

VIEWPOINT

Anti-Roma Racism is Spiraling during COVID-19 Pandemic

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There is a new global comity taking shape. Across the world, from the markets of Wuhan to the streets of New York, Rome, Rio, and Delhi, people are sharing the experience of facing the COVID-19 pandemic as a health, social, and economic threat. But there is a darker side to this collective danger—a license to unleash racism against stigmatized groups. We have seen this at national borders, as countries hurry to separate “them” from “us.” But we are also seeing this within countries—as the COVID virus compounds the virus of racial hatred via politician, policy-makers, journalists, or social media. The discriminatory treatment of Europe’s Roma minority is a brutal case in point.

On April 7, 2020, the European Union (EU) Agency for Fundamental Rights, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and the Council of Europe issued statements drawing attention to the disproportionate risks that Romani people face in relation to contracting COVID-19.¹ A few days earlier, Helena Dalli, the EU Commissioner for Equality called on EU Member States to implement urgent measures for Romani communities, because COVID-19 exacerbates their exposure to structural inequality. However, despite these requests and the clear mandates of international and European human rights treaties guaranteeing equality, non-discrimination, and dignity for all people, there is a frightening escalation of populist and racist voices intent on blaming the Roma community for this pandemic.

From Slovakia to Romania and Bulgaria, states have enacted disproportionate or militarized measures targeting Romani neighborhoods or towns. Some of these measures are driven by a racist narrative that casts Roma as a collective health and safety threat. The Bulgarian government has imposed particular measures, including road blocks and police checkpoints, on several Romani neighborhoods despite no evidence of COVID-19 positive test results there.² A Bulgarian Member of the European Parliament, Angel Dzhabazki, speculated that Romani “ghettos [could] turn out to be the real nests of contagion.”³

Early on in the Romanian conversations regarding COVID-19, the prefect of Timis, one of the largest counties in Romania, suggested that the infection of a school pupil had been caused not by virus spread within the classroom but by some “other environment” as the child “belonged to a Romani family.”⁴ Non government organizations (NGOs) also drew attention to abuses at the local level, including police abuse or restrictions on Roma from entering cities, such as in Ponorâta, Romania. In North Macedonia, nine Romani musicians were singled out of a group of 200 and forced into quarantine, in spite of the Minister of Health’s announcement that the whole group was going to be quarantined.⁵ The mayor of Kosice in Slovakia

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suggested Roma could pose a particular health risk because they are a “socially unadaptable people.”⁶

Some of these discriminatory pronouncements are harsh reminders of earlier European anti-Roma racist measures. In the centuries of Roma enslavement, enslaved nomadic Romani people were forbidden from entering the city of Bucharest during outbreaks of the plague.⁷ Similarly, as the National Centre for Roma Culture noted recently, Romanian fears that Roma would contaminate the “Romanian race” with typhus led to anti-Roma measures in the 1940s.⁸ These sentiments are finding favor again today. They must not. Instead, states must act now to protect the rights, including health rights, of all people within their jurisdictions, including their Roma populations.

It is not just politicians who have been uttering racist falsehoods. Across Europe, a range of media outlets have been broadcasting similar narratives blaming Roma, especially those recently returning from other countries, for spreading COVID-19. The Romanian media is one of the worst examples. An unashamedly crude racist narrative has exploded across the country, exploiting the relatively large number of confirmed cases and deaths in Tandarei, a small Romanian town, to sow fear and hatred. The media do not appear to have inquired if, and if so why, young Roma without underlying conditions are over-represented among the dead. A national newspaper, taking another equally unfounded approach, misinformed the public and risked Roma lives by implying that Romani people are immune to the virus—a dangerous idea rooted in the racist assumption of inborn Roma genetic resistance to disease.⁹ Local and national newspapers have raged a racist, hateful, and life-threatening campaign of anti-Roma propaganda.¹⁰ As a predictable corollary to this outburst of racist hate speech, countless anti-Roma dehumanizing, degrading, and deeply offensive fake posts and “news” on Facebook remain unaddressed by that platform.

Like other racialized and marginalized communities, Roma need humane and protective measures. These must recognize their structural inequalities and be tailored to the specificities of their racialized vulnerability—access to water,

community facilities, health care assistance, direct cash payments, and income supplements to counterbalance inevitable drop offs in daily wage labor. With 80% of European Union’s Roma living below the poverty line, 30% with no running water, and 46% without an indoor toilet or shower, access to non-discriminatory and high quality care is critical for their health and well-being.¹¹ In the Western Balkans, and elsewhere, many impoverished Roma are forced through discrimination and structural injustices into the informal economy and do not have the luxury of work benefits or paid unemployment to stay at home. In Bosnia and Herzegovina alone, only 11% Roma are employed in the formal economy.¹² If Roma human rights entitlements had been fulfilled rather than willfully neglected, these structural inequalities would have decreased long before this current pandemic.

Forced evictions and forced migration in search of survival both result in high levels of homelessness for many Romani people in many EU member states, including Romania, Italy, Sweden, and Denmark. According to the Institute of Global Homelessness, across Europe “Roma populations have been shown to be more at-risk for homelessness than non-Roma groups.”¹³ They do not have the option of sheltering in place. Because of the acute risks presented by homelessness in a time of pandemic spread, both prudence and humanity require that evictions be stopped, and appropriate shelter provided. This is the lesson to be learnt from forward-looking municipalities across the globe, from Boston to Berlin, municipalities that are rightly concerned with their homeless communities and the wider public within which they live.¹⁴ A rights-based approach to the social and economic impact of COVID-19 also necessitates direct cash payments and stimulus packages for those most in need, regardless of their ethnicity.

Discriminating against Romani people, already marginalized and forced to live and work in toxic and overcrowded conditions, is a grave human rights violation that threatens the public health of all members of the community, Roma and non Roma.¹⁵ To prevent the spread of COVID-19 in all communities, government responses must be

informed by human rights principles that protect the most vulnerable, both in the short term and thereafter. An essential aspect of this approach is to seriously and vigorously tackle the structural, racial, and social inequalities that continue to expose Romani people to greater risks of poor health, in times of emergency as much as outside of them.¹⁶

COVID-19 provides the world with a chance to recognize our joint humanity and interdependence. We call on policy makers, opinion leaders, and public spokespeople to use this time of collective emergency to stamp out racist and inflammatory rhetoric, to promote human rights, justice, equality, and dignity and, as a result, protect global public health.

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