

Impact of the Pandemic on the Eastern European Roma Population in Spain

Almudena Macías León¹

Abstract

This work focuses on the analysis of the incidence of Covid-19 in the Roma population of Eastern Europe residing in Spain. This article intends to examine the multidimensional impacts that the pandemic has caused in the different areas: education, employment, housing or fundamental rights. For this purpose, a thematic review was carried out on recent studies of the consequences of the pandemic on the Roma ethnic minority in the various countries of Europe, and Spain in particular. The decline in the precarious living conditions of this population has reached alarming levels in the various European countries during the pandemic, increasing levels of food insecurity and revealing new processes of discrimination and stigmatization towards this group in all countries of Europe. In this work, the Covid-19 pandemic has been considered a new global factor that makes up a new scenario, influencing pre-existing exclusion dynamics. These always seem to affect the same population sectors, the most vulnerable, which occupy a more marginal position in the social stratification that emerges from global dynamics. Once again we witness human rights abuses against Roma in the EU context closely linked to the process of ethnicization of the pandemic.

Keywords: Roma Population; Covid-19; Stigmatization; Human Rights

Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a global pandemic that has affected any country all over the world. The health crisis has led to a sizable economic and social crisis in any country. However, the impact of this crisis has been unequal depending on the population sector. Preliminary studies show how the burden of mortality and morbidity has fallen on specific population sectors, exacerbating health, social, and economic pre-existing disparities within societies (Plat and Warwick, 2020).

In Spain, the economic impact of the pandemic crisis has had a much more negative effect on people with more precarious jobs (youth, women, and low-income jobs). The deterioration of the family incomes has led to a significant increase in situations of acute poverty or severe need. Situations of greater need have been concentrated in traditionally more vulnerable groups and, in particular, immigrants and members of single-parent families (Ocaña, Baldrés, Chuliá, Fernández, Malo, Rodríguez, and Torres, 2000).

This has also occurred in other countries. In the United Kingdom, the health and economic crisis triggered by Covid-19 has underscored the inequalities between different ethnic groups and revealed new factors that promote such inequality. The incidence of mortality is higher in different ethnic groups (Bangladeshi, Pakistani,...) than in British white people. The

¹ Dr Almudena Macías León, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Psychology, Social Work and Social Services and Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Labour Studies, University of Malaga, Spain. E-mail: almudena.macias@uma.es



prevalence of certain previous pathologies, as well as the occupations and/or work niches of certain population sectors, can help to explain these unequal effects.

During the crisis, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis in the UK have had a more significant economic risk because of the temporary suspension of activity in specific sectors. Labor segregation is one of the main explanatory factors of the unequal incidence of the pandemic among different ethnic groups in the United Kingdom (Plat and Warwick, 2020:286)

Therefore, these studies suggest that living conditions may predispose certain groups to an increased risk of contagion, disease development and death, and transmission in their communities. These living conditions are related to ethnic minority background. Social exclusion of Roma minority within Europe make it more likely to suffer a higher risk of morbidity, mortality, and the psychological, social, and economic effects of the pandemic.

In this work, we will focus on Roma migrants residing in Spain. The decline in the precarious living conditions of this population has reached alarming levels in the various European countries during the pandemic, increasing the levels of food insecurity and revealing new processes of discrimination and stigmatization towards this group in all countries of Europe. A process of ethnization of the pandemic has been encouraged, fomenting anti-Roma feelings in the general population. This process of stigmatization has done nothing but exacerbate the structural discrimination and levels of racism and xenophobia, violating the fundamental rights of the Roma population within the European context.

Theoretical background

The term 'Roma' refers explicitly to those populations that employ that label as their community-based self-ascription, irrespective of lifestyle, social status, or occupational patterns, or who otherwise self-identify explicitly as belonging to communities whose members self-ascribe as Roma (Matras and Leggio, 2018).

The history of Roma in Europe is to a great extent bound up with ideas around migration, “nomadism,” diaspora and exile. Some authors consider this mobility a strategy used to maintain their freedom and cultural vitality (Crowe, 2003; Sovotka, 2003). Other authors, however, interpret it as a sign of the constant search for better living conditions. Nevertheless, the great majority of the Roma of Europe is sedentary and only part of Roma population are migrants.

We need to differentiate between “nomadism” and “migration”. Linking Roma with Travellers implies that migration is motivated by traditional nomadism instead of external social and political factors. Although Romani migration westwards, compared with that of other groups, does indeed show distinctive features, one must not confuse “migration” with “nomadism” (Matras Y, 2000: 32). We can define Roma Migrant as “members of the Roma ethnic minority who have left their country of residence to seek a better quality of life in the medium or long term, or immediate refuge” (Matras, 1996).

Migration patterns of the Roma ethnic minority from Eastern Europe have been the result of a global order that excludes them and places them in the margins of the global social and economic order in different periods. Extreme poverty and structural discrimination has been the main elements that have shaped these migration flows.



This idea is closely linked to Bauman's analysis perspective of global mobility. This author states that although globalization affects all members of society, it does not affect everyone in the same way (Bauman, 2000). For this author, the main explanatory factor of the social stratification of today's society is the access of its members to global mobility, that is, individuals' freedom to choose where to live. Therefore these global dynamics have shaped migration flows and the high levels of precariousness and poverty of the Roma ethnic minority in the European context.

From this perspective, a new factor should be considered a global pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2. In this work Covid-19 pandemic has been considered a new global factor that makes up a new scenario, influencing pre-existing exclusion dynamics.

Coronaviruses are infectious diseases of zoonotic origin that can infect humans and cause the severe or acute respiratory syndrome. Covid-19 emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and has now infected more than 24.3 million people and killed more than 828,000 (Varga, 2020).

The different governments enforced lockdown measures to combat the spread of the virus. These measures included travel restrictions, the mandatory closure of schools, nonessential commercial activities, and industries. People were asked to stay at home and socially isolate themselves to prevent being infected. These measures can suppress the virus transmission from one person to another, slowing down the growth rate of cases and rapidly reducing case incidence. But they also have had a disproportionate impact on Roma population in all the countries of Europe, mainly because of its high levels of exclusion and poor living conditions.

Methodology

This article aims to analyze the impact of the pandemic on the Roma migrants residing in Spain from a multidimensional perspective. It is based on a reflection on the relevance of the primary sources that can be used and critical dialogue with the few works published to date.

For this purpose, a thematic review focused on the pandemic's consequences on the Roma ethnic minority was carried out. Data was collected from the highest-ranking journals and databases in English and Spanish, with the following keywords: Roma population, migrants, covid-19, Spain, discrimination, fundamental rights.

As a first step literature review of existing literature focusing on the impact of Covid-19 on Roma people from Eastern Europe residing in Spain was carried out. Because of the scarcity of research articles on this issue, I needed to support this work on reports coming from national and international organizations. Specifically, I have consulted Faga and FSG studies that focus on the impact of the pandemic and the situation of Roma residing in Spain. These studies analyze the living conditions of autochthonous and migrant Roma.

I needed to broaden the research to the European context firstly because of the scarcity of studies focused on Spain and secondly for a better understanding of the multidimensional impact of the pandemic as it seems that there are some common elements within the European context. Therefore, reports from European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), European Commission, and ERGO Network have been consulted, and some from International Ngo's as European Roma Right Center. (ERRC).

Roma Population in Europe: Contextualization

The Roma minority is the main ethnic minority in Europe. The European Commission estimates that the European Roma population could amount to 10-12 million (2% of the total population). High levels of exclusion and job precariousness are present in the Roma community in any European country (Laparra and Fresno, 2005).

Roma live in all European countries and in most cases in segregated areas or settlements without proper access to healthcare services. Most of this population lives in countries of Eastern Europe. Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Romania are the countries with the highest percentages of the Roma population, with 10 to 12% of the population. In absolute numbers, the European country with the highest number of people belonging to the Roma ethnic group is Romania (1.8 and 2.5 million, 10% of the total population). Other European countries with a significant volume of Roma populations are Spain and Bulgaria, whose Roma population is between 700,000 and 800,000 people (European Commission, 2014).

Concerning their living conditions, the majority of the Roma population (90%) lives below the poverty line according to data from the European Union's Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). Forty percent of the households do not have sufficient income to ensure the food security of all their members (UNDP, 2012:12)

Regarding housing, there are high levels of overcrowding and precarious habitability conditions. At least 45% of the households lack one of the following facilities: toilet, kitchen, shower, and/or electricity (UNDP, 2012). Thirty percent do not have access to running water, 80% live in overcrowded homes and neighborhoods, and 40% have no sanitary facilities (European Commission, 2020).

These housing conditions are especially present in the slum settlements of this population. In Eastern European countries, the living conditions of these settlements are particularly striking. Fakulteta, Sofia's Roma neighborhood, is considered the largest ghetto in Europe. Thirty thousand people live there, almost all overcrowded, without essential services, most of them in shacks (Topper, 2012).

They have high levels of illiteracy. At least 10% of school-age children do not attend school and less than 10% have completed Secondary Education. There was 67% premature school dropout before the pandemic (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2020).

High levels of unemployment are observed, and most jobs are informal and belonging to the submerged economy. In certain areas of countries such as Hungary, Slovakia, or Romania, where there is a high concentration of Roma population, their unemployment rates reach 90% of the population, and these people do not carry out other activities that contribute to their livelihood (UNDP, 2012).

The average life expectancy of the Roma population is about ten years less than that of the rest of the population, to which must be added higher rates of morbidity, malformations, disabilities, etc. A high percentage (33%) have health problems that condition their daily activities. Social exclusion and spatial segregation make access to primary care difficult and 20% have no health coverage (UNDP, 2012:12).



Finally, high levels of discrimination against this minority are also observed in all European countries (Romani CRISS, 2003). Since the expansion of the European Union (EU) in 2004, violent acts and hate crimes have decreased significantly in eastern European countries. But structural discrimination is still present, as well as certain discriminatory practices and stigmatization processes that have intensified during the pandemic (ERGO Network, 2020; Marques Gonzalves, 2020).

Roma population of Eastern Europe in Spain

The international migrations of the Roma population from Eastern Europe during the 1990s were not a new phenomenon. Roma migrations from eastern Europe continued since World War II. But the economic and political chaos that occurred after 1989 was unique, occurring in societies supposedly in the process of democratization. These factors brought about new migration patterns. From 1989-1990 onwards, migration trends of Eastern European Roma to Western European countries intensified. The top country of origin of these international migrations has been Romania. Other important sending countries have been the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia.

Countries of destination have been Germany, Italy, France, and Austria. But there have been significant movements between these countries and other EU countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, and Spain (Matras Y, 2000).

International migrations of the Roma ethnic minority from Eastern Europe to Spain in the 1990s took place within this context. Migratory flow of the Romanian Roma to Spain intensified considerably in the early 1990s. The fall of the communist regime in 1989, as well as the EU expansion process in eastern Europe, has shaped this migration flow (Sovotka, 2003:82). Extreme poverty and structural discrimination had an intense impact on the Roma population of eastern Europe during this period and were the main reasons for emigrating. There were also major racist outbreaks in the communities of origin. Poverty, unemployment, and discrimination in home communities initially molded this migration flow (Macías, 2005:94).

As in other European countries, many of the Roma migrants from Romania to Spain applied for asylum during this period. Romania was the main country of origin for asylum-seekers in Spain in the period 1994-1997. In 1997, 30% of all applications filed with the Asylum and Refugee Office (Oficina de Asilo y Refugio, OAR) were from Romania. Although there are no official data on the applicants' ethnicity, the majority (90%) of these applicants belonged to the Roma ethnic minority (Macías, 2005:92).

Considering that most asylum-seekers belonged to the Roma ethnic minority, it is likely that this migration flow was mainly made up of the Roma minority in its early days. Subsequently, the ethnic composition of the migration flow changed as the volume of the total Romanian population in Spain increased.

Based on data from the Municipal Population Census of the National Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE) the volume of foreigners from Romania began to increase considerably in 2001. That year, the registered Romanian foreigners accounted for 2.3% of the total number of foreigners. In 2005, Romanian nationals were the fastest-growing collective interannually, with more than 100,000 new people enrolled in the census. In January 2005, the registered foreign population from Romania amounted to 317,366, or 8.51% of all

registered foreigners (3.7 million). In 2007, the Romanians (and Bulgarians) became Community citizens. The Romanian and the Bulgarian population in Spain increased more than the foreigners from other regions in that year, by almost 23% as a whole. In 2008, the Romanian nationals exceeded 700.00 people among foreigners registered in our country. Subsequent increases were smaller, but Romania continued to be one of the main countries of origin of the registered foreigners. Romania is currently the second country of origin for foreigners registered in Spain (665,598 people) making up 12.3% of the total number of registered foreigners and the largest nationality in the EU-28 (INE, 2020).

It should be noted that data on registered foreigners, as well as data from other official sources, are significantly limited for the study of the Roma ethnic minority. Its characteristics and the possible administrative obstacles that hinder the registration of this population make its representativeness in this census lower than the real one. The main barrier that prevents the registration in Municipal Population Census in Spain is the lack of a proper address. The mobility pattern also obstacles this process. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the number of people belonging to the Roma ethnic minority from eastern Europe in any given country and region. However, these data allow making some estimates of the volume of this population.

Firstly, the Roma ethnic minority constitutes only part of the Romanian immigration in Spain and, as mentioned, it is underrepresented in these official data. It is estimated that at least 10% of Romania's total immigrant population belongs to the Roma ethnic minority, and this figure could reach 90,000-100,000 people (Macías, 2005).

Laparra and Perez set a similar figure. For these authors Roma population from Eastern Europe constitute 10% of autoctonous Roma in Spain. Roma population in Spain could reach 970,000 people, therefore Roma from Eastern Europe could set around 97000 people (Laparra and Pérez, 2008).

Considering these estimates, Spain could constitute the main destination country of the Eastern European Roma, tripling the volume of immigrant eastern Roma population in France (*Gitanos rumanos, europeos de segunda en el limbo legal*, 2010, 12 de Septiembre de 2010).

Roma are distributed throughout the national territory, residing particularly in large cities: Madrid, Barcelona, Seville, Granada, Valencia, Zaragoza and Murcia. They are highly concentrated in the Community of Madrid, the Valencian Community, Catalonia, and Andalusia.

Several settlements have been located in Spain. La Cañada Real is the largest illegal metropolitan settlement in Europe, an area where more than 7,500 people live. A high percentage live in slum conditions, without resources, and with a difficult access to social services. A significant percentage of people residing in this settlement belong to the Roma ethnic minority from eastern Europe (ACCEM and FSG, 2010). These settlements have also been located in other autonomous communities, such as Catalonia and Andalusia, among others.

This is how the United Nations Special Rapporteur, described the situation of the Roma ethnic minority in Spain in early 2020:



“Spanish Roma, like Roma elsewhere in Europe, have suffered the pandemic from an exceptionally disadvantaged position... More than 80% of the Roma population faces poverty or social exclusion, and 46% are extremely poor, with a monthly income of less than 310 euros. Child poverty rate is 89% and unemployment is 52% (...) The government officials I met agreed that the situation for many Roma people is serious, but I was struck by the lack of urgency and resignation with which they accept that entire portions of the population have been relegated to a third-class status without access to their rights. After years of plans and benchmarks that have left the Roma poverty indicators at deplorable levels, there is a real need for an emergency response” (Alston, 2020).

We will now delve deeper into the situation of this ethnic minority concerning employment, housing, and health before the pandemic.

Living conditions before the pandemic

Eastern Roma population in Spain usually worked in the informal economy sector, engaging in marginal activities such as begging, selling newspapers (La Farola, La Calle,...), or collecting scrap metal. Other more standardized sectors were construction (work force), agriculture (harvesting campaigns), and domestic service (domestic tasks and caring for people). These were usually odd jobs with low wages. In Andalusia, they may work in the fairground rides and stalls but these were temporary jobs, without a stable income that allows them to improve their living conditions (Roma from eastern Europe: Particularly vulnerable to Covid, 2020, 18 de Abril de 2020).

In Spain, more than 9,000 Roma families still lived in slums without the minimum conditions of habitability (about 40,000 people); of these 9,000 homes, 2,273 were shacks in settlements (about 11,000 people) (FSG, 2015).

Unlike the shacks that Spanish Roma built in settlements, eastern Roma used easy-to-dismantle tents for their continuous changes of residence. The two (Autoctonous and Eastern Roma) tend to have differentiated settlements, albeit often close to each other.

“El Gallinero” has been one of the settlements that has had the greatest media impact. It began in 2001 and was evicted by the City Council of Madrid in September 2018. About 400 people, half of them underage, lived there. NGOs and social groups developed intervention projects during this period (Gutierrez, 2015).

High levels of overcrowding are observed when it is difficult to access more normalized housing. Sixty percent of Roma households are made up of several family nuclei.

In the field of health, the eastern Roma population had a lower life expectancy and a higher prevalence of physical and mental illness, and they also presented more health-threatening behaviors. Among the diseases with the highest incidence were tuberculosis, hepatitis, or measles. Other diseases with a higher prevalence in this population were Chronic Lung Disease (CLD), diabetes, and obesity.

This group also had more difficulty to access health resources, primary care, and prevention services (vaccines) in our country. The documental situation and, sometimes, the mobility of the population hindered their access.

This precariousness in the different areas of housing, health, and employment has predisposed this population to suffer a greater psychosocial and economic impact of the pandemic, as we will see below.

Impact of the pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has affected everyone's daily lives, although some sections of the population, living in conditions of marginalization and suffering high levels of social exclusion and poverty, face particular challenges. The pandemic has revealed that families' housing conditions, employment situation and/or income level are key factors in the pandemic's consequences for the different sectors of the population. The Roma population has suffered a disproportionate impact of the pandemic in all the countries of Europe, mainly because of its high levels of exclusion and poor living conditions. Anti-Roma discrimination and practices have also increased the risk for this group (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2020).

On March 14, 2020, the Spanish Government established the Alarm State². Although, initially, this state of alarm does not violate the Fundamental Rights of the population, the new restrictive measures affect freedom of movement and assembly, the perimeter closure of some municipalities, and the suspension of some economic activities. The negative effects of these measures have disproportionately affected socially excluded persons in general, and the eastern Roma population in particular.

As mentioned, the majority of the eastern Roma population engaged in temporary and informal activities: scrap collection, street selling, agricultural campaigns... These families frequently lived "from day to day" and subsisted on precarious, often irregular activities, with no protection.

The lockdown has substantially limited all these activities and had an immediate effect on many of these families' ability to earn a living. The informal status of these jobs has made it difficult for these people to claim any aid or benefit from the formal labor market. Formal registration of residence, especially in settlements, has limited access to social services, further worsening their situation.

The Roma Secretariat Foundation (FSG)'s March 2020 study found that approximately 47,000 people lacked food and basic resources for survival and, at that date, had received no state assistance or resource (Fundaciòn Seretariado Gitano, 2020). But, as some NGOs pointed out, the most pressing thing was the lack of food and necessities such as medicines and hygiene products.

Therefore, the pandemic has prevented many of these households from meeting their basic needs. Despite government-enabled resources to alleviate the social emergency that many people are experiencing, and the recommendations to direct them to the most vulnerable families, for various reasons, aid was not arriving fast enough (FSG, 2020). Consequently, the families lacked food and the basic necessities.

Faced with this situation, some NGOs and the Evangelical Church, as well as local entities, mobilized resources in different parts of Spain to meet these basic needs. In Alicante, the

² Royal Decree 463/2020 declaring the state of alarm for the management of the health crisis situation caused by COVID-19), 14 March 2020.



NGO FAGA³, together with local institutions, mobilized resources to attend to 300 families that lacked financial means, food... Other NGOs and social entities have also provided school and hygiene materials and food. Using seven mobile units, the Red Cross delivered school, hygiene and food supplies to 400 families in the Cañada Real.

The situation in slum settlements, with little health protection and an insufficient presence of social services and public resources, has been particularly worrisome. The lack of drinking water and the overcrowded living conditions have placed the family nuclei that make up these settlements at risk. Poverty levels and lack of facilities prevent them from performing self-care and protection tasks. This has been even more serious in segregated settlements and villages, where a significant percentage of Roma live. Slum conditions, lack of facilities, and overcrowding have made it challenging to adopt prevention measures such as hand-washing or social distance.

Concerning health, the Roma ethnic minority is at risk because of the high incidence of previous pathologies and the living conditions described above. Unsanitary conditions that may be present in their environment has been also a risk factor.

However, Covid-19 does not appear to have had a significant impact on this population. According to the FSG study, only 1.5% of the people had become ill. One wonders why Covid has not spread in these settlements. Perhaps the conditions of isolation and spatial segregation can explain this.

In the field of health, the consequences of Covid-19 on the mental and emotional health of these people should also be considered. The anxiety levels of family nucleus members have increased in the face of their inability to meet the basic needs of the household members, as well as the high levels of uncertainty. This has materialized in migration projects, although it would be appropriate to delve deeper into these issues. To our knowledge, there are no systematic studies on the incidence of the disease in the Roma population's migration projects from eastern Europe.

In relation to education, the lockdown and adoption of online teaching by schools has increased the digital gap and school failure of children belonging to the Roma ethnic minority. Nearly one-third of the Roma children (29%) cannot do the homework, mostly because they lack the adequate equipment (58.8%), and/or school supplies (48.7%). Besides, even if they have the means, almost half (49%) do not advance because they do not understand the subjects and have no support to solve this issue (FSG, 2020:8).

The lack of equipment and technological resources (internet, computers,...) in the settlements is even more important and makes it very difficult for these children to follow the classes. Other difficulties for the supervision of online teaching are the high levels of illiteracy of the Roma population and their lack of knowledge of the Spanish language. There have also been significant problems to supervise telematic classes (Arza, Gil-González, Catala-Oltra, Frances, González, Rodríguez and La Parra, 2020). In the settlements of marginalized communities, the lack of connectivity, facilities, and digital knowledge means that many of the children had no access to education.

³ Autonomous Federation of Gypsy Associations of the Valencian Community.

The pandemic seems to have had some impact on the migration flows of the eastern Roma ethnic minority. These have been shaped throughout history by different political, social, economic, and cultural factors. The pandemic and its socio-economic effects can be considered the new factor that will condition these migration projects and the flows that emerge from them.

The main reason to come to Spain has been to improve their living conditions and those of their families at origin and destination. The current health emergency has truncated many of these migration projects because of the impossibility of further developing the various economic activities.

It is estimated that, since mid-March, 500,000 million people have returned to Romania from abroad because they feared the disease or were out of work (Roma from eastern Europe: Particularly vulnerable to Covid, 2020, 18 de Abril). Although there are no data on this, part of this return involves the Roma ethnic minority.

The return of thousands of migrants to their countries appears to be the source of some outbreaks of contagion in countries like Romania and Slovakia. The press and other media amplified some incidents in these Roma communities to turn these issues into a larger problem. These discourses promoted racist and xenophobic actions in these countries of origin, as we will see later.

The Romanian authorities isolated the town of Txandarei on April 4, 2020, after detecting exceptionally high levels of contagion there. Something similar occurred in Slovakia, where the Government quarantined three Roma-majority locations in the Kosice region (east) after dozens of infections were detected (Korunovska and Jovanovic, 2020).

The isolation of these communities and the restrictions of freedom of movement had the same effect on the communities of origin that they had in Spain, precluding mobility and the development of economic activities in the informal sector of the economy. This had an immediate negative impact on the families, making it impossible for them to satisfy basic needs.

Community health was further threatened by the lack of access to safe water and sanitation, shortage of hygiene products, and the cuts in and closing of day-care centers and support services. Family doctors adopted telematic assistance, changing their usual consultations to online and telephone consultations. This made it difficult for Roma to access health care, especially for those who lack the necessary digital skills or online connectivity.

Anti-Roma and Discrimination

Pandemics share one historical constant: the attribution of the origin of the lethality to specific population groups. During the current pandemic situation, racist and xenophobic discourses and attitudes towards the Roma ethnic minority have been exacerbated in all European countries. We can therefore say that, in Europe, a process of ethnization of the current pandemic has been encouraged, fomenting anti-Roma feelings in the general population. At these times, so prone to collective hysteria, the Roma community is a perfect candidate for channeling fears toward “the others”, “those who are different”.

This wave of racist and xenophobic discourse has had particular impact on migrants who have returned to their home country. In Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia, news of the



mass return of migrants was used to stoke fears about the spread of Covid (European Commission, 2020:26). FRA Report reveals a number of incidents in which Roma were blamed for bringing the corona virus to Slovakia, and reports that the Bulgarian authorities have established controls at the access to Roma-inhabited neighborhoods and municipalities (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2020).

In Bulgaria, discriminatory restrictions, police abuse, and racist discourse have been denounced. Although the authorities rushed to block and quarantine Roma neighborhoods, they did not guarantee that the residents had full access to safe water and sanitation, medical care, medical treatment, or adequate supplies of food and medicine. Due to severe movement restrictions that prevented Roma from leaving blocked settlements to seek work, the average incomes in Roma neighborhoods sank.

According to the United Nations Rapporteur, , *“these measures have been fully supported within the legal framework developed to implement the state of Social Emergency, becoming a legitimate practice that hinders the protection of basic human rights”* (ERRC, 2020:61).

In Romania, there has also been an important process of ethnization of the pandemic, exacerbating hostility towards Roma. Isolated incidents in certain settlements became a matter of social emergency and public health, with police force deploying in certain neighborhoods and areas. When the Minister of Home Affairs announced the deployment of 1500 police and gendarmes, he stated that *“the additional resource will be directed to the areas at highest risk of criminality, communities with people who have recently returned [from abroad] and are known for their criminal activities”* (ERRC, 2020: 35).

ERRC also has reported a series of violent attacks on Roma communities, including the disproportionate use of force, the use of tear gas against women and children, the inhuman and degrading treatment of detainees, and police attempts to prevent NGOs from providing humanitarian aid. It describes human rights violations that have occurred in all the countries of Europe. The strict social emergency measures that have been carried out in eastern European countries have led to a violation of fundamental rights.

“The danger of racism is much greater today than two months ago” according to Romanian sociologist Gelu Duminica (Roma people of Eastern Europe especially vulnerable to COVID-19, 2020, April 18th), who denounced the hatching of racist demonstrations on social networks and media since Txandarei was isolated.

In Spain, social and racist tensions towards the Roma ethnic minority have also occurred to some extent. According to the FSG study *“almost 4 out of 10 feel discriminated against or blamed since Covid”* (FSG, 2020).

This may be related, among others, to the image that has been disseminated in the media about the Roma ethnic minority as individuals who are unwilling to comply with social norms and, consequently, with the confinement rules dictated by the State of Alarm. Roma have traditionally been characterized as *“individuals disintegrated from the Spanish society, unjustly presented as unwilling to adhere to government policies and the mandatory confinement imposed to combat the pandemic”* (Gay y Blasco and Rodriguez , 2020).

Therefore, the vulnerability and poverty levels of Roma communities, resulting from structural racism, has been exacerbated by the accusing discourse about Roma's expansion of the virus. Anti-Roma has turned into in violence, intimidation, and political and institutional

discourses that have legitimized discriminatory practices. These social reactions and effects have occurred over the course of history, as the Roma ethnic minority has been blamed for the situation and the negative effects of any social, political, and/or health crisis or upheaval. This discriminatory treatment infringes the fundamental and political rights of European citizens.

Discussion

Migration patterns of the Roma ethnic minority from Eastern Europe have been the result of a global order that excludes them and places them in the margins of the global social and economic order. International migrations of the Roma ethnic minority from Eastern Europe to Spain in the 1990s and later were also conditioned by a combination of socio-economic and political factors intrinsic to the process of globalization and EU's adhesion (Crowe, 2003).

Concerning the socio-economic aspects, poverty and unemployment in the communities of origin were the main factors of expulsion. These countries of origin present a significant structural discrimination, as well as an institutional inability to ensure the fundamental rights of the Roma ethnic minority. In the main areas classified as social exclusion areas in Europe, the majority belong to the Roma ethnic minority (Torralba, 2019). Despite the strategies and political measures that have been implemented within the European context for the inclusion of this ethnic minority, those have not had a significant effect on the situation of the Roma population in Europe.

Related to political factors, the expulsion of the Roma ethnic minority has been a constant in the history of this population. The different flow management policies implemented in the different EU countries have been redirecting this flow from one European country to another (Macías, 2005).

In this context of precariousness and discrimination should be considered this new global pandemic factor and the various elements emerging. The pandemic and the contingency measures developed by different governments have had a disproportionate effect on the living conditions of the Roma ethnic minority in Europe increasing pre-existing exclusion-promoting dynamics and triggering a process of stigmatization of the European Roma ethnic minority (ERGO Network, 2020). A process of ethnization of the pandemic has been encouraged, fomenting anti-Roma feelings in the general population. Mobility restrictions emerging from the health emergency, which have affected the entire population, have had a disproportionate effect on the Roma ethnic minority, leading to the violation of the fundamental rights of the Roma ethnic minority in the EU context.

These social reactions and effects have occurred over the course of history, as the Roma ethnic minority has been blamed for the situation and the negative effects of any social, political, and/or health crisis or upheaval. This process of stigmatization could have some common elements with the social and political upheavals that have occurred in Romania's transition process in the 1990s. The Roma ethnic minority was blamed for all the country's social and political tensions, and xenophobic and racist outbreaks emerged at that time in the countries of eastern Europe.

Pandemics have always shared one constant throughout history; the attribution of the origin of the lethality to specific population groups. It is a process of stigmatization that promotes social hatred toward people considered propitious victims. This process of stigmatization has



done nothing but exacerbate the structural discrimination and levels of racism and xenophobia, violating the fundamental rights of the Roma population in all the countries of Europe.

Global factors always seem to affect disproportionately the same population sectors, the most vulnerable, which occupy a more marginal position in the social stratification that emerges from global dynamics (Bauman, 2000). The disproportionate effects and discriminatory treatment infringes on European citizens' fundamental and political rights. Once again, we witness human rights abuses against Roma in the EU context, closely linked to the process of ethnicization of the pandemic.

References

- ACCEM y FSG. (2010). Informe-Diagnóstico sobre la Cañada Real Galiana. Retrieved from: <https://www.gitanos.org/upload/78/59/INFORMEDIAGNOSTICO2010.pdf>
- Alston, P. (7 de February de 2020). United Nations Human Rights. Office for the High Commissioner. Retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25524&LangID=E>
- Arza Porras, J., Gil-González, D., Català-Oltra, L. et al. (2020). COVID-19 Crisis: Impact on households of the Roma community. *International Journal of Roma Studies*, 2(2), 28-51. doi: 10.17583/ijrs.2020.6242
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. Columbia University Press.
- Crowe, D. (2003). The International and Historical Dimensions of Romani Migration in Central and Eastern Europe. *Nationalities Papers*, 81-94. doi:10.1080/0090599032000058839
- ERGO Network. (2020). The effects of Covid-19 on Roma communities in EU Member. Retrieved from: https://ergonetwerk.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ERGO-input_impact-section-in-specific-MS.pdf
- ERRC. (2020). Roma Rights in the Time of Covid. Retrieved from: <http://www.errc.org/reports--submissions/roma-rights-in-the-time-of-covid>
- European Commission. (2014). Roma Integration – 2014 Commission Assessment: Brussels. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_14_249
- European Commission. (2020). Overview of the impact of the coronavirus measures on marginalised roma communities in the EU. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/overview_of_covid19_and_roma_-_impact_-_measures_-_priorities_for_funding_-_23_04_2020.docx.pdf
- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). (2020). Coronavirus pandemic in the UE- Impact on Roma and Travellers. Doi:10.2811/06170
- FSG. (2015). Estudio-Mapa sobre Vivienda y Población Gitana. Retrieved from: https://www.gitanos.org/centro_documentacion/publicaciones/fichas/117552.html.es
- FSG. (2020). Impacto de la crisis del Covid-19 sobre la población gitana. Retrieved from: https://www.gitanos.org/centro_documentacion/publicaciones/fichas/131119.html.es
- Fundación Seretariado Gitano. (24 de Marzo de 2020). Ante la emergencia social que están viviendo muchas familias gitanas, es urgente que las ayudas comprometidas por el Gobierno ante la crisis del Covid-19 lleguen ya a las personas y barrios más vulnerables. Retrieved from <https://www.gitanos.org/actualidad/archivo/130992.html.es>
- Gay y Blasco, P., & Rodriguez, M. (2020). Covid-19 and its impacto on the Roma community: The case of Spain. *Somatosphere*. Retrieved from: <http://somatosphere.net/forumpost/covid-19-roma-community-spain/>
- Gitanos rumanos, europeos de segunda en el limbo legal. (12 de Septiembre de 2010). *Diario de Jaén*. Retrieved from: <https://www.diariojaen.es/historico/gitanos-rumanos-europeos-de-segunda-en-el-limbo-legal-IBDJ42219>
- Gutierrez, D. (2015). Los menores gitanos rumanos de “El Gallinero”. *Etapas de desarrollo en un contexto de riesgo*. *Revista electrónica de Investigación y Docencia.*, 27-44. doi: 10.17561/reid
- INE. (2020). Avance del Padrón Continuo. 1 de Enero de 2020.

- Korunovska, N., & Jovanovic, Z. (2020). Roma in the Covid-19 Crisis: An Early Warning from Six EU Member States. Open Society Foundation. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Roma%20in%20the%20COVID-19%20crisis%20%20An%20early%20warning%20from%20six%20EU%20Member%20States.pdf>
- La prensa latina media. (18 de Abril de 2020). Roma people of Eastern Europe especially vulnerable to COVID-19. La Prensa Latina Media. Retrieved from: <https://www.laprensalatina.com/roma-people-of-eastern-europe-especially-vulnerable-to-covid-19/>
- Laparra, M., & Fresno, M. (2005). La Europa de los Gitanos. Documentación Social.
- Laparra, M., & Pérez, B. (2008). La Exclusión Social en España: Un espacio diverso y disperso en intensa transformación. En F. Foessa, VI Informe Foessa sobre Exclusión y desarrollo social en España 2008. Madrid.
- Macías, A. (2005). La población romaní en el flujo migratorio del Este hacia Europa occidental: el caso de Rumanía. (Cáritas, Ed.) Documentación Social, 137, 79-88.
- Marques Gonzalves, G. (2020). Vivenciando el racismo cotidiano: Relatos de Antigitanismo en España. *International Journal of Roma Studies*(2), 66-86. doi: 10.17583/ijrs.2020.6072
- Matras, Y. (1996). *Problems arising with the international mobility of the Roma (Gypsies) in Europe*. (Report submitted to the Council of Europe's Committee on Migration (CDMG)). No publisher name.
- Matras, Y. (2000). Romani migrations in the post-communist era: their historical and political. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32-50.
- Matras, Y., & Leggio, D. (2018). *Open Borders, Unlocked Culture. Romanian Roma Migrants in Western Europe*. Routledge.
- Ocaña, C., Baldrés, E., Chuliá, E., Fernández, M., Malo, M., Rodríguez, J., & Torres, R. (2000). Impacto social de la pandemia en España. Una evaluación premilinar. FUNCAS.
- Platt, L. y Warwick, R. (2020). Are some ethnic groups more vulnerable to COVID-19 than others? London: The Institute for Fiscal Studies. Retrieved from: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/wpcontent/uploads/2020/04/Are-some-ethnic-groups-more-vulnerable-to-COVID-19-than-others-IFS-Briefing-Note.pdf>
- Roma from eastern Europe: Particularly vulnerable to Covid. (18 de April de 2020). La Vanguardia.
- Romani CRISS. (2003). Respecting Human Rights in Romania: Roma citizens of the state of law. Annual Report. Bucharest.
- Shamir, R. (2005). "Without Borders? Notes on Globalization as a Mobility Regime. *Sociological Theory*. doi:10.1111/j.0735-2751.2005.00250.x
- Sovotka, E. (2003). Romani Migration in the 1990's: Perspectives on Dynamic, Interpretation and Policy. *Romani Studies*, 79-121. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3828/rs.2003.4>
- Topper, I. (12 de Mayo de 2012). El gueto gitano. *Mar del Sur*. Retrieved from: <https://msur.es/2012/05/05/bulgaria-gueto-gitano/>
- Torralba, C. (31 de Agosto de 2019). Guetos gitanos sin salida. *El País*, pág. Online. Retrieved from: https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/08/30/actualidad/1567181412_094524.html
- UNDP. (2012). The situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States. Survey results at a glance. Retrieved from: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2012/situation-roma-11-eu-member-states-survey-results#~:text=2012,The%20situation%20of%20Roma%20in%2011%20EU%20Member,Survey%20results%20at%20a%20glance&text=Roma%20%2D%20Europe%27s%20largest%20minority%20of,as%20the%20Racial%20Equality%20Directive.>
- Varga, B.M. (2020). Access to healthcare services for the Roma and undocumented migrants in the EU in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Roma Studies*, 2(2), 4-27. doi: 10.17583/ijrs.2020.5952

