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SOCIAL ASPECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INFORMAL ROMA SETTLEMENTS: SPECIFIC CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Pandemic of Covid-19 of 2020 has qualitatively changed lives of many individuals. Yet, for those who are marginalized, such as members of the Roma community, change was rather quantitative, because level of their already existing everyday hardships multiplied. Impact of virus epidemic on one specific segment of population has ran over boundaries of epidemiological domain and enveloped all aspects of their social life. Health isn't the only concern of those struck by pandemic, which affected their economic status and employment chances; education of their children and overall social status. Article explores specific problems faced by Roma community in Serbia, and different answers and solutions provided by various stakeholders (government, international organizations, NGOs and local activists). Presented data was gathered from media reports and interviews with experts and actors in the field who have planed, organized and participated in these activities in different municipalities in Serbia.

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1. On social and physical distance

In Serbia, as well as in rest of the world, expression “social distance” (Serbian “*socijalna distanca*”) is still uncritically used in both everyday speech and expert’s narratives. True reason for this preference can only be guessed, but conformism in language usage is a part of explanation. It comes to no surprise that in situations of great peril and danger, such as Covid-19 pandemic, people aren’t paying attention to lexical and semantic details. Still, there is one more latent fact worth of noting here. Misuse of term “social distance” instead of more appropriate expression “physical distance” implies that majority of people were, and still are, unaware of social reality behind this concept.

Keeping physical distance in context of hygienic measures against airborne microbes is profoundly simple spatial arrangement between individuals who are at least 1.5 to 3 meters apart. On the other hand, social distance is primarily a symbolical phenomenon with many different consequences. As classical sociologist Georg Simmel stated in his short, but very influential essay *The Stranger* (Jovanović Ajzenhamer, 2019: 677-680): “The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly

formulated by saying that in the relationship to him, distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near” (Simmel:1950: 402).

Elaborating this short, yet heuristically rich quotation, Simmel adds that symbolic distance is connected with with spatial dimension, because different symbolic evaluations can only occur in physical proximity. Space itself is socially mediated concept, which is even more evident in contemporary era. Internet and extensive air travel can make someone who is spatially very far away to appear close. On the other hand, people sharing same streets may look as individuals with whom none symbolic ties are shared. In that sense, strangeness isn’t absence of psychical contact, but one special case of it. In order to have someone stigmatized as stranger, those who are stigmatizing him must be aware of his presence. Vice-versa, in order for stigma to have an effect on any individual, it must be applied by people with whom one is sharing social ties (Elias, Scotson: 1994; Kubiček, 2018a).

Considering this from the micro social perspective of epidemiology, symbolic (social) distance can cause physical distance. People who are considered as strangers are distrusted, and barely approached in everyday life. Since social ties serve as pathways for

sharing all kinds of material and non-material contents – including viruses – lack of these bonds means lack of risk for disease containment. Mutual closeness and recognition are normally needed to share infection with someone, along the pleasant time which is spent together (Kubiček, 2020).

In this sense, “Roma” in this article will not include all individuals who share Roma national identity. Roma people living in formal settlements who are integrated in wider society aren’t affected in any way which is specific to them, and not to non-Roma. Simply put, focus of this article is set upon social situation, not an ethnic self-identification¹.

As in any topic concerning Roma people living in informal settlement, precise statistical data about number of infected or deceased individuals is lacking (in fact, keeping any kind of this statistical data concerning this topic would be illegal, and would present a form of discrimination). That is the reason why quantification concerning impact of Covid-19 pandemic on Roma population are highly speculative (Gecková Madarasová et al, 2014: 58). Still, qualitative data and information collected from interviews and field experiences of experts are realistic. Covid-19 was definitively present in informal settlements, and sadly, there were cases of people dying from it. Only in city of Niš it is estimated that around 10 people have deceased from this disease. It is especially sad that there were cases of brave and selfish individuals who contacted virus during their humanitarian efforts. One of them, who was dedicated and diligent Roma activist, even passed away, which is both a tremendous loss and warning about danger which Covid-19 presents. Still, what forms the base of vulnerability to virus of marginalized groups? How it is generated, and how it effects both medical and social status of informal Roma settlements inhabitants?

2. Specific problems in Roma settlements

At the first glance someone may think that Roma population living in informal settlements has one big demographic advantage against Covid-19 – their average age, since their population is one of the youngest among all ethnic communities (according to 2011. Census in Serbia, average for Roma is 28.31 years²). Higher than average birthrate isn’t the only cause of this demographic outcome, because sadly, life expectancy among Roma

¹ It is possible that some inhabitants of informal settlements actually don’t identify themselves as “the Roma”, but rather as members of ethnic majority (Serbs, Romanians, Albanians...), or some other ethnic minority group (Ashkali, Egyptians, Muslims...) (Kubiček, 2018a).

² Veroispovest, maternji jezik i nacionalna pripadnost Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova 2011. godine u Republici Srbiji Knjiga 4, RZS.

is drastically lower than in other segments of population (including both ethnic majority and other minorities). Studies show that it is as low as 62.2 years, which is 12.4 years less than the average (Raković, 2015: 18). Also, most of inhabitants of Roma settlements have overall health which is lower than usual. Harsh living conditions, which include working in the open, contact with dangerous materials and substances, insufficient diet, lack of sanitation, heating, exposure to smoke, moisture, pests and other risks usually affects one's medical status severely – especially concerning respiratory, cardiovascular and malignant diseases, as well as defensive capabilities of the immune system. All these factors are cumulatively contributing to emergence and presence of illnesses which aren't common in general population, such as tuberculosis, HIV, parasites and severe allergies (Molnár et. al, 2012: 11; Sepkowitz, 2006). Among different conditions present in the settlements, most are identified as being connected with developing of severe or fatal Covid-19 outcomes: coronary artery disease, obesity, hyperlipidaemia, and diabetes mellitus compared with the majority population, and experience more frequent occurrence of health problems/complaints (Gecková Madarasová et. al, 2014: 58). Most striking data indicates that people living in Roma settlements in Serbia are 30% more likely to die from cardiac failure, and four times (300%) more likely to have fatal outcome of chronic lung diseases (Raković, 2015: 18).

Also, some of the Roma settlement's inhabitants don't have medical assurance, and even those who have it, usually face different obstacles in realization of this right. Some settlements are located far away from medicinal facilities and aren't easily accessible, especially during the pandemic. Other forms of discrimination, past and present, have caused distrust towards health institutions among people who have limited insights and information about nature of this system.

Population in Roma settlements is highly mobile and follows recurrent migratory patterns directed to more developed European countries (Germany, Austria, Sweden, Belgium, France...). Income from family members living abroad is sometimes substantial for many settlement's inhabitants. Sudden return of Roma who couldn't find employment anymore in their destination countries had at least two consequences. First, it reduced family budget, but also potentially exposed neighbors to virus contamination, and people who returned in Serbia had to be in quarantine. Furthermore, fear from spreading disease has crossed boundaries of marginalized settlements and fortified already existing stereotypes, making scapegoats out of their inhabitants and blaming them for spreading of Covid-19. There were no reported cases of these or similar racist phenomena in Serbia, neither by

state institutions, self organized groups or in media, in the way it was happening Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine³.

3. Hygiene and health-related issues

In the context of Covid-19 pandemic, diverse hygienic measures are both advised and enforced by the authorities. Some of these practices were considered common before pandemic (washing of hands and clothes), while some are novel for most individuals, wherever they live (wearing masks and gloves, use of different means of disinfection). Yet, for Roma living in the settlements fundamental human right to healthy environment (Batrićević, 2018: 316-317) is systematically denied.

First problem which appears is that even getting information about advised measures posed problem for many families, because they lack access to nationwide media (newspapers and TV), and in some cases because of lack of advanced language competencies. In these situations it wasn't uncommon for inhabitants to misunderstand scarce information, which made them distrust governmental institutions all the more. Even better off Roma respondents describe their visits to medicinal facilities as “embarrassing” and “confusing” (Belak, 2018; Belak, 2019).

It is a notorious fact that Roma settlements lack running water and stable/safe access to electricity. Most informants from the field have stressed out this basic fact, because without these two preconditions, most of advised hygienic measures are impossible to be implemented. One can't wash his hands with water which is neither clean, nor warm, neither he can wash his clothes regularly without a laundry machine. Lack of sanitation is another problem, since most household aren't connected to sewage system either. In the most extreme cases, some settlements doesn't even have access to natural flowing watercourses (rivers and streams), and all waste water is deposited in still ponds. Also, many more problems are present in the field, which were negatively affecting life of Roma settlements inhabitants before Covid-19 pandemic. For example, garbage disposal, which is barely functioning in the ordinary situations, was almost impossible in some settlements, because people were unable to dispose waste during the lock downs. One should also be aware that most Roma settlements are located far away from grocery

³ https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ERGO-input_impact-section-in-specific-MS.pdf, accessed on 5.9.2020.

stores, pharmacies, markets and other locations which grew even more important during the pandemic.

In the situation in which even better off citizens were struggling to find face masks, liquids for disinfection and gloves, it comes as no surprise that inhabitants of Roma settlements could barely find any of these. Scarcity of these goods which demand plummeted increased prices in the manner which was unaffordable to people who barely can satisfy their basic needs. And these basic needs also include other commonly used hygienic means, such as soaps, detergent, etc.

Finally, keeping of distance was made almost impossible by numerous families living close to each other, sharing common yards and other spaces between houses. Also, it isn't unusual that more than two generations share the same home or even rooms, as well as small number of everyday utensils, which also presents risk on its own (especially concerning trans-generational contamination from younger/healthier individuals to older ones, or those with poorer health). Some studies show that average number of persons who inhabit room is 2.5, and that many respondents feel bad because of lack of privacy and personal space (Monasta et. al, 2008: 2038).

In context of Covid-19 pandemic, fact worth noting is that Republic of Serbia employs Roma Health Mediators (serb. *romske zdravstvene medijatorke*) since 2008. In these 12 years, these women drafted from within the Roma community had made enormously positive breaches in the field of medical protection. They helped people from the settlements to be formally recognized by the medical system of Serbia and to have medical assurance; to be vaccinated and to go to different medical examinations; they were also providing basic health education and promoting healthy lifestyles. Still, their role was marginalized during Covid-19 pandemic by the Ministry of Health, in which frame they operate. Roma health mediators were not allowed to enter health facilities, nor to officially work in settlements. Reasons for this decision remain unknown, although it may be deduced from strict hygienic measures in all health facilities.

4. Economic problems

Since all types of Roma settlement's inhabitants professions have similar characteristics, pandemic of Covid-19 had profound and devastating effects on their status. First of all, most of them are self-employed, which means that they didn't had any kind of security or support from state which was provided to the formally employed citizens. Nature of informal and self-organized work means that payments are made only when particular

operation is completed. These small and usually daily payments need to be frequent in order to provide bare existence. In this context, only kind of support Roma in settlements have, besides welfare, are their cash savings and help from family members.

Second, most of their professions include services which are provided to people outside of their communities: craftsmanship, petty trade, manual labor (construction, agriculture, cleaning...), music and entertainment, gathering of secondary materials etc. While the demand for most of these employments went down dramatically, other were made basically impossible because of lock downs (secondary materials, trade and agriculture), but also because of reduced general production, which provides raw material for recycling. It should be remarked as well that pandemic of Covid-19 has stigmatized very materials which many Roma from the settlements collect and sell – metal. Media reports have claimed that “new virus” simply “loves metal surfaces”, and that it can survive on them for many days.

Thirdly, most of these professions are exercised in the family’s circles. Sons are working with their fathers, and cousins are sharing their workplace. This means that economic income of families living in Roma settlements aren’t diversified, and loss of it can hardly be substituted by any means of income different then already described. Also, since living in improvised or devastated buildings means that inhabitants must leave their settlements from time to time in order to find different materials needed for household maintenance or for heating, these activities were also affected during the lock downs and police hour. For example, Roma from Čukarica municipality had problem, because they were unable to get wood to fuel their stoves.

Since considerable number of Roma are users of different welfare programs, lock downs again made access to facilities in which these services are provided very difficult and complicated. This problem was especially apparent in concern with delivery of food in Red Cross’s and other meal centers. Situation was dire, because people living in severe poverty didn't have, and couldn’t provide any kind of food stockpiles. Roma from Niš and Belgrade were literary afraid from starvation, and quality of interpersonal relations in some settlements was on the verge of physical clashes. Sadly, one man was beaten to death in Belgrade during the month of March in the mass fight in one settlement.

5. Education

Attending, completing and achieving favorable results in formal education is one of the most important problems of Roma settlement communities. This is even more evident if

the fact that children are one of the most vulnerable social groups, and in the high risk of absolute poverty (Ljubičić, 2019: 121) is taken into account. Elementary school degrees (in Serbia first 8 years) are usually completed nowadays, but high school (second 4 years) are very rarely finished.

Transition to teaching at distance using digital technologies prove to be very challenging for students who already faced hardships in their ordinary education. First of all, many of them didn't had any access to TV and Internet, or devices needed for this mode of learning (cellphones, laptop or tablet computers). In the most severe cases - some didn't even had access to electricity. This problem was even more severe concerning the fact that many families in settlements also have more than one or two children attending school, making it even more difficult for them to catch up with this novel approach (practically, one digital device or one TV receiver is needed for each child). Also, learning on distance demanded lot of support from parents, both in organizing time and schoolwork, and in helping their children with lessons – activities which inhabitants of these settlements were unable to provide, since they lack needed skills. Beside that, many parents from general population found very difficult to substitute teacher's expert educational skills, having to tutor only one, or two to three children. Homeschooling more that three children would be impossible even for parents who have higher education.

Some schools and local municipalities provide meals for Roma students between classes, which is highly valued and relieves family budget. Without physical presence in schools, this mean of support was canceled as well, and children were deprived of that one meal they would normally count on.

Since formal education is one of few social frames in which deprived Roma children have chance to experience life outside their closest surrounding, being unable to attend it affected them more severely than other children, because it only further marginalized them from their non-Roma peers.

Finally, considerable percentage of students from these settlements attend individualized educational programs (IOP – *“individualni obrazovni program”*), which by definition demand individual work with student. It is obvious that this form of work can be hardly realized without personal contact with the student.

As it was already mentioned in the beginning of this article, many of these described obstacles were already present, and pandemic of Covid-19 severely aggravated them. Yet, in the field of education, role of pedagogical assistants (originally Roma pedagogical

assistants) had positive impact, since they supported Roma and (from 2009.) all other students who needed additional help (Milivojević, 2015: 4). Besides supporting children, PAs also provided help to teachers and to school's psychological/pedagogical stuff; they cooperated with students parents and families, local and government and institutions. In the context of Covid-19, pedagogical assistants were involved in every aspect of educational process, and had to improvise and think quick solutions in order to overcome ever emerging problems in the field. As one PA explained in the interview, she managed to substitute lack of Internet using phone call, or direct communication with children and parents. Also, students who couldn't do their homework using digital means of communication would receive and send back their learning materials in psychical, paper form. Needless to say, facilitation of this activity was not at all a small feat.

During the summer school brake, in August 2020, new systematization of work for pedagogical assistants came out, foreseeing that in order to be employed, each PA needs to have at least 50 students who need special support. Association of Pedagogical Assistants estimated that around 60 out of 220 in total will lose their job, and that their students will lose support they previously had⁴. Even thou in the end this quota was revised and lowered to 20 students in September, these events caused much uneasiness in whole Roma community.

6. Measures taken in order to aid Roma community

Roma activists involved in providing help and support in the field stressed out that agile and proactive approach has proven to be crucial. From the before mentioned description of situation, it is clear that time was of utmost importance, since Roma living in informal settlements needed even the most basic things. In fact, Roma NGOs and organized members of community were the first to give the needed impulse. During the month of Mart, most Roma from the settlements would go back and forth between local centers for social care and Red Cross offices, without receiving any help. Governmental and international organization (UN and EU) made the great impact, since they have largest capacities, especially concerning budget and material means. Local crisis headquarters, which were organized in every municipality, usually supervised distribution of aid (which some activists perceived as bureaucratic obstacle), and also have managed to disinfect Roma settlements and supply water tanks and electricity where it was needed. Religious

⁴ Facts worth noting here also are that it is unrealistic that one PA can provide proper support to 50 (or more) students. Also, this systematization would possibly force PAs to persuade parents to register their children as students who are educated according to individual plans, which would both decrease quality of education and future chances for children who actually don't need this kind of support.

organizations which are most active in Roma communities – Muslim and Evangelical Christian – have also organized both distribution of basic goods and provided information about Covid-19 (Marinković, 2020). Activists also stressed support from diaspora, who also provided support. It is hard to list all individuals, groups and organizations (both national and international, governmental and non-governmental) which were, and to this day still are, involved in providing different means of support. Since most of the modes of provided help and support are similar, this isn't a goal here. Presented data should be rather understood as examples of good practice.

First response to fast and unpredictably emerging humanitarian and epidemiological crisis included distribution of packages with basic everyday needs: food, bottled water and hygiene kits. Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU) of the Government of the Republic of Serbia has visited around 14.000 Roma households, donating more than 13.000 packages, plus 11.000 face-masks and gloves until May 15. Also, similar packages were donated by Roma National Council in Serbia and many other organizations.

Standing Conference of the Roma Association of the Citizens (*SKRUG*), an organization which includes many Roma NGOs from whole Serbia, successfully coordinated their work through monthly and weekly meetings. Mutual sharing of relevant information between stakeholders and connecting local communities with donors on national and international level had great beneficial impact. Also, diffusion of informations about Covid-19, proper procedures against it and other relevant advises in the settlements was recolonized as one of the top priorities by *SKRUG*. They employed all means to achieve it, including face-to-face contacts, social and conventional media, printed notices etc. Also, this association formed a team in order monitor possible appearance of the hate speech about Roma in context of pandemic in the media (which wasn't the case up to this day in Serbia, unlike in some other European countries).

Concerning education, besides support which was provided by pedagogical assistants⁵, situation demanded innovative approaches as well, because it was estimated that 17% of Roma students were not included in teaching process in any way. Many NGOs and other stakeholders had to provide digital teaching devices besides traditional didactic material they provided before. Center for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP) from Belgrade distributed

⁵ According to data gathered by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, during the temporary suspension of teaching in schools, the support of a pedagogical assistant covered 68% of the total of 9,335 students belonging to the Roma national minority, who receive this type of support in 194 primary schools in regular conditions.

tablet and laptop computers, printers and other equipment in 10 schools, as well as providing Internet access for 424 families together with Digital Serbia Initiative. Large quantity of tablet computers and SIM cards needed for web connection (500 in total) were also supplied by Roma Education Fond, and assigned to schools by Center for Education of Roma and Ethnic Communities (CEREZ). In the framework of this project, selected school stuff was trained in using digital equipment, in order to be able to further educate students and their parents as final beneficiaries.

Probably the most positive example is left for the end. During the whole Covid-19 crises 65 young Roma volunteers, previously supported by the UNHCR and UNDP, were active in the local communities, and have cooperated in delivering emergency packages, giving health care and advises, providing access to drinking water or helping people to obtain personal documents necessary for obtaining health insurance or applying for social assistance⁶. Many of them are well educated and very successful individuals in their different professions (music, literature and medicine, among others), proving the great potential of their community.

7. Conclusion

It is hard to evaluate precise epidemiological impact of Covid-19 on Roma settlements in any quantitative manner. Still, data from the field show that pattern of virus spreading follows trends in general population: there were cases present in larger cities, while settlements in smaller towns, villages and remote areas were spared to some extent. Although disease doesn't choose between established and marginalized groups, social and economic consequences aren't spread equally. Physical distance between people who are considered as strangers and general population wasn't an effective barrier for the pandemic which is crossing all borders known to humanity. Social distance in it's true meaning and cumulative effects of exclusion have had catastrophic effects on the most vulnerable settlements in Serbia, almost leading to humanitarian crises – crises about most of public was unaware off.

Still, in the time of great challenges, Roma community in Serbia, as well as it's diaspora, has shown capacity to aid their less fortunate members. On all levels, as individual, self-organized volunteers, activists of NGOs, employees and officials of municipal and

⁶ https://www.rs.undp.org/content/serbia/sr/home/stories/un-volunteers-during-covid19-.html?fbclid=IwAR3IVWBhz6xOO7LRQFqjn8ggT5VfyZCrEEW-ENd15-p6Wo__y7hr3EgrimQ, accessed on 22.9.2020.

governmental institutions, they have promptly and efficiently alleviated critical and complex situation. Through linking people affected by the pandemic with different benefactors, investigating their needs and determining best means to fulfill them, meticulously planing and coordinating actors in the field, a different segments of Roma population have presented itself in non-stereotypical light. Instead of being passive recipients of charity, in the absence of many modes of support – which were denied because of these prejudices and lack of consciousness – they have recruited all their resources to overcome challenges of global pandemic and to provide solutions.

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