

5

HATRED AGAINST ROMA IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC¹

*Margareta Matache, Jennifer Leaning
and Jacqueline Bhabha*

I Introduction

A decentralized, globally dispersed population of approximately 15 million Roma live across the world. They are separated by borders, national languages, Romani dialects, local histories, and traditions. Many have little consciousness of their global Roma-ness, but they share a group history, local identities, and a culture. Roma fled Northern India approximately 1,000 years ago, and many moved into Southern and Eastern Europe. Today, the majority of Roma live in Central and Eastern Europe, but there are Romani people or Romani-related groups in the Americas, the Middle East, and Australia. The diversity and fluidity of Romani people position them in some ways as exemplary global citizens, bound together by a sense of identity but devoid of the nativism or exclusionary impetus that typically accompanies such constructions.

Romani people have been targeted by structural racism and violence throughout their history.² Roma were enslaved in the Principalities of Moldova and Wallachia (today Romania) between 1385³ and 1855/1856. Roma were subject

1 This chapter includes sections and builds on several Op-Eds published by the authors during March–June 2020, including Margareta Matache and Jacqueline Bhabha, “Anti-Roma Racism Is Spiraling during COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Health and Human Rights* 22, no. 1 (2020), 379–382; and Margareta Matache, Jennifer Leaning, and Jacqueline Bhabha, “The Shameful Resurgence of Violent Scapegoating in a Time of Crisis,” *Open Democracy*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/shameful-resurgence-violent-scapegoating-time-crisis/>.

2 Margareta Matache and Jacqueline Bhabha, “The Roma Case for Reparations,” in *Time for Reparations*, eds. Jacqueline Bhabha, Margareta Matache, and Caroline Elkins (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming 2021).

3 The transaction of 40 Roma families from Dan I, the Prince of Wallachia, to Tismania Monastery in October 1385 constituted the first written record of chattel enslavement of Roma on the territories of what is now Romania. However, slavery may have started earlier.

to expulsions and anti-Roma laws across a range of European territories for centuries. They were victims of genocide during the Holocaust, and even today they continue to be targets of a widely diffused racist ideology that invokes Roma “inferiority” and “criminality.”⁴

Contemporary racism builds on a long and robust legacy. It includes the Nazi Sterilization Law, justifying forced sterilization of thousands of Romani women demonized as “deviant asocials.”⁵ Democratic European polities such as Austria, Denmark, Czechoslovakia (and later the independent Czech Republic and Slovakia, post-communism), Finland, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland have all imposed forced sterilization procedures on Romani women during and/or after the Holocaust.⁶ Past stigmatization of Roma as deviant outsiders has included references to the threat they pose as potentially contaminated carriers of disease,⁷ so that public health arguments have been leveraged to justify atrocities. Reciprocally, in settings known to carry risk of incitement to atrocity against specified groups, epidemics have been identified as both risk and triggering factors.⁸

The present-day situation for Romani people continues to be harshened by racism. Centuries of anti-Roma racism and related structural violence have generated an embedded legacy of discrimination, bias, rejection, and exclusion that has yet to be addressed. This legacy is the Roma political and socioeconomic terrain on which the COVID-19 pandemic has spread, a terrain rife with racialized inequities and deprivation, and devoid of the protective opportunities that facilitate mitigation of morbidity and mortality risks. As in other deeply racialized and unequal societies, so too across Europe the pandemic’s disproportionate impact on socially vulnerable and racialized minorities has shone a bright light on broader democratic failings.⁹

4 Matache and Bhabha, *Roma Case for Reparations*.

5 “Ten Pictures That Tell Us Human Stories of the Holocaust,” *European Roma Rights Centre*, July 30, 2015, <http://www.errc.org/news/ten-pictures-that-tell-us-human-stories-of-the-forgotten-holocaust> and Gwendolyn Albert and Marek Szilvasi, “Intersectional Discrimination of Roma Women Forcibly Sterilized in the Former Czechoslovakia and Czech Republic,” *Health and Human Rights* 19, no. 2 (2017): 23–34.

6 Albert and Szilvasi, “Intersectional Discrimination of Roma Women,” 23–34.

7 Petre Petcut, *Roma: Slavery and Freedom* (National Roma Culture Center, 2015) and Christian Promitzer, “Typhus, Turks, and Roma: Hygiene and Ethnic Difference in Bulgaria, 1912–1944,” in *Health, Hygiene and Eugenics in Southeastern Europe to 1945*, eds. Christian Promitzer, Sevasti Trubeta and Marius Turda (Budapest: CEU Press, 2011), 87–126.

8 “The UN Framework for Analysis of Atrocity Crimes,” *United Nations*, 2014, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/about-us/Doc.3_Framework%20of%20Analysis%20for%20Atrocity%20Crimes_EN.pdf. (Risk Factor 2; Indicator 2.1; Trigger Factor 8.9.)

9 Mary Bassett, Nancy Krieger, and Jarvis Chen, “The Unequal Toll of COVID-19 Mortality by Age in the United States: Quantifying Racial/Ethnic Disparities,” *HCPDS Working Paper* 19, no. 3 (2020) and Mary Bassett and Natalia Linos, “The Coronavirus Could Hit the U.S. Harder than Other Wealthy Countries,” *Washington Post*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/03/02/coronavirus-could-hit-us-harder-than-other-wealthy-countries/>.

According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 80% of European Roma live below the poverty line, 30% with no running water, and 46% without an indoor toilet or shower.¹⁰ Even in non-pandemic circumstances, these conditions negatively impact the community's health—Roma have higher morbidity and shorter lifespans than their non-Roma co-nationals.¹¹ These prejudicial health determinants are compounded by political adversity, most particularly a persistent, if sometimes implicit, diffusion of anti-Romani hatred, periodically aggravated by outbreaks of virulent hate speech and targeted violence. The pandemic has exacerbated this adverse climate, with Roma being increasingly targeted as contaminators and societal threats to public health.

In this chapter, we explore these challenges and argue that failure to promptly attend to them will increase the risk of atrocities, violence, and hate crimes against the Roma. We also place these patterns of fearing or blaming Roma for COVID-19 in the broader history of minority scapegoating in times of pandemic.

II Hatred in times of pandemic

A Epidemic disease and its effects

Terrible epidemic diseases that afflict populations often arise in settings of war, migration, revolution, or intense social disruption.¹² Regardless of context, epidemics unleash fear and death and prompt measures that affect the mobility of populations. In the last 60 years, social historians and medical anthropologists have begun to interrogate epidemics as “constructs.” A productive scholarship in this vein suggests that:

[E]pidemics are also themselves intellectual ‘constructs’ which, once formulated, have a history, vitality, and resilience of their own. One of the chief lessons...is the extent to which man-made images of pestilence have shaped responses to it, whether or not they have been what we would regard as ‘accurate’ or ‘rational’ depictions of the phenomenon.¹³

10 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey Roma - Selected Findings 2016* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018).

11 “Closing the Life Expectancy Gap of Roma in Europe,” *European Public Health Alliance*, December 2018, <https://epha.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/closing-the-life-expectancy-gap-of-roma-in-europe-study.pdf>.

12 Donald Hopkins, *The Greatest Killer: Smallpox in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 26–91 and William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1976), 132–175.

13 Paul Slack, “Introduction,” in *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence*, eds. Terence Ranger and Paul Slack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 8.

Historians of epidemics speak of the “construct” that instantiates prejudices—the “construct cholera,” the “construct leprosy,” the “construct malaria,” the “construct syphilis,” or the “construct yellow fever.”¹⁴ This construct most often includes negative views about the population that lives in the area where these diseases arise and/or remain prevalent. This construct can also serve as a political tool, as in the case of President Trump’s references to the “Chinese virus” or the “Kung Flu.”¹⁵

B The construct and racist scapegoating of the “other”

Adjacent to this notion of the “construct” or the notion of “man-made images of pestilence” is the recognition that in certain instances of sudden outbreaks of deadly disease, people seek a scapegoat, often in the “Other.” The notion of the “Other” has served for centuries as justification for oppressive and discriminatory measures against marginalized and oppressed peoples. And epidemics typically intensify preexisting animus toward the “Other.”

A notion of the “Other” was implicit in accounts of the Crusades in the early Middle Ages and became prevalent during the centuries of European colonization and imperial encounters with lands and peoples across the globe. The notion of the “Other” was seminal for the West in “dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.”¹⁶ This “Other” often has been portrayed as strange and inferior and identified with problematic behavior relating to cleanliness, sexuality, food habits, and living conditions. The construction of Romani people as “G*psies” and the “Other” is no exception.¹⁷

Unlike other groups in Europe, Roma were constructed as “the Orientals within.”¹⁸ Enslaved for half a millennium on the territories of contemporary Romania, Roma were only recognized as “persons in law”¹⁹ in cases of criminal punishment. In other territories, Roma were excluded consistently, neither European nor white nor Christian enough to be included in the polity.

For instance, between 1471 and 1637, Spain, Holland, and Scotland implemented anti-Romani laws.²⁰ By a 1560 decree, Archbishop Petri of Sweden stipulated that “[t]he priest should not concern himself with the G*psies. He shall

14 Sheldon Watts, *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power, and Imperialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), passim.

15 “Trump Calls Coronavirus ‘Kung flu,’” *BBC News*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-53173436>.

16 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

17 Ken Lee, “Orientalism and Gypsylorism,” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 44, no. 2 (2000): 129–156.

18 Lee, “Orientalism,” 132.

19 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

20 Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, *The Destiny of Europe’s Gypsies* (New York: Basic Books, 1972).

neither bury their corpse nor christen their children.”²¹ In the early 1600s, scholars described Romani people as “the worst kind of wanderers and impostors... disfigured by their swarthinness; sun-burnt; filthy in their clothing, and indecent in all their customs.”²² During their enslavement in Romania, the Netoci Roma,²³ those who escaped and resisted slavery, were portrayed as “half savage, half naked, living by theft and rapine, feeding in times of want upon cats, dogs, and mice...the most degraded and debased of all the G*psy population.”²⁴ In his 1787 book “The G*psies,” a prejudiced, yet highly influential early book regarding Romani people, Grellmann labeled Roma as “uncivilized people.” “G*psies are an eastern people, and have eastern notions. It is inherent in uncivilized people, particularly those of Oriental countries, to be strongly attached to their own habits,” he claimed.²⁵

Racist scapegoating of the ‘Other’ in times of epidemic as a carrier or transmitter of disease is a strategy with an ancient pedigree. As Paul Farmer has noted, “blame [i]s, after all, a calling card of all transnational epidemics.”²⁶ Patterns of scapegoating have received some attention in accounts of prior epidemics. They include the 14th-century Black Death, smallpox epidemics recurrent across the globe, and epidemics of cholera in Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Incidents of scapegoating also occurred during intermittent outbreaks of syphilis and leprosy in many societies. They persist through a series of viral epidemics beginning with the 1918 influenza pandemic and extending to the later 20th and 21st century worldwide viral epidemics originating in China, Southeast Asia, or the Middle East.

Large-scale killings and burnings of Jews were prevalent during the years of the Black Death, as they were accused of spreading transmission or poisoning wells.²⁷ The pogrom of the Jews in Europe started in France in 1348²⁸ and continued in Switzerland, the Rhineland, and Spain. With the rise of organized Christianity in the early Middle Ages, European Christians continued to blame people scapegoated as witches and evil spirits, but increasingly attributed blame to heretics, Muslims, and Jews, too.

Between the 17th and 19th centuries, with the relatively rapid movement of populations and the building of cities, many epidemics of cholera and typhus were imputed to the “filth” of new and “suspect” populations. During the

21 Kenrick and Puxon, *Destiny of Europe's Gypsies*, 22.

22 George Smith, *Gypsy Life: Being an Account of Our Gipsies and Their Children, with Suggestions for Their Improvement* (Lenox: Hardpress, 1880).

23 Semi-nomad Roma who escaped the enslavers and moved in the Carpathians.

24 Ian Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome* (Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers, 1987), 26.

25 Lee, “Orientalism,” 2000.

26 Samuel Cohn, “Plague and Prejudice,” *History Now*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/feature/plague-and-prejudice>.

27 Watts, *Epidemics and History*, 48–50.

28 Joan Acotella, “The End of the World,” *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2005, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/03/21/the-end-of-the-world-6>.

smallpox outbreak in the 19th century in the United States, which coincided with the time of the emancipation, formerly enslaved African Americans were left to die. As Evelyn Hammonds has pointed out:

White physicians knew how to treat smallpox. They knew about vaccination. But they isolated the black people who were following the troops as refugees. And by isolating the African-Americans, or I should say by isolating the newly freed African-Americans, the disease spread very quickly among them. So the outbreak of smallpox was not controlled, and many of those African-Americans suffered and died. And, in fact, a historian named Margaret Humphreys said something to the effect of: the path to freedom was paved with death, and destitution, and suffering. So it was very striking that freedom came with the spread of a very serious and highly contagious disease, at a moment when there was no federal or state infrastructure to care for them.²⁹

During colonization, the “Other”—the colonized people—were also the target of fear, violence, scapegoating, and losses. To stop the disease, during the bubonic plague (1896–1900), British colonizers burnt Indians’ belongings and homes. Similarly, during the 20th-century plague, French colonizers burned the belongings and homes of Senegalese people.³⁰

Stamped as “an inferior race” and “degraded” people since the second half of the 1800s, Chinese Americans were accused of spreading the bubonic plague in San Francisco in the early 1900s. The first outbreak of the plague was portrayed as “an Oriental disease, peculiar to rice-eaters.”³¹

The choice of scapegoats during pandemics was not random. Scapegoating built on a preexisting history of injustice against the “Other.” Jews blamed for the Black Death were a people already demonized for centuries in Europe. Throughout the 19th century, Chinese Americans were constructed as the “Other,” scapegoated as disease spreaders and discriminated against in access to health care in San Francisco. In 1871, Chinese Americans were accused of having brought “the dread scourge” of Mongolian leprosy to the West Coast” and Chinatown was pictured as a “laboratory of infection.”³² According to historian Joan B. Trauner:

During the smallpox epidemic of 1876–1877, for instance, city health officer J. L. Meares bragged that not only had he ordered every house in

29 Isaac Chotiner, “How Racism Is Shaping the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *The New Yorker*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/how-racism-is-shaping-the-coronavirus-pandemic>.

30 Samuel Cohn, “Pandemics: Waves of Disease, Waves of Hate from the Plague of Athens to A.I.D.S.,” *Historical Journal* 85, no. 230 (2012): 535–555.

31 Joan Trauner, “The Chinese as Medical Scapegoats in San Francisco, 1870–1905,” *California History* 57, no. 1 (1978): 70–87.

32 Trauner, “Chinese as Medical Scapegoats,” 70–87.

Chinatown thoroughly fumigated, “but the whole of the Chinese quarter was put in a sanitary condition that it had not enjoyed for ten years.”³³

Pandemics have not only served to scapegoat the “Other,” commonly understood as the oppressed, the poor, Jews, Chinese, Black Americans, and other similarly stigmatized minorities, but have also served as political tools for domination, as in the case of the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic. By scapegoating Blacks, white South Africans took the first legal steps toward Apartheid.³⁴ As Laura Spinney notes, “the epidemic gave a big spur to that legislation because white people blamed very explicitly black people for bringing in the disease without any evidence whatsoever.”³⁵

Colonization accelerated the spread of disease. Following Columbus’ arrival in the Americas in 1492, “measles, flue [sic] and smallpox burned through the native populations, killing millions of people and enabling the Spanish, English, Portuguese and French empires to take root in the New World.”³⁶ Some epidemics were even weaponized against indigenous peoples. North American colonists used smallpox against Native Americans through “gifts of blankets and linens contaminated with smallpox.”³⁷

Finally, it was the HIV-AIDS pandemic, and the blame associated with gay men, persons who suffered from heroin addiction, Haitians, people with hemophilia, and sex workers that magnified contemporary historians’ interest in documenting the nexus between disease and hatred in times of pandemic.³⁸

III Hatred against Romani people in times of pandemics

The international historical record is largely silent about whether throughout their time in Europe, Roma were explicitly targeted for persecution in the context of epidemics. Over the centuries, however, violent and targeted persecution of Roma became a learned behavior. The murder of Roma—ordered by princes or feudal lords—was executed by wide swathes of dominant populations.³⁹ Pervasive violence against the Roma became a communalized mode of response by

33 Trauner, “Chinese as Medical Scapegoats,” 70–87.

34 Laura Spinney, “How Pandemics Shape Social Evolution,” *Nature*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03048-8>.

35 Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017).

36 Jason Opal and Steven Opal, “When Mosquitoes Brought Yellow Fever to the Caribbean, They Also Spread Slavery,” *Time Magazine*, October 11, 2019, <https://time.com/5693134/columbus-explorers-yellow-fever-slavery/>.

37 Patrick Kiger, “Did Colonists Give Infected Blankets to Native Americans as Biological Warfare?” *History.com*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/colonists-native-americans-smallpox-blankets>.

38 Cohn, “Pandemics,” 535–555.

39 Cohn, “Pandemics,” 535–555.

non-Roma. Thus, the groundwork for scapegoating Roma in times of pandemic has long been prepared.

A Accounts of Roma scapegoating during plague epidemics

The Roma appear in only a few mainstream accounts of scapegoating during epidemics. In an extensive monograph on the topic spanning centuries from 500 BC to modernity, the Roma are mentioned only once:

With few exceptions, authorities did not act on these epidemiological grounds until the plague of 1575–1578, when ‘tricksters, g*psies, n*groes, knaves, herbalists, street-singers, comedians, whores, and similar oddballs (*e simil sorti de genti stravaganti*) were prohibited from entering towns or expelled beyond city walls to fend for themselves.’⁴⁰

Shorter studies mention “g*psies” as scapegoats and victims of the Flagellant Movement and others⁴¹ during the “Black Death” epidemic:

The flagellants were a group of zealous Christians, led by a Master, who roamed from town to city to countryside whipping themselves for their sins and the sins of humanity, falling to the ground in penitential frenzy, and leading communities in the persecution and slaughter of Jews, g*psies, and other minority groups until they were banned by Pope Clement VI (1291–1352 CE) as ineffectual, disruptive, and upsetting.⁴²

Enslaved nomadic Romani people were scapegoated in the territories that are now part of Romania as carriers of the plague, forbidden from entering cities at the first signs of an outbreak. “The G*psies were suspected of spreading the epidemic via their itinerant lifestyle and wretched living conditions,” writes historian Viorel Achim.⁴³ During epidemics, they were expelled from cities and forced to wash in nearby rivers. For instance, during a plague outbreak in 1793, enslaved nomadic Romani people were expelled from Bucharest for the entire month of July.⁴⁴

B Scapegoating of Roma during the typhus epidemic in Bulgaria

In 1928, during the early days of a typhus epidemic in Bulgaria’s capital of Sofia, members of Parliament blamed the Roma, along with Turks, for the disease.

40 Cohn, “Pandemics,” 535–555.

41 Joshua Mark, “Effects of the Black Death on Europe,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, April 16, 2020 <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1543/effects-of-the-black-death-on-europe/>.

42 Mark, “Effects of the Black Death.”

43 Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History* (Cambridge: CEU Press, 1998). Achim states, “often, it was not the movement of stars that was blamed for the disease, but the minorities in the community. Witches and g*psies were frequent targets.”

44 Petcut, *Roma*.

One Member of Parliament pointed out that Roma roamed the city in search of garbage, while another argued that as a matter of public health, Roma should have long been expelled from the city. In 1930, the Central Directorate of Public Health (CDPH) of Bulgaria concluded that Turks and Roma were the cause of typhus.⁴⁵ Velichko Georgiev, a physician in the county of Peshtera, wrote, “[T]he weakest, scrawniest and most sickly elements of the county are the Roma. These unlucky people live in absolute misery and indeed represent the pariah in our society.”⁴⁶

When a local typhus epidemic started in the town of Zlatitsa in 1931, possibly within a Romani family, Sanitary Inspector Petar Verbev recommended that Roma be confined to a special area as “their present housing among the Bulgarian population is dangerous and the supervision of their cleanliness proves to be more difficult.”⁴⁷ In the 1930s, CDPH advised Bulgarians about the risk that nomad Roma posed in the transmission of typhus. According to a publicly distributed brochure:

The most genuine custodian of typhus are the Roma, for whom the lice are like livestock; then come the Mohammedans, who consider lice a sacred animal and do not kill them; and finally, those lice infested families, who believe that the earth must shake before they clean themselves of their lice.⁴⁸

During another typhus outbreak in the 1940s, the low numbers of deaths among Roma were explained through the lens of “relative racial immunity.”⁴⁹ Despite this, in 1943, according to Christian Promitzer:

the Ministry of the Interior ordered the restriction of Romani movement within Bulgaria under the pretext that they were spreading typhus and other contagious diseases. It would appear that the authorities sought to deport a considerable proportion of Bulgarian Roma together with Bulgarian Jews.⁵⁰

Fortunately, the Bulgarians opposing the deportation of Jews also saved Roma from deportation, a crisis that brought the two stigmatized communities together.⁵¹ Overall, the Bulgarian government considered Roma the “custodian of typhus,” an attitude that informed their overall approach, even though there is

45 Christian Promitzer, “Typhus, Turks, and Roma: Hygiene and ethnic difference in Bulgaria, 1912–1944,” in *Health, Hygiene and Eugenics in Southeastern Europe to 1945*, eds. Christian Promitzer, Sevasti Trubeta, and Marius Turda (Cambridge: CEU Press, 2011).

46 Promitzer, “Typhus,” 108.

47 Promitzer, “Typhus,” 108.

48 Promitzer, “Typhus,” 110.

49 Promitzer, “Typhus,” 110.

50 Promitzer, “Typhus,” 121.

51 Promitzer, “Typhus,” 121.

also evidence that they instituted some targeted information campaigns intended to help the Roma community avert some of the health risks.

C *Scapegoating of Roma during the Holocaust*

The Holocaust accelerated the racially motivated identification of minorities as dangerous contaminants, human parasites, responsible for spreading typhus. Both Roma and Jews were targeted on this account. In Nazi Germany, typhus was portrayed as the “Jewish plague.”⁵² Romanians’ fears that Roma were the source of typhus and potential contaminants of the “Romanian race” led to deportations of Romani people to camps in Transnistria.⁵³ As M. Benjamin Thorne notes, the ideas already constructed by eugenicists in Romania, some members of the National Legionary State or Marshal Antonescu’s dictatorial rule planted the seeds of Roma persecution during the 1940 anti-typhus campaign:

Particular attention is given to Antonescu’s own prejudices against Roma, and how they were intrinsically tied with notions of filth, disease, and national inferiority. As is shown, Antonescu’s views of Roma were quite in sync with that of radical eugenicists, even if the solution he adopted for resolving Romania’s “G*psy Question” differed to an extent from their own. It was in order to “save” Romania from its “dysgenic” threat that Antonescu ordered the deportations of Roma starting with the group identified as most dangerous during the anti-typhus campaign: the nomads.⁵⁴

In 1940, the Minister of Labor, Health, and Social Protection Vasile Iasinschi, forced nomadic Roma to be quarantined in tents in encampments even if they did not have typhus symptoms. At the local level, in October 1940, the mayor of Bucharest ordered the gendarmerie:

to no longer permit the encampment of nomadic G*psies within suburban communities of the capitol, that constitute a permanent danger for the health, wealth, and life of the population. Consequently, give categorical orders to the respective formations in this sense.⁵⁵

As a result of the Holocaust, overt anti-Semitism has been classified as a hate crime in many countries. Remarkably, no such measures have been taken with

52 Michael Besser, “Typhus: The Influence of Society and State on a Human Disease,” *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 5, no. 5 (2015): 107–117.

53 Government of Romania, “Romania, a Europe in miniature,” *Department for Interethnic Relations*, December 31, 2006, <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/romania-a-europe-in-miniature-brief-presentation-of-national-minorities>.

54 M. Benjamin Thorne, “Assimilation, Invisibility, and the Eugenic Turn in the “Gypsy Question” in Romanian Society, 1938–1942,” *Romani Studies* 21, no. 2 (2011): 178.

55 Thorne, “Assimilation,” 197.

respect to anti-Romani racism and hatred. Instead, to this day, in much of Europe, especially in Central Eastern Europe and the Balkans, social and economic crises, whether small or large in scale, regularly evoke the dark legacy of Roma scapegoating by igniting communally sanctioned attacks on Romani individuals and communities. COVID-19 is simply the most recent public health, social, and economic crisis to precipitate publicly sanctioned attacks on Romani individuals and communities.

IV Scapegoating Roma in times of COVID-19

Across the world, from the markets of Wuhan to the streets of New York, Rome, Rio, and Delhi, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has generated forms of global comity as people invent socially distanced ways to come together in the face of devastating changes to their ways of life. In many places, however, a darker collective agency has also emerged—a license to unleash racism against stigmatized groups. There have been reports of attacks on people of Chinese ethnicity in many countries,⁵⁶ but also on those identifiable as “Other”—Africans in China⁵⁷ and India as well as refugees and asylum seekers at borders.⁵⁸ In Europe, among the scapegoats of the COVID-19 pandemic are also the Roma.

Few political leaders have risen to the challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some, many of them women, have relied on scientific experts to guide early lockdown and aggressive testing policies and to achieve impressively low morbidity rates. Germany, New Zealand, and the south Indian state of Kerala are examples.⁵⁹ Other leaders, a majority, have been slow and hesitant in following expert advice, wasting precious time and thus contributing to dramatic surges in rates of infection and mortality among their populations. At the time of this writing, the U.S., with 4% of the world’s population, is responsible for 25% of

56 Susan Benesch, “COVID-19 Dangerous Speech Breeds Violence and Helps the Disease Spread,” *Dangerous Speech Project*, March 20, 2020, <https://dangerousspeech.org/covid-19-dangerous-speech-breeds-violence-and-helps-the-disease-spread/>; Katie Rogers, Lara Jakes, and Ana Swanson, “Trump Defends Using ‘Chinese Virus’ Label, Ignoring Growing Criticism,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/china-virus.html>; Justin Baragona, “Trump Addresses ‘Kung-Flu’ Remark, Says Asian-Americans Agree ‘100 Percent’ with Him Using ‘Chinese Virus,’” *The Daily Beast*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-addresses-kung-flu-remark-says-asian-americans-agree-100-with-him-using-chinese-virus>; and Emma Tucker, “CBS Reporter: WH Official called Coronavirus ‘Kung Flu’ to My Face Today,” *The Daily Beast*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/cbs-reporter-weijia-jiang-says-wh-official-called-coronavirus-kung-flu-to-her-face>.

57 Frank Sieren, “Sieren’s China: Scapegoating African Residents over COVID-19 Fears,” *Deutsche Welle*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/sierens-china-scapegoating-african-residents-over-covid-19-fears/a-53158262>.

58 Kristy Siegfried, “The Refugee Brief – 18 December 2020,” *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugeebrief/latest-issues/>.

59 Amanda Taub, “Why Are Women-Led Nations Doing Better With Covid-19?,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html>.

COVID-19 deaths.⁶⁰ Still other leaders have politically exploited the widespread insecurity and fear generated by a novel and as of the time of this writing incurable virus by turning on stigmatized “Others” to foment hatred.

A Racist rhetoric against Roma by public officials

In the past few months, state representatives in several countries have propagated inflammatory rhetoric, labeling Roma as sources of coronavirus contamination. Bulgarian politicians and state representatives, in particular, seem to have adopted anti-Romani rhetoric, similar to that used in the beginning of the 1900s during the typhus epidemic. For instance, Angel Dzhambazki, a Bulgarian Member of the European Parliament, stated that Romani “ghettos [could] turn out to be the real nests of contagion.”⁶¹ The Bulgarian Minister of Interior said that coercion was needed in Fakulteta, a Romani neighborhood in Sofia, because they wanted “to protect the rest of the population.”⁶² As Orhan Tahir, a Romani rights activist based in Bulgaria, remarked, E.U. representatives did not speak out against these racists speeches, and neither did the Prime Minister:

[The Bulgarian Prime Minister] had no problem with the closure of entire Roma neighborhoods, but at the same time said the churches should remain open for worshippers. This is a very cynical approach. When the head of the executive power endorses parallel regimes for Roma and non-Roma in a time of crisis, the outcome is a normalization of the state of exception for a certain group of citizens, seen as “unfit” to be trusted. This calls to mind Carl Schmitt’s concept of the state of exception, initially developed in Weimar Germany and later applied in the Third Reich.⁶³

Leaders in other countries have expressed similar racist thoughts. The mayor of Kosice in Slovakia suggested Roma could pose a particular health risk because they are a “socially unadaptable people.”⁶⁴ Nail Noğay, Deputy Manager of Istanbul’s Family and Social Policies Ministry, told a Romani woman to “die” on social media in response to her concerns over not being able to provide food to

60 Scottie Andrew, “The US Has 4% of the World’s Population but 25% of Its Coronavirus Cases,” CNN, June 30, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/30/health/us-coronavirus-toll-in-numbers-june-trnd/index.html>.

61 Andrew, “The US Has 4%.”

62 Palash Ghosh, “Coronavirus Pandemic Poses Grave Threat to Europe’s Roma Communities,” *International Business Times*, Apr. 7, 2020, <https://www.ibtimes.com/coronavirus-pandemic-poses-grave-threat-europes-roma-communities-2954171>.

63 Bernard Rorke, “More Toxic than COVID-19? The Politics of Anti-Roma Racism in Bulgaria,” *European Roma Rights Centre*, June 8, 2020, http://www.errc.org/news/more-toxic-than-covid-the-politics-of-anti-roma-racism-in-bulgaria?fbclid=IwAR27BoYI7p8vzLgX0n3lJLPT8ocg_VUNqm5mEnPS1-ik9vZk8PM4ZILXUHA.

64 Bernard Rorke, “Inequality, Anti-Roma Racism, and the Coronavirus,” *EU Observer*, Mar. 19, 2020, <https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/147759>.

her family during the quarantine.⁶⁵ Michael Gove, a British Conservative Minister, was accused of “egging on a racist witch hunt” after he expressed gratitude for the Facebook campaign organized by Surrey Tory councilors supporting the eviction of a Romani camp on April 27, 2020.⁶⁶

B Racist narratives in the social and print media

It is not only politicians who have engaged in racist speeches. Across Europe, some national and local media outlets have broadcast racist narratives blaming Roma, especially those returning from abroad, for COVID-19.⁶⁷ Romanian media is a case in point and one of the worst examples. Across Romania, a racist narrative has exploded, exploiting the relatively large number of confirmed cases and deaths in Țândărei, a small Romanian town, known to have a large Roma community. Țândărei was the second town to be quarantined after Suceava, a large Romanian city. The narratives about Țândărei and Suceava were totally different. National narratives about the human errors of Romanians in Suceava contrasted with racist narratives of horrors, dirtiness, and irresponsibility of the Roma in Țândărei. “They didn’t follow the advice to be isolated. Now they suffer,” said a doctor from Iolomita County, referring to the Romani victims from Țândărei.⁶⁸ Some Romani community members said that medical staff treated them “like dogs” and that they were not tested when they arrived at the hospital with symptoms.⁶⁹ No one followed up on complaints that these Roma were treated with indifference, disgust, or fear when they asked for care. Nobody inquired whether, and if so why, young Roma without underlying conditions were overrepresented among the dead. In the eyes of many other Romanians, the Roma in Țândărei and elsewhere did not deserve regret and compassion.⁷⁰

65 He was fired after the incident. “Turkish Ministry Official Sacked after Telling Roma Woman Suffering from Poverty to Die on Twitter,” *Duvar English*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/human-rights/2020/04/09/turkish-ministry-official-sacked-after-telling-roma-woman-suffering-from-poverty-to-die-on-twitter/>.

66 Peter Lazenby, “Tory Councillors’ Campaign to Evict Roma Travellers’ Camp Slammed as Racist” *Morning Star*, May 1, 2020, https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/b/tory-councillors-campaign-evict-roma-travellers-camp-slammed-racist?fbclid=IwAR1ORSDerQyxi3WjHfGKq6KZm4tlqH9o6GqF0_-TRbLxPcr0AfWFI7w8LJ4.

67 Bernard Rorke and Jonathan Lee, “Roma Rights in the Time of COVID,” *European Roma Rights Centre*, September 2020, http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload_en/file/5265_file1_roma-rights-in-the-time-of-covid.pdf; and Neda Korunovska and Zeljko Jovanovic, “Roma in the COVID-19 Crisis: An Early Warning from Six EU Member States,” *Open Society Foundations*, 2020, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/2f2efd8a-8ba5-4ac4-8aee-ae0dcd2933ca/roma-in-the-covid-19-crisis-20200428.pdf>.

68 Andreea Pocotilă, “COVID-19. Bomba cu ceas din Țândărei,” *Recorder*, April 1, 2020, <https://recorder.ro/covid-19-bomba-cu-ceas-din-tandarei/>.

69 Pocotilă, “COVID-19.”

70 Margareta Matache, “Rasismul antiromi crește împreună cu vocile populiste în perioada pandemiei COVID-19 și ne periclitează pe toți,” *Libertatea*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.libertatea.ro/opinii/harvard-margareta-matache-rasismul-anti-romi-creste-covid-19-2957550>.

Across Europe, other mainstream social responses to the pandemic, including deliberate misinformation, have had a deep and painful impact on Romani communities. In Scotland, in April 2020, social and print media falsely claimed that the Romani population in Govanhill was not respecting social distancing rules. These allegations spread fear among the community. As Davie Donaldson, Chairman of Romano Lav, noted:

[T]hese images have created a tense and racialised atmosphere where Govanhill's Roma communities are placed unfairly under the spotlight regarding social distancing...We understand that as many as 50 per cent of the local Romanian Roma community have now returned to Romania or are in the process of doing so. They are relocating because they do not feel safe in Scotland, both from COVID-19 and from racialised abuse based on misinformation and prejudice.⁷¹

C Discriminatory local and national policy measures

From Brazil to Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine, local or state authorities have enacted disproportionate or militarized measures in Romani neighborhoods or towns. Many justify the racist narrative portraying Roma as carriers of disease and as a collective health and safety threat. The Bulgarian government has imposed particularly invasive measures, including instituting roadblocks and police checkpoints, on several Romani neighborhoods despite zero evidence of positive COVID-19 testing there.⁷² As Amnesty International reported in April 2020:

Several towns, including the seaside town of Burgas, decided to use drones with thermal sensors to remotely take the temperature of residents in Roma settlements. While drone technology has been used in other European countries to gauge temperatures of groups of people, in Bulgaria it appears to exclusively target the Roma population.⁷³

71 Catriona Stewart, "Claims 50% of Roma Group Have Fled Govanhill after False Covid-19 Rumours," *Glasgow Times*, April 11, 2020, https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/18373662-claims-50-roma-group-fled-govanhill-false-covid-19-rumours/?fbclid=IwAR2eayohr7dqAROPKLOTv8W1WlleM2aV7yB_zVFiVXUHEieT3fr5BKQurQo.

72 Angel Krasimirov and Tsvetelia Tsoleva, "Bulgaria's Roma Say Some Coronavirus Measures Are Discriminatory," *Reuters*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-bulgaria-roma/bulgarias-roma-say-some-coronavirus-measures-are-discriminatory-idUSKBN21B355>.

73 "Stigmatizing Quarantines of Roma Settlements in Slovakia and Bulgaria," *Amnesty International*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR0121562020ENGLISH.PDF>.

The Bulgarian government's response did not come as a surprise; its increasingly populist and anti-Romani path has been documented since the 2017 elections.⁷⁴ At that time, populist and far-right nationalist parties took electoral power, and shortly thereafter manifestations of anti-Romani hatred escalated through riots, demolition of homes, police abuse, and killings in rural areas.⁷⁵ Once the pandemic struck, the populist government took advantage to augment its racist message, ignoring the urgent task of addressing the social determinants of health—including the structural inequities in education or housing—that were exposing some Roma communities to greater risks than other more privileged ones.

Romani communities in other countries have faced similar struggles. In Slovakia, the government claimed they had taken proactive measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic in marginalized communities, including through testing and food supplies. “We want first and foremost to protect the people who will now remain in quarantine. We are arranging for grocery deliveries there,” said the Prime Minister when he visited the town of Krompachy, one of the targeted areas.⁷⁶ However, some measures taken by the Slovakian government were heavily criticized by members of civil society. For instance, the government used armed forces, including civil-military operations—*Umbrella 1*—which aimed to ensure “civic life and security in closed Romani communities, while special teams of the armed forces continue to examine samples for COVID-19.”⁷⁷ Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have also pointed out that some of the installed measures penalize poor people for their poverty, reinforce stereotypes, and scapegoat and punish Roma as “culprits.”⁷⁸ Amnesty International has drawn attention to the risk of further blame and prejudice against Roma:

As of 3 April [2020], the authorities in Slovakia started testing residents of some Roma settlements. The testing was initially carried out in 33 out of several hundred settlements, with the assistance of the army. It focused on Roma locations, where the authorities recorded returns of residents from abroad, especially from the Czech Republic and the United

74 Vivek Chaudhary, “‘Everybody Hates Us’: On Sofia’s Streets, Roma Face Racism Every Day,” *The Guardian*, October 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/20/bulgaria-sofia-racism-roma-everybody-hates-us-anti-gypsy-abuse>.

75 Chaudhary, “Everybody Hates Us.”

76 “Slovakia: Five Romani-Inhabited Settlements Are Being Closed for Quarantine, 30+ COVID-19 Infected Persons Found So Far,” *Romea.cz*, September 4, 2020, http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/slovakia-five-romani-inhabited-settlements-are-being-closed-for-quarantine-30-covid-19-infected-persons-found-so-far?fbclid=IwAR2J822lKurVJpA0v_xNVfyqkFPADfpp8LMK89z37uRWnnZTSA47p3Tmzg.

77 “NGOs Criticised Government for Steps Taken in Roma Settlements,” *Spectator*, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22384400/ngos-criticise-government-for-steps-taken-in-roma-settlements.html>.

78 “NGO’s Criticize Government,” *Spectator*.

Kingdom. During the testing, Amnesty International notified the government of Slovakia that without providing Roma with the necessary means to protect themselves, ensuring access to water and sanitation, targeted testing will only add to the stigmatisation and prejudice they already face.⁷⁹

Scholars and NGOs have also called attention to abuses at the local levels, including restrictions imposed on Roma to exit or enter certain cities, neighborhoods, or towns during the pandemic. Some of these measures are reminiscent of policies implemented during earlier pandemics when Roma were enslaved in Romania or during typhus outbreaks in Bulgaria. For example, in several municipalities in Brazil, racist claims that Romani people are vectors of transmission have led to the expulsion of nomadic Roma.⁸⁰ Municipalities such as Cachoeira do Sul, Imbituva, and Dois Vizinhos expelled groups of itinerant Kalon Roma from their territories in the last week of March 2020. In the city of Guarapuava, on April 2, 2020, an attempt to expel another Romani group was interrupted only because of Ministério Público Federal (MPF) intervention.

There are other egregious examples of discriminatory conduct related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some Gypsy and Traveller camps have been victims of evictions in England.⁸¹ Ukrainian mayor Marčinkiv also ordered the forced transfer of the Roma from his city of Ivano Frannkvisk to the border with Zakarpattia (their alleged province of origin), hurling racial slurs at Romani people who resisted coercive banishment.⁸²

Other institutions and private entities have exploited irrational fears that Roma are transmitters of the novel coronavirus. In North Macedonia, a pregnant Romani woman and her unborn baby died in March 2020 after the woman was denied treatment in a gynecological clinic in Ohrid, traveled in pain to an emergency department in Skopje, and then was “left outside the hospital for more than six hours while personnel waited for the results of a COVID-19 test.”⁸³

79 Amnesty International, “Stigmatizing.”

80 Terça-Feira, “Researchers and Activists Denounce Racism against Roma Groups in Brazil during the COVID 19 Pandemic and Demands an Emergency Plan,” *Associação Estadual das Etnias Ciganas*, April 14, 2020, https://aeecmt.blogspot.com/2020/04/researchers-and-activists-denounce.html?fbclid=IwAR3BL3UBTd6NBk1ZDdb3ivoctdkDBkzxo9m0-mO0Wd8clA66-1D5_a8vKn0.

81 Lazenby, “Tory Councillors’ Campaign.”

82 Halya Coynash, “Criminal Investigation Initiated after Mayor of Ivano-Frankivsk Orders Forced Eviction of Roma,” *KHPG*, April 24, 2020, <http://khp.org/en/index.php?id=1587594049>.

83 “North Macedonia: Investigation of Death of Pregnant Romani Woman Denied Care for Days Despite Being in Labor,” *Romea.cz*, April 16, 2020, http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/north-macedonia-investigation-of-death-of-pregnant-romani-woman-denied-care-for-days-despite-being-in-labor?fbclid=IwAR1WqYYEQELjlqf9ZY4HOIwMT47tx-uwOIVmTYO_xEVV968dIm9j-b02f2o.

D Anti-Roma violence

Responses by government officials have included physical and emotional violence. In April 2020, in Krompachy, Slovakia, a police officer beat one Romani boy and four Romani girls (aged between 7 and 11) with a truncheon and threatened to shoot them. “We went for wood and the cop began to chase us and shouted at us that if we didn’t stop he would shoot us. We stopped and he took us into a tunnel and beat us there,” one girl told Press TV.⁸⁴ Also, in April 2020, in Hunedoara, Romania, online videos showed:

a man being beaten by special forces inside a block of flats, on the stairwell, and a 14-year-old child being violently abused near the block. Police entered many homes without a warrant, used tear gas indoors, including against women and minor children (one child was 11 years old).

Romani people, including children, were also victims of April 2020 police attacks in the Bucharest neighborhoods of Bolintin Vale, Giurgiu, and Rahova.⁸⁵

Violent and discriminatory behavior has also been evident in responses by citizens. In April, in Kiev, Ukraine, two men attacked a Romani family, physically assaulted the father, and put their temporary dwelling on fire.⁸⁶ In May 2020, in Rociana del Condado, Huelva, Spain, a vigilante murdered a Romani man before the eyes of the victim’s seven-year-old son.⁸⁷ Furthermore, in Karrantza, in Bizkaia (the Basque country), a Romani family received threats, including being subjected to comments, such as “f*cking g*psy, you are beating us with the coronavirus. We are going to make your life impossible. We are going to burn you.”⁸⁸

84 Zdeněk Ryšavý, “Slovakia Police Face Backlash After Police Beat and Threaten to Shoot Children as Anti-Roma Violence Escalates,” *Stand Up to Racism*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.standuptoracism.org.uk/slovakia-faces-backlash-after-police-beat-and-threaten-to-shoot-children-as-anti-roma-violence-escalates/>.

85 “Open letter Romani CRISS and UCTRR Are Asking for the Immediate Dismissal of the Minister of Internal Affairs and of His Chief of Staff following Recent Violence by Romanian Police,” Romani CRISS, accessed January 20, 2021, <http://drepturile-omului.info/arhiva-stiri/?fbclid=IwAR3gchrEn7tGTnPPX5d-Q0FgIBUr6WpaTfCfYAOpk1EIJ5gML64VbsEbygA&lang=en>.

86 “Ukraine: Racists Attack Romani Family of Four, Setting Fire to Their Home and Threatening a Pregnant Woman with Rape,” *Romea.cz*, May 17, 2020, <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/ukraine-racists-attack-romani-family-of-four-setting-fire-to-their-home-and-threatening-a-pregnant-woman-with-rape?fbclid=IwAR2sc8G2oqTNRxGE96WBdq97yI xgEUoA2AbYg3IxoKHi0zUx7x8ILPK2PNg>.

87 Annabel Mesa and Mariana Salazar, “Is a Romani Life Worth a Hill of Beans?,” *Pterodactilo*, May, 17, 2020, http://www.pterodactilo.com/is-a-romani-life-worth-a-hill-of-beans/?fbclid=IwAR3W_TwjTwL_4Eb-G-Xh0IJ52TaTI6jXSNTKH4DrM0M-7GLxbNX4WqJhCcY.

88 Maialen Ferreira, “AUDIO|Una familia gitana denuncia insultos racistas por parte de sus vecinos en Bizkaia: ‘Gitano de mierda nos estás pegando el coronavirus,’” *El Diario*, April 16, 2020, https://www.eldiario.es/norte/AUDIO-denuncia-Bizkaia-Gitano-coronavirus_0_1017349045.html.

The cumulative evidence of unchecked racial violence and explicit hatred is irrefutable. In this problematic context, the European Union Race Equality Directive's guarantees of equality, nondiscrimination, and dignity for all people are being violated daily as Roma lives are put at risk. As the 2014 U.N. Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes carefully points out, hate speech is a strong indicator of underlying patterns of incitement to commit atrocity and a signal for monitors and observers to use this document as a tool to advance early warning of atrocity crimes.⁸⁹

E Protective responses and measures

Alas, these institutional resources have been singularly ineffective. Relevant stakeholders have voiced concerns over the responses by state institutions to the ongoing pandemic-related discrimination and violence against Roma. The E.U. Agency for Fundamental Rights, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and Council of Europe have issued statements highlighting the structural inequalities that exacerbate the risks of COVID-19 infection for Roma.⁹⁰ Helena Dalli, the E.U. Commissioner for Equality, called on E.U. Member States to address this entrenched structural racism and inequity by implementing urgent measures for Romani communities.⁹¹ In May 2020, Maria Daniella Marouda, the Chair of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, called on governments to "include specialists in human rights, particularly the fields of equality and non-discrimination, in their Covid-19 task forces or advisory boards."⁹²

Responding to human rights violations and hate speech more broadly, on April 21, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a statement on human rights and COVID-19.⁹³ It was somewhat perfunctory. This was

89 "The UN Framework for Analysis of Atrocity Crimes," *United Nations*, accessed January 20, 2021, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/about-us/Doc.3_Framework%20of%20Analysis%20for%20Atrocity%20Crimes_EN.pdf.

90 "Persistent Roma Inequality Increases COVID-19 Risk, Human Rights Heads Say," *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/449668?fbclid=IwAR1lSy5oHshRKVhvR8VDf2wz9npwp1ZTTM0v1-3cZAqE6Do9jQEpoCCc5IA> and "Governments Must Ensure Equal Protection and Care for Roma and Travellers during the COVID-19 Crisis," *Council of Europe*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/governments-must-ensure-equal-protection-and-care-for-roma-and-travellers-during-the-covid-19-crisis>.

91 "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council," *European Commission*, October 7, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/union_of_equality_eu_roma_strategic_framework_for_equality_inclusion_and_participation_en.pdf.

92 "Chair of Council of Europe's Anti-Racism Body Warns: The Risk of Further Deepening Divisions in Society Increases in Times of Crisis," *Council of Europe*, May 27, 2020, https://www.coe.int/en/web/democracy/covid-19-newsroom/-/asset_publisher/ueOjQLU2N7mp/content/chair-of-council-of-europe-s-anti-racism-body-warns-the-risk-of-further-deepening-divisions-in-society-increases-in-times-of-crisis/33998058?inheritRedirect=false.

93 "Addressing Human Rights as Key to the COVID-19 Response," *World Health Organization*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/addressing-human-rights-as-key-to-the-covid-19-response>.

followed, on April 23, 2020, by a detailed paper by the U.N. Secretary-General on the need to respect human rights in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹⁴ The Secretary-General's paper emphasized the importance of protecting minorities and stigmatized groups from discrimination or barriers to health care. On May 11, 2020, the Secretary-General released further, more detailed, guidance on Addressing and Countering Covid-19-related Hate Speech targeting oppressed and stigmatized minorities (though the document makes no explicit reference to Roma).⁹⁵

Several local and national authorities have engaged in protective measures to benefit Romani and other marginalized groups. In Greece, the government has set up a small crisis fund for 98 municipalities, which include "endangered Romani residents of segregated encampments and settlements."⁹⁶ The Spanish government is developing a policy to ensure a basic income and access to water and electricity in poor neighborhoods, several of which include Roma communities.⁹⁷

These measures are urgent and already belated. Robust anti-racist policies need to be included, as essential elements of the pandemic response package, to quash the racist attacks and diffusion of hate speech that have so exacerbated the challenges posed by the pandemic for Roma families and communities the world over. In public health emergency response, atrocity prevention efforts must take into account the ways in which particular identity-based groups are scapegoated, targeted for discrimination, and subjected to state-sponsored and private violence.

V Final reflections and recommendations

Regrettably, the historically entrenched practice of minority scapegoating during epidemics is evident today, as the global COVID-19 pandemic spreads. As in the past, the targets of racist fear-mongering are historically stigmatized and marginalized communities, already subjected to structural racism and inequity. The Roma are a clear case in point. As detailed above, much contemporary

94 "COVID-19 and Human Rights: We Are All in This Together," *Office of the UN Secretary General*, April 23, 2020, https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief_on_human_rights_and_covid_23_april_2020.pdf.

95 "United Nations Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate Speech," *Office of the UN Secretary General*, May 11, 2020, https://www.un.org/en/genocide_prevention/documents/publications-and-resources/Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20related%20Hate%20Speech.pdf.

96 "Greece Approves Crisis Fund for Romani Settlements during COVID-19," *Romea.cz*, April 21, 2020, http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/greece-approves-crisis-fund-for-romani-settlements-during-covid-19?fbclid=IwAR2pZL1UBJKrwy4gk0t6L5P9ENTfII2AUq54W0PBa4B7WqL_DfeojSfyzUc.

97 Ismael Cortes, "Unveiling Anti-Roma Sentiments in Spain. What's Next after Covid-19?," *European Network Against Racism*, April 5, 2020, <https://enar-eu.org/Unveiling-anti-Roma-sentiments-in-Spain-What-s-next-after-Covid-19>.

anti-Roma behavior is a harsh reminder of earlier European pandemic-related racist outbursts against Jews, Roma, Muslims, and other minority groups. Similar insults and myths recur, including the notion of so-called “racial immunity.” As the COVID-19 public discussion morphs into a series of anti-Romani diatribes, there is among many in the Romani communities a terrifying sense that the clock is ticking and that past anti-Roma atrocities, including house burnings, violent expulsions, and physical attacks, are going to escalate. The indicators of atrocity crimes are there for all to see.

A global pandemic demands carefully targeted local public health responses. This includes adequate provision of personal protective equipment; free, reliable, and easily accessible testing; reliable and nondiscriminatory tracing; and supported isolation where needed. In Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, political leaders also have a solemn and urgent obligation to address escalating anti-Romani racism, manifested through discriminatory policy measures, restrictions, hate speech, or violence, and call out vicious scapegoating for what it is. It is a necessary part of the public health and atrocity prevention responses.

The United Nations (U.N.), including the WHO, the European Union, and other intergovernmental agencies must also adjust their pandemic-related policies to address the urgency of preventing and responding to escalating scapegoating of minority groups. WHO took a small step in 2015 when it issued best practices on naming diseases, arguing that “[t]he use of names such as ‘swine flu’ and ‘Middle East Respiratory Syndrome’ has had unintended negative impacts by stigmatizing certain communities or economic sectors.”⁹⁸ But in the case of the U.N., the absence of a clear and consistent message across the organization is noteworthy, particularly so as such clear evidence of the ongoing jeopardy to already stigmatized peoples accumulates. The organization, at all levels, should adopt the well-established lesson from the public health field that prevention of known harm depends upon surveillance to discern outbreaks followed by prompt action to contain them. As the novel Coronavirus persists, so the virus of racial hatred spreads with alarming speed when transmission mechanisms are not meticulously monitored, traced, and checked.

Governments and intergovernmental organizations need to craft anti-racist, humane, and protective measures, which recognize and address the legacy of structural inequalities and cater to the racialized vulnerability they have generated. COVID-19 provides the world with a chance to recognize our joint humanity and interdependence. In the face of the mounting evidence of harm and threat, the failure to act is not mere negligence—it is culpable omission.

98 “WHO Issues Best Practices for Naming New Human Infectious Diseases,” *World Health Organization*, May 8, 2015, <https://www.who.int/news/item/08-05-2015-who-issues-best-practices-for-naming-new-human-infectious-diseases>.