitored and drafted recommendations on a wide range of Roma issues including employment, based on a group of 41 members experts appointed by Council of Europe. Finally, it is in its current form from 2020, the Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (ADI-ROM) which is composed of members designated by governments of member states and has appointed a number of thematic rapporteurs to assist in monitoring ongoing issues (Council of Europe, 2019). In relation to this, there is also a Roma and Travellers Team which supports member states' governments in "the design and implementation of laws, policies, programmes and measures so as to ensure that Council of Europe human rights standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit Roma and Travellers", which is also based on the work of ADI-ROM (Council of Europe, n.d.). The scope of these Council of Europe groups and committees is broad, working primarily on issues of segregation, exclusion, discrimination against Roma and also focusing on Roma youth, as well as cultural, political and legal concerns / rights. Economic aspects are present in many of these areas and reports frequently highlight barriers and exclusion Roma face in the labour market and accessing income, with the obvious links to poverty and inequality.

The Council of Europe was also involved in the adoption of the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 (Roma Decade), which was adopted by 12 European governments and supported by a variety of European and global institutions (Regional Cooperation Council, n.d. a). It focused on education, employment, health and housing as priority areas, with participating governments obliged to allocate resources towards this. However, there is recognition that the Roma Decade had a limited impact and did not achieve what was initially hoped, with Roma remaining isolated from mainstream public policies (Regional Cooperation Council, n.d. b; Rorke & Matache, 2015). One consequent action is the ongoing Roma Integration 2020 project which is focusing on the Western Balkans and Turkey, aiming specifically to reduce the socio-economic gap between Roma and non-Roma (Regional Cooperation Council, n.d. b).



The EU had in place a Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) between 2011-2020 adopted by the Commission and based on a series of reports and recommendations from experts and civil society organisations (European Commission, n.d.). The four core foci are education, employment, health and housing, as well as anti-discrimination and anti-gypsyism, through which it monitors EU member states actions taken and produces annual reports. This recognises progress made but also issues remaining, for instance in its 2019 annual report it states 43% of Roma were in paid work as of 2016 a figure reduced to 29% for women (56% for men), quite obviously drastically worse than the general EU average (European Commission, 2019).

Given the focus of this Research Paper is non-EU states (which are home to roughly half of Europe's 10-12 million Roma (European Commission, n.d.)), this subsection moves on to discuss the situation of Roma in the seven states on which the primary research was conducted. Before discussing each case individually, it is worth mentioning a recent World Bank report on 'Breaking the Cycle of Roma Exclusion in the Western Balkans' – given that five of the states in this paper's focus fall into this geopolitical category. The report focuses on a number of core thematic areas, one of which is 'labor markets', whereby the authors state that low labour force participation and high unemployment are an issue across the Western Balkans and are a particular problem for Roma women (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019). They provide some statistics which show that employment rates for Roma are much lower than for non-Roma populations and much lower than the EU 28 average.

Proceeding alphabetically on a state by state basis, Albania has a significant Roma population under a variety of names / groups and were recognised as a linguistic minority by the Albanian government in their first state report to the FCNM in 2001 (Republic of Albania, 2001). In this report Albania claimed that statistical data on Roma did not exist at that time (Ibid., p. 16) but it has since been stated that officially there are around 1,300 Roma in Albania – yet other estimates put this between 80,000 and 150,000 (Minority Rights Group International, n.d. a; European Roma Rights Centre, 2010). The Albanian government signed up to the Decade of Roma Inclusion plus also have in place a National Action Plan for the Integration of the Roma and Egyptians 2016-2020 (Government of Albania, 2015). Yet issues still persist and the World Bank described Roma as the most excluded community in Albania (The World Bank, 2018) with the ACFC in its most recent Opinion suggesting that the situation remains “an unresolved and urgent problem in Albania” whereby Roma “continue to be excluded from effective participation in social and economic life” and “continue to suffer from high unemployment” (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2018a, p. 2).

With regard to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Roma are a recognised national minority under the FCNM (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2003) many of which identify as Muslim and were misplaced during the ethnic conflict between 1992-95. These two aspects problematise population estimates which are officially around 20,000 but estimated by Roma NGOs to be in the range of 30,000 to 50,000 (Minority



Rights Group International, n.d. b). A series of national action plans have been drawn up in relation to Bosnia and Herzegovina's pledges under the Decade of Roma Inclusion, with the most recent running from 2017-2020. Whilst the most recent ACFC Opinion acknowledges that some progress has been made thanks to these targeted action plans, it states that Roma "continue to face serious and entrenched difficulties and discrimination" particularly in relation to employment and access to public services (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2018b, p. 2).

Moldova officially has just around 9,000 Roma according to its 2014 census but this number is estimated at 250,000 by Roma leaders (Minority Rights Group International, n.d. c). They were recognised as a national minority and ethnic group of the Republic of Moldova formally in 2003 (Republic of Moldova, 2004). As an observer state of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, Moldova also implemented a Roma Action Plan 2011-2015 and another for the period of 2016-2020. However, the most recent Opinion of the ACFC recognised the intention of the Roma Action Plan 2011-2015 but stated that it did not fulfil its objectives of promoting access to (amongst others) employment and social services (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2017, p. 6). Thus it concluded that Roma "continue to face major obstacles" in accessing employment and that a lack of infrastructure in rural areas (where minorities, including Roma, largely reside) limits access to economic opportunities (Ibid., p. 5).

Following independence from Serbia and the ratification of the FCNM in its own right in 2006, Montenegro also recognised Roma as a national minority. Of course, Roma issues predate Montenegrin independence and were deeply affected by conflict in the 1990s which included many fleeing from Kosovo into Montenegro (Minority Rights Group International, n.d. d). The 2003 census put the number of Roma at just 2,601 in terms of those declaring Romani 'national belonging', yet even the Montenegrin government admitted the census statistics is likely to be inaccurate due to the census being conducted in a period of "political tensions" and that there were no Romani census-takers involved (Republic of Montenegro, 2007, pp. 7-8). Unofficial estimates by the OSCE put the number at around 20,000 (Minority Rights Group International, n.d. d). The latest Opinion of the ACFC praises the progress made by Montenegro in registering and integrating Roma who had fled from Kosovo, but stresses that measures are needed to improve the social and economic situation of Roma, "particularly by increasing employment opportunities" (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2019a, p. 2). A lack of access to identity cards for Roma in Montenegro has also been highlighted in a World Bank report, as an issue for accessing social services and benefits (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019).

In North Macedonia, Roma were listed as one of the state's national minorities or 'peoples' in its first State Report to the FCNM in 2003 (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 2003) and the last census



conducted in 2002 numbered Roma at 53,879 (Minority Rights Group International, n.d. e). However, the Roma community as well as international observers estimate the population to be in the region of 80,000 to 135,000 (Ibid.). In 2015 a National Roma Inclusion Strategy plus a Roma Integration Strategy were adopted but in its most recent Opinion, the ACFC reported that the recommendations during consultation processes were not taken into account in the new strategy (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2016, p. 16). Therefore, the ACFC declared that Roma “remain dramatically disadvantaged from a socio-economic point of view” and that “the vast majority... are not registered with the Employment Agency and thus do not benefit from its programmes to promote their inclusion in the labour market” (Ibid., pp. 5-6). Robayo-Abril & Milián (2019, p. 123) suggest that unemployment amongst Roma in North Macedonia remains around 50%, although there was a small decline between 2011 and 2017.

In Serbia, Roma are recognised as a national minority and are represented by one of the state’s 23 National Councils of National Minorities (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2019b). The results of the 2011 census showed that there were 147,604 persons declaring their ethnicity as Roma (Ibid. p. 4), yet other estimates put the figure at somewhere between 300,000 and 460,000 (Minority Rights Group International, n.d. f). The Serbian government was one of the signatories to the Decade of Roma Inclusion and adopted The Strategy of Social Inclusion of Roma for the 2016-2025 Period (Government of Serbia, 2016). In this, the government recognised that the previous Strategy for the Improvement of Roma Status 2009-2015 did not meet its objectives, and amongst its strategic objectives for the new Strategy is to “eliminate the structural causes” of poverty through interrelated public policies including in the area of employment (Ibid. p. 1). The most recent Opinion of the ACFC also highlights the structural discrimination Roma face with regard to (amongst others) employment and access to services (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2019b, p. 1). Robayo-Abril & Milián (2019, p. 123) report that unemployment dropped significantly amongst Roma in Serbia between 2011 and 2017 but still remains much higher than the non-Roma population, plus Roma are concentrated mostly in the areas of Serbia with the highest poverty rates.

Ukraine recognises Roma / Romani people as a national minority under the FCNM and in the last official census in 2001 they were numbered at 47,600 – however, the government recognises that unofficial estimates put the figure at between 120,000 to 400,000 (Ukraine, 2016). A ‘Strategy for Protection and Integration of the Roma National Minority into Ukrainian Society for the period up to 2020’ was adopted in 2016 and the ACFC recognised that it was “yielding some positive results” in its most recent Opinion (Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2018c, p. 2). Yet the ACFC also states that Roma continue to suffer “systemic discrimination” and that the situation of the Roma minority “remains one of the most pressing social



problems in Ukraine” which did not improve between monitoring cycles (Ibid. p. 21). Moreover, the ACFC highlight the issue of Roma not being able to access services due to not having identity documents.

As this entire subsection and the individual paragraphs on the seven states have shown, socio-economic issues are long embedded in the everyday reality for Roma persons across Europe. Issues such as higher unemployment rates, over-representation in informal and precarious work, exclusion from social policies (further hindered by low registration numbers), remain problematic despite the numerous international and national action plans to combat this. It is particularly salient in the seven non-EU states in focus in this Research Paper, where Roma issues are compounded by a broader lack of economic opportunities. Thus, already before the COVID-19 pandemic Roma communities and individuals were in a difficult, marginalised position. Before looking directly at the effects of COVID-19 on Roma, the next section considers the broader scope of COVID-19 in the seven states as well as for minorities in Europe and beyond.

2.2 The COVID-19 Pandemic

As the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread throughout Europe in late February / early March 2020, the reaction of states was initially rather mixed with regard to lockdown measures. Whilst states in western Europe were the first to experience a spread of the virus and consequent lockdown measures were enacted by mid-March, eastern European states began to enact lockdown measures quickly before a significant spread of the virus (Walker & Smith, 2020). The consequence of this is that regardless of the number of cases, lockdown measures were similar across the continent – to a large extent. Thus, it is not possible to judge the severity of the pandemic in economic terms by examining the case numbers. This is of course relevant for the states in focus which lie at the EU’s eastern and south-eastern borders, because although the case numbers were very low during the lockdown period between approximately March and June 2020, the economic effects could have been just as severe as those in western Europe. Moreover, given that these seven states have lower GDP per capita figures than the majority of the EU countries, their economies were in a more vulnerable position going into the lockdown period. Therefore, already on a comparative state by state level, the Roma communities in these seven states were likely to be at a disadvantage.

In terms of the seven countries which this Research Paper is concerned with, there were of course a number of measures put in place to combat the economic effects of COVID-19 – although these were largely generic and not targeted at Roma, with the result of the same ineffectiveness mentioned above. In Albania, the Prime Minister declared a state of emergency on 24th March for an initial 30 days which was consequently extended, with curfew measures and school closures to accompany this (OECD, 2020a). Economic activity slowly began to reopen sector by sector in late April and through May, with



1st June seeing the end of the curfew (Ibid., p. 3). In terms of economic support, unemployment packages were reportedly doubled and a series of one-off payments were distributed to families most affected by business closures and the tourism collapse (Ibid., p. 5).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a state of emergency was declared and followed by restrictions on movement of people and public gatherings from 21st March, including an overnight curfew and in places an entire restriction on movement for over 65s and under 18s (OECD, 2020b). Shops began to reopen in early May, followed by restaurants and cafes in mid-May as well as the resumption of public transport services, but schools remained closed until the end of the school year (minus kindergartens) (Ibid., p. 2). Most of the economic policy was directed at businesses through subsidising social security contributions and covering the wages of employees who were temporarily laid-off (up to a maximum of 90 days) during the state of emergency (Jusic, 2020).

In Moldova, a state of emergency was declared from 17th March to 15th May, which restricted movement of people and most trade activity (OECD, 2020c). Additionally, the Moldovan government put in place financial assistance for individuals who had lost their jobs, but this was conditional on length of service plus also limited to a certain percentage of their previous wage (Ibid.).

Montenegro acted quickly despite a low number of cases, by closing schools, stopping most economic activity and restricting movement and gatherings from mid-March (Kaludjerovic, 2020). These began to be eased in early May in stages, with the final re-openings taking place from 1st June (OECD, 2020d). In terms of employment subsidies, the Montenegrin government provided two waves (mid-March and mid-April) to businesses to pay between 50% and 100% of employees' wages and insurance contributions depending on the industry (Kaludjerovic, 2020; OECD, 2020d, p. 5).

North Macedonia introduced a state of emergency on 18th March which lasted until 22nd June, involving a strict curfew and travel ban and the closing of schools and non-essential businesses (OECD, 2020e; Gervoska Mitev, 2020). This began to be eased gradually in mid-May in three stages with cafes and restaurants opening by the end of that month, but larger events continuing to be restricted throughout summer (OECD, 2020e). In terms of economic support, the government subsidised the wages of employees in a number of sectors to varying percentages, for the months of April to July, plus additionally set up unemployment benefits of 50% for those losing their jobs during the crisis (OECD, 2020e, pp. 5-6). In addition, accessibility of the social protection measures was improved (by removing certain criteria) and an energy subsidy was introduced for recipients of social welfare – yet this was criticised for a low-take up rate (Gervoska Mitev, 2020).

In Serbia, a national state of emergency was declared on 15th March and lockdown measures were introduced, including the closures of most shops, the suspension of public transport and a night-time



curfew (OECD, 2020f; Pejin Stokic, 2020). However, already in late April, the government began to allow the opening of a variety of businesses and the curfew was lifted on 6th May (OECD, 2020f, p. 3). Nonetheless, economic measures were provided, including wage support during the state of emergency for firms not laying-off more than 10% of their employees, plus a one-off payment of around €100 to all citizens above 18 and further support for pensioners and those (registered) on temporary benefits (OECD, 2020f; Pejin Stokic, 2020).

Finally, in Ukraine, containment measures began on 12th March with an initial three-week quarantine including closure of schools, followed quickly by the closure of most businesses and limits to gatherings of 10 people by 17th March (OECD, 2020g). This was extended through until May 11th after which many shops began to reopen, with further industries allowed to reopen on 22nd May and then schools on 25th May (Ibid. p. 4). Economic measures included subsidies of utility bills for households as well as a one-time payment for pensioners and the extension of unemployment eligibility (Ibid. p. 7). Support to encourage SMEs to retain employees was also introduced, subsidising lost-hours of worktime and offering government loans (OECD, 2020c).

To summarise, the seven states mostly followed a similar timeline in terms of enacting states of emergency and lockdown measures, beginning around 15-20 March and starting to ease restrictions around early-May and then being largely reopened by June – at least in terms of the domestic economies. Thus, the cases are broadly comparable although certain states had stronger measures in place in terms of general support. Yet this seemed for the most part targeted at employees or at best registered unemployed – leaving an obvious gap when it comes to Roma.

2.3 The COVID-19 Pandemic and Minorities

In the six months following the lockdown measures being introduced in March 2020, research has begun to show that marginalised groups are being hardest hit by the pandemic and its economic effects. Before focusing directly on the case of Roma, it is useful to demonstrate how widespread this is in minority contexts. On the international level, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2020) has reported that COVID-19 has a “broad range of disproportionate and adverse impacts upon national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities”, adding further that “minority communities also face greater impacts from the economic downturn engendered by the pandemic” (p. 1). UNICEF (2020) in its focus on Europe and Central Asia, has also expressed strong concern at the “immense and long-lasting” economic damage caused by COVID-19 and suggests that many millions will be pushed into poverty, including of course many children who then may face lifelong effects of this. On a European level, the European Network Against Racism (2020) also highlighted through empirical case studies that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to face “financial insecurity as a result of government measures”, making quite apparent its concern over lockdown measures and also mentioning specifically Roma as



a group likely to find themselves without income. The Institute for European Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, also discussed the issue and suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic is amplifying pre-existing socio-economic inequalities faced by minority communities (Ajayi & Westerveen, 2020). Moreover, this issue was also discussed by Eurac Research (2020) during a panel discussion on Economy, Minorities and COVID-19. It has also been well-documented in the case of the USA, for example a study using data from April 2020 on unemployment suggested that “the early impacts of COVID-19 on unemployment raise important concerns about long-term economic effects for minorities” due the disproportionate effects on Black and Latinx Americans (Fairlie, Couch & Xu, 2020).

2.4 Roma Communities and COVID-19

On top of the recognition by many international organisations that Roma are a particular risk group, there has also been concentrated focus on Roma as well as some initial research on the economic effects. The European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network produced a Position Paper based on data collection with its members during May 2020 (European Roma Grassroots Organisations, 2020). This report highlights the core socio-economic issues being commonly faced by Roma communities and states that Roma are “often not reached by mainstream inclusion measures and initiatives”, suggesting that extra work is needed to identify the “actual needs on the ground” (Ibid., pp. 3-4). In terms of issues, the Position Paper stresses that Roma communities have been particularly hard hit by ‘soaring’ unemployment and that many Roma have “lost their income” – with the implication that this is often a complete income loss rather than just a reduction.

Similar concerns were expressed by leaders of Caritas Europa and Caritas Romania who stress that employment-based social measures will not reach the vast majority of Roma due to the fact that most are active in the informal sector (Pfohman & Hackl, 2020). Again, they suggest that thousands of Roma will be “left without the means by which to purchase food” due to having no income or social support during lockdown.

Moreover, a report on six EU countries from the Open Society Roma Initiatives Office highlighted economic pressures facing Roma in the initial months of lockdown, as well as the exclusion faced in particular by returning migrant Roma workers due to not meeting the criteria for unemployment benefits in their home state – a particular issue in Bulgaria (Korunovska & Jovanovic, 2020).

The EU itself produced a report as part of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies programme, which was released in May 2020 and highlighted issues and state responses across the bloc (European Commission, 2020). This concluded that the COVID-19 outbreak has “widened long-standing exclusion, poverty and discrimination” against Roma communities across the EU, recognising that many Roma have and will experience being “cut from any source of income and (formal or



informal) economic activity, leading to rising unemployment and poverty” (Ibid., p. 1). The report highlights that due to a large percentage of Roma being engaged in the informal sector, “thousands” will be left without an income or social support and thus without means to purchase essentials such as food. Whilst the report does list some statistics of previous data available on Roma issues, none of this is specific to the COVID-19 crisis. And whilst the report provides a detailed overview of state responses to such issues for Roma during COVID-19, this is of course limited only to EU member states.

On the Council of Europe or OSCE levels, the reporting has been much more limited thus far, with broad statements released such as those around International Roma day, or within an introductory note produced by the Steering Committee on Anti-discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (CDADI) in early April which mentioned Roma as one of the at-risk groups for discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic (Council of Europe, 2020b). Yet, there has been very little in depth analysis on the state level from these organisations – this perhaps could be addressed in future ACFC reporting, for example.

On the state level, some limited research has been released on Roma during the COVID-19 lockdown. In Spain, the Roma association Fundación Secretariado Gitano conducted a telephone survey of 11,000 Roma people at the end of March, covering a variety of topics including economic aspects. Their survey found that 40% are having problems accessing food and 34% are finding it difficult to pay their bills (Fundación Secretariado Gitano, 2020). In employment terms, the survey found that (of those in paid employment) over a third had already lost their jobs and another third had been temporarily laid-off, whilst 71% of self-employed persons worked in the informal sector and thus did not qualify for any official government support to the self-employed (Ibid.).

2.5 Summary

It is evident that Roma communities across Europe were in (often extremely) marginalised positions and faced generational social exclusion across a number of areas including employment and access to welfare systems. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns it produced were clearly having exponential effects on a variety of minority communities in Europe and in the US, oftentimes entirely eradicating any source of income for individuals. Logically, grave concern was expressed early on in the crisis by international organisations working with or monitoring Roma in Europe – yet much of this focused on the EU. As section 2.1 showed, the seven non-EU states in focus for this research had particularly problematic situations for Roma and most lacked any form of targeted COVID-19 response. Moreover, the economic responses that were put in place were usually linked to formal employment / registered unemployment. In light of a lack of data on the effects during this period, certainly on a comparative level, the gap this Research Paper seeks to address becomes apparent. Thus, the general research question is ‘how have Roma communities in Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine been affected by the COVID-19



pandemic in economic terms?'. Given the low levels of formal employment going into the pandemic, this research places a focus on types of income and income loss during the lockdown, as well as the numerous knock-on effects this could have.

3. Methodology

As part of a larger research project 'Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe'² conducted by the University of Leicester and the European Centre for Minority Issues in Flensburg, data was collected through a series of local research assistants in each of the seven states studied (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine). Each local research assistant was responsible for the three types of data collection, based on a methodology designed by the core researchers, including the present author. These were a survey, expert interviews and desk research, however this paper focuses only on the survey data. The survey was implemented through Online Surveys³ and translated into each of the local state languages. This was distributed to a minimum of 50 persons identifying as Roma in each of the seven states, however this number was exceeded in some cases. As such, the final number of valid respondents was 440.⁴ Given the unique circumstances of the pandemic, the surveys were distributed online or via phone in order to limit physical contact between researcher and survey respondent.

The first questions in each survey related to demographics such as age group and gender, from which 60.1% were female and 39.9% male, and the age breakdown measured by 10-year intervals.⁵ In terms of content, the survey was designed with 32 questions across the themes of employment, education, healthcare, and housing. For the purposes of this research paper, the section on employment is of most interest, but questions of relevance can be also found within those covering housing (relating to welfare) and education / healthcare (relating to the need to pay bribes).

4. Results

This section provides the results of the economic related questions in the survey, which are summarised in Appendix I. This is broadly separated into two sections; reasons for and direct effects of reduced income, and the consequent measures taken to address this (borrowing, government welfare). To ascertain an idea of the respondents most important source of income before the pandemic, an initial question directly asked this – the results of which are shown in Figure 4.1 below.

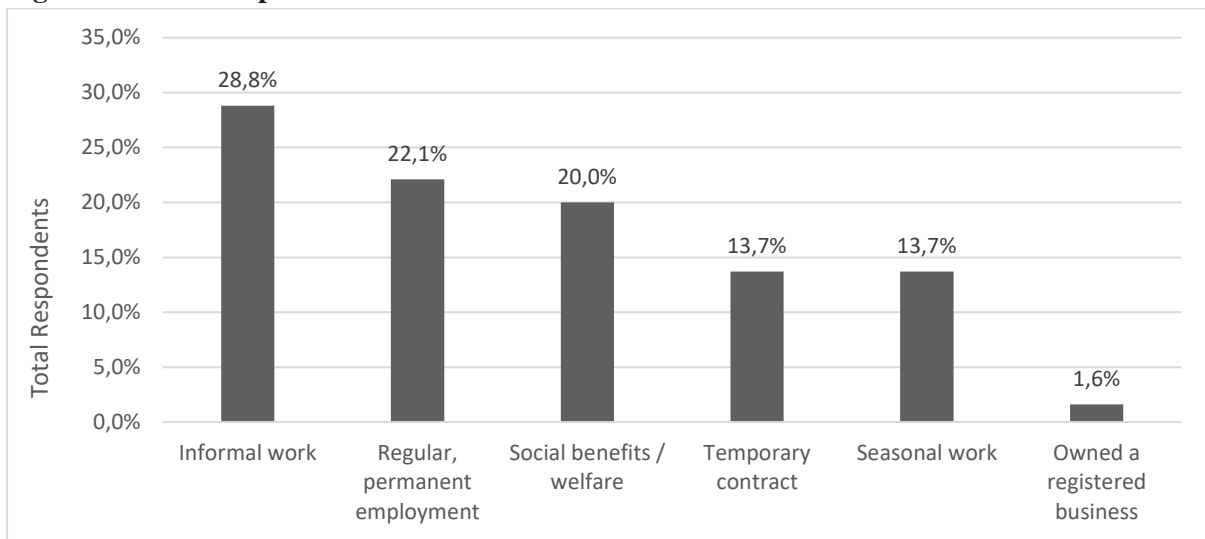
² See further, <https://www.ecmi.de/research/equality-and-inclusion/marginality-on-the-margins-of-europe-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-roma-communities-in-non-eu-countries-in-eastern-europe>

³ See further, <https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/>

⁴ When subtracting respondents who answered no to agreeing to participate.

⁵ This research paper does not utilise the age breakdown in its statistical analysis at this stage.

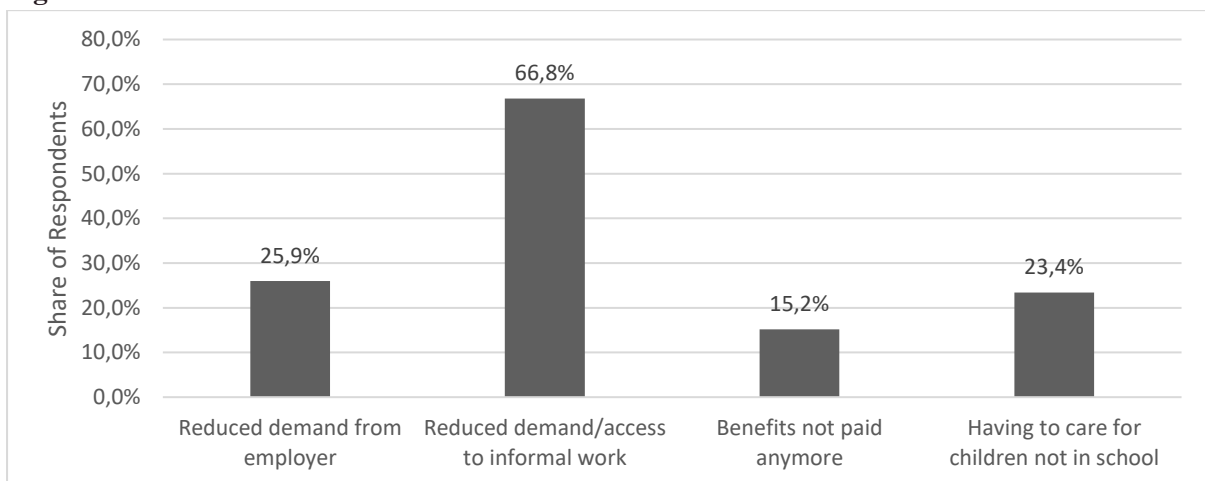
Figure 4.1: Most Important Source of Income Before the Start of the Pandemic



Source: Authors own table, using data from University of Leicester. *Notes:* total number of valid respondents to this question was 430.

As can be observed, just 22.1% of the respondents were in regular permanent employment and this figure was similar in each of the seven states individually. 56% relied most on what can be termed as precarious income – temporary contracts, seasonal work or informal work – whilst 20% relied mostly on social benefits. On the consequences of the lockdown measures, 71% of respondents agreed that the lockdown limited their ability work, whilst 72.8% agreed that their income had been reduced. The reasons for this are shown in Figure 4.2, which again demonstrates the reliance on the informal market.

Figure 4.2 Reasons for Reduced Income



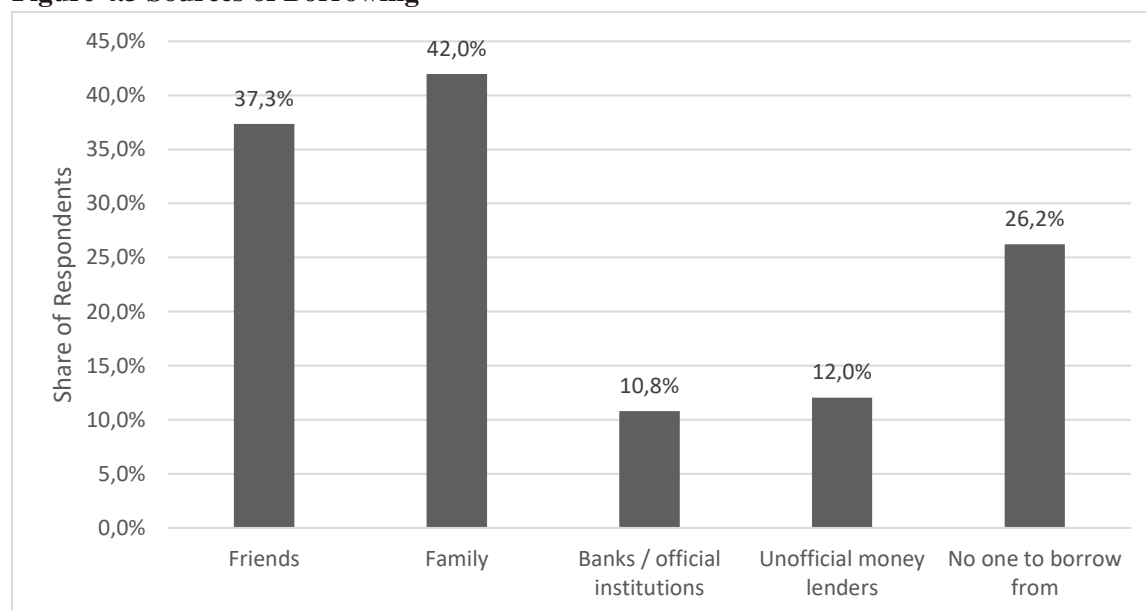
Source: Authors own table, using data from University of Leicester/ European Centre for Minority Issues research project. *Notes:* total number of respondents answering this question stating their income was reduced was 316, however respondents could select more than one answer.



In terms of knock-on impact of this reduced income during the COVID-19 induced lockdown measures, the survey found that 31.9% of respondents felt that they could not afford food and household essentials. In terms of geographic variance, these trends were largely similar, but in the case of affording food and household essentials, this was strongest in Albania (48%) and Ukraine (44.9%). On the topic of housing, 8.5% of respondents had been cut off from a utility service due to non-payment, whilst 3.7% had been threatened with eviction and 1.4% had been evicted during lockdown. Again on geographical variance, Ukraine (26%) and Albania (16.7%) had the highest figures for utility service cut offs. Further cost-related questions concerned education and health, whereby 34.1% of respondents agreed with the statement 'remote learning has increased costs for the household' and 20.2% of those needing medical assistance had to offer extra payments to doctors to be consulted.

Regarding the consequences of this, the survey asked a number of questions regarding the need for borrowing money or apply for government financial assistance /welfare. Only 27.2% stated that they did not need to borrow money during lockdown and thus 73% by implication did need to borrow money. Figure 4.3 highlights the sources (or lack of) which this 73% (almost three quarters of survey respondents; 324 persons) had to turn to.

Figure 4.3 Sources of Borrowing



Source: Authors own table, using data from University of Leicester/ European Centre for Minority Issues research project. *Notes:* total number of respondents answering this question stating they had to borrow money was 324, however respondents could select more than one answer.

As can be observed, just over one quarter had no source to borrow money from even though they stated that they needed to. Of those that needed to borrow, the primary sources were private (family and friends) with just one in ten borrowing money from banks. Relatedly, with regard to government assistance only 35.6% were aware of any such schemes and only 23.8% of total respondents applied.



This latter figure fluctuated vastly between countries, with 91.8% of respondents in Serbia applying for government assistance but only 3.8% in Bosnia and Herzegovina or 11.3% in Montenegro. Finally, only 6.6% applied for housing benefit or social housing.

5. Analysis

Following the same structure as the results, the first aspect in focus is the most important source of income going into the pandemic. The broad picture of Roma across Europe demonstrated in section 2.1 suggested that Roma rely mostly on informal work and have low figures of formal employment. The survey across 430 members of Roma communities across the seven states found that just 22.1% were in permanent employment, a figure lower than the 43% for the EU in 2016 although this was termed simply ‘paid employment’. Nonetheless, it seems broadly in line with the concerns expressed in ACFC monitoring cycles for the seven states, as well as other general international reports on Roma. Indeed, adding together the figures for informal work, seasonal work and temporary contracts, it is possible to observe that 56% of survey respondents relied primarily on a precarious income, with a further 20% on social benefits. This offers strong evidence that the concerns expressed by international reports on Roma being in a vulnerable economic position going into the lockdowns are well-founded, plus it shows that the respondents of this survey fit that profile. The logical next step was then to ascertain whether this precarity manifested itself in reducing income for Roma during the lockdown, as much of the international reporting was warning. The survey found almost three quarters of respondents stating that their income had been reduced, with a variety of knock-on effects. This offers some empirical evidence to the statements made in the Position Paper by ERGO which claimed that “Roma communities have been particularly hard hit by ‘soaring’ unemployment and that many Roma have “lost their income”. Moreover, Caritas Europa and Caritas Romania suggested that activity in the informal sector would be a prime reason for reduced income, which was in line with the consequent question in our survey which showed that 66% of respondents had less income due to a reduced demand for or access to informal work.

The following questions looked at the consequences of this reduced income and the figure of almost 32% surveyed stating that they could not afford food and household items, seems in line with the concern expressed by Caritas Europa and Caritas Romania. The geographic variance showed strongest results in Albania and Ukraine which is not particularly surprising given they have a lower GDP per capita than Serbia or Montenegro, yet it is surprising that Moldova did not show higher rates here. Questions were also asked in relation to housing costs, such as utility bills and ultimately the ability to pay rent during the lockdown period. 8.5% of respondents had been cut off from a utility bill, which may appear a somewhat low figure but, considering this research was conducted in early July 2020 and the lockdown measures came into force only in March 2020, this is alarmingly quick to already be



cutting off individuals for not paying bills. This is particularly concerning given the salience of COVID-19 and the general social and international pressure to allow individuals some extra time. Again, the figures were much higher in Albania (17%) and Ukraine (26%) which is particularly alarming. Furthermore, almost 4% had been threatened with eviction and 1.5% had been evicted, which again are low percentages but any figure above 0% is concerning. Furthermore, the effects of having to pay for remote learning (34%) and extra doctor's fees (bribes) (20%) would add extra strain to Roma's household budget.

It is a logical consequence therefore that Roma would need to borrow money or apply for government assistance, due to reduced income and pressure to pay bills and afford food and essentials. It is not a surprise then that 73% of respondents stated that they needed to borrow money, but it is insightful to investigate the sources of this. Firstly it is problematic that over one quarter did not have anyone to borrow from. Furthermore, the majority of borrowing was private through friends or family. Unfortunately, the survey did not ask further details on this, because it may well be the case that this was in the form of remittances from abroad. Given the well-documented patterns of exclusion and discrimination which Roma face, it is not particularly surprising that only just over 10% borrowed from banks or official institutions. A particularly alarming statistic is that only 23.8% of respondents applied for government assistance, although this varied enormously between states. Given that the figures for those with a reduced income and those needing to borrow money were similar at around 73%, it seems illogical that only 23.8% would willingly apply for government assistance. Indeed this average figure across the seven countries is slightly distorted by the high figure of almost 92% in Serbia – suggesting that the schemes there were well-communicated and Roma were eligible to apply. However, the figures of less than 4% in Bosnia or around 11% in Montenegro offers empirical evidence in support of the concerns made by Caritas that government schemes to address the economic effects of COVID-19 would not reach Roma.

6. Conclusions

The main takeaway from this research is the initial evidence of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma persons across the seven non-EU states in focus. Section 2 of this paper demonstrated the existing precarities and socio-economic exclusion already prevalent in Roma communities and the concern stressed by Roma organisations as well as international observers that the pandemic would accentuate and compound these. Thus it can be stated that the survey data offers empirical evidence to these concerns through answering the research question on how Roma communities were affected in economic terms. In particular, the claims that Roma would be subject to income loss due to their engagement in informal work and exclusion from social security systems was



found to be true in all seven states. The knock-on effect of not being able to afford everyday items or pay utility bills was also evidenced – particularly in the cases of Albania and Ukraine.

Of course, there are limitations to this research which have to be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size is relatively small and given the challenges of reaching Roma communities particularly during the pandemic, no attention was paid to making the survey representative across demographics such as age, gender, income or geographical location. Whilst age and gender were collected in the survey, the scope of this Research Paper did not allow for cross-tabulation at this stage, something which is certainly a consequent step. However, given the urgency of the issue and the ongoing nature of the pandemic, it is of primary interest to make available some of the results with the aim of highlighting some of the issues Roma have faced and are facing. Thus allowing for relevant actors to utilise such information immediately. The research can then be made stronger with an increased focus on expert interviews and desk research relating to COVID-19 enacted policies, including such data which was collected in the scope of this research project.

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Appendix I. Survey Questions of Relevance for this Paper.

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



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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION SEE

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