

Implications of COVID-19 pandemic on Roma and Travellers communities

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1 Specific implications of the general measures taken to stop the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma and Travellers' communities?

1.1 Type of measures

In **Bulgaria**, the local authorities in several cities applied restrictions of access to and from neighbourhoods with a predominant Roma population. Initially, the restrictions were more lenient, but with the increase of the number of infected persons in the country they were gradually tightened leading to a complete lockdown of some locations.

In **Bulgaria**, the first restrictions of access to and from Roma neighbourhoods were introduced in March 2020 in Kazanlak (Karmen neighbourhood with a population of about 2,000 people),¹ Nova Zagora (Shesti neighbourhood with a population of about 10,000 people),² Sliven (Nadezhda neighbourhood with a population of about 25,000 people),³ and Yambol (Rayna Knyaginya neighbourhood with a population of about 10,000 people).⁴ These restrictions were not introduced due to confirmed cases of infection within the neighbourhoods, but were rather aimed to facilitate the enforcement of the general preventive measures such as physical distancing and restriction of mass gatherings. The measures consisted mostly of setting up police checkpoints and checking the identity of persons entering or leaving the neighbourhoods.

In **Bulgaria**, more serious restrictions of access to and from Roma neighbourhoods were introduced in April 2020. These restrictions were imposed in relation to registered cases of infection in the neighbourhoods and were more severe than those introduced in March. The measures, implemented in Sofia (Fakulteta and Filipovtsi neighbourhoods with a population of about 45,000 people),⁵ Peshtera (Lukovitsa neighbourhood with a population of about 4,000 people),⁶ and Brestovitsa (with a population

¹ Bulgaria, Kazanlak Municipality (Община Казанлък), Order No 387 on introducing anti-epidemic measures ([Заповед № 387 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки](#)), 18 March 2020.

² Bulgaria, Nova Zagora Municipality (Община Нова Загора), Order No РД-12-201 on introducing anti-epidemic measures ([Заповед № РД-12-201 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки](#)), 17 March 2020.

³ Bulgaria, Sliven Municipality (Община Сливен) (2020), 'Access regime is introduced in Nadezhda neighbourhood' (['Въвежда се пропускателен режим в кв. „Надежда“](#)), press release, 18 March 2020.

⁴ Bulgaria, Yambol Municipality (Община Ямбол), Order No РД-02-00257 on introducing anti-epidemic measures ([Заповед № РД-02-00257 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки](#)), 18 March 2020.

⁵ Bulgaria, Sofia Municipality (Столична община) (2020), 'Decisions of the Sofia Operational Headquarters from 15 April' (['Решения на Софийския оперативен щаб от 15 април'](#)), press release, 15 April 2020.

⁶ Bulgaria, Peshtera Municipality (Община Пещера), Order No 185 on introducing anti-epidemic measures ([Заповед № 185 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки](#)), 4 April 2020.



of about 200 people),⁷ consisted not only of setting up police checkpoints, but also of not allowing access to and from the neighbourhoods except for going to work, paying utility bills, visiting a doctor or purchasing food or medicine.

In **Bulgaria**, the last, but also the most severe, restrictions were introduced in the beginning of May 2020 in Rayna Knyaginya neighbourhood in Yambol.⁸ The local authorities in the city locked down the neighbourhood from 4 May to 19 May 2020 after eleven of its residents tested positive for COVID-19 in one day.⁹ Initially, access to and from the neighbourhood was allowed for persons going to work or visiting a doctor or a pharmacy. On 9 May 2020, however, the neighbourhood was completely locked down as a countermeasure against non-compliance with the initially applied restrictions.¹⁰

In **Bulgaria**, in some of the Roma neighbourhoods, where the local authorities introduced restrictions of access, the residents organised protests against the measures. Several such protests took place in Sofia¹¹ and Yambol¹², and during some of them the tension escalated and the police had to intervene to restore order. In Sofia, the situation calmed down after a series of negotiations between representatives of local authorities (deputy mayors of the respective districts), the police, the informal leaders of the local Roma communities and the leader of the Roma oriented political party Euroroma (*Евророма*).¹³ In Yambol, the demonstrations were stopped after the mayor of the city met with the protesters and explained when the measures were going to be lifted.¹⁴

⁷ Segal (*Cera*) (2020), 'Blockade of the Roma neighbourhood in Brestovitsa because of a new outbreak' (['Блокада на ромския квартал в Брестовица заради ново огнище'](#)), *Sega*, 29 April 2020.

⁸ Atanasova D., (*Атанасова, Д.*) (2020), 'New blockade: checkpoints around the Roma neighbourhood in Yambol with the purpose to limit the infection' (['Нова блокада: КПП-та около ромския квартал в Ямбол с цел ограничаване на заразата'](#)), *bTV*, 4 May 2020.

⁹ Nova TV (2020), 'A neighbourhood in Yambol was blocked due to cases of coronavirus' (['Блокираха квартал в Ямбол заради случаи на коронавирус'](#)), *Nova TV*, 5 May 2020.

¹⁰ Nova TV (2020), 'For noncompliance with the measures: full blockade of the Rayna Knyaginya in Yambol' (['Заради неспазване на мерките: пълна блокада на ямболския квартал „Райна Княгиня“'](#)), *Nova TV*, 10 May 2020.

¹¹ Mediapool (2020), 'The residents of Filipovtsi and Fakulteta went out on a peaceful protest' (['Жителите на кварталите „Факултета“ и „Филиповци“ излязоха на мирен протест'](#)), *Mediapool*, 17 April 2020.

¹² Atanasova D., (*Атанасова, Д.*) (2020), 'Blockade is down: the Roma neighbourhood in Yambol was fenced off for 16 days' (['Блокадата пада: Ромският квартал в Ямбол беше заграден 16 дни'](#)), *bTV*, 19 May 2020.

¹³ Segal (*Cera*) (2020), 'Ministry of the Interior: There is no more tension in Fakulteta and Filipovtsi' (['МВР: Вече няма напрежение във Факултета и Филиповци'](#)), *Sega*, 17 April 2020.

¹⁴ Nova TV (2020), 'Protest in the Yambol district "Raina Knyaginya"' (['Протест в ямболския квартал „Райна Княгиня“'](#)), *Nova TV*, 18 May 2020.

In **Bulgaria**, as soon as the first restrictions were imposed in Roma neighbourhoods, the National Operational Headquarters (NOH) (*Национален оперативен щаб, НОЩ*) explicitly noted that the measures were 'not aimed to discriminate' the Roma population and that they were accompanied by increased awareness raising within the local Roma communities carried out by the health authorities and the Roma mediators.¹⁵ Civil society organisations and Roma rights activists, however, expressed concerns that the restrictions were discriminatory, as they applied to Roma neighbourhoods only,¹⁶ and called for their careful implementation in order to prevent situations, which could cause ethnic conflicts.¹⁷ The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) (*Български хелзинкски комитет, БХК*) described the quarantine of Roma neighbourhoods as a discriminatory measure, because, according to the chair of the organisations, being applied on the whole neighbourhood, the restriction was not aimed to prevent the spread of the infection in the community, but rather to protect the rest of the population.¹⁸ Amnesty International expressed concerns that in the Roma neighbourhoods affected by the restrictive measures the authorities have not provided any assistance to the families living there 'to ensure that they can comply with government advice on how to protect against infection such as through regular hand washing, access necessary health care if they have symptoms of COVID-19, and provide for their families during the quarantine'.¹⁹

1.2 Implications of measures

In **Bulgaria**, the restriction of access to and from neighbourhoods with a predominant Roma population had a negative impact on the local communities. According to media reports, in Sofia, after the authorities announced the introduction of restrictions in the Roma neighbourhoods, persons living there were dismissed from work, because their employers were afraid that they were going 'to transmit the infection'. As a consequence, these persons started to experience difficulty paying their

¹⁵ Mediapool (2020), 'A number of municipalities have put Roma neighbourhoods under blockade because of the coronavirus' (['Редица общини поставиха ромски квартали под блокада заради коронавируса'](#)), *Mediapool*, 19 March 2020.

¹⁶ Vaksberg, T. (*Ваксберг, Т.*) (2020), '"We agree with the measures but they must be the same for everyone." What is the police doing in the Roma neighbourhoods' (['Съгласни сме с мерките, но да са еднакви за всички". Какво прави полицията в ромските махали'](#)), *Radio Free Europe*, 24 March 2020.

¹⁷ Bulgarian National Radio (*Българско национално радио*) (2020), 'In Roma neighbourhoods, mediators keep track of people coming back from abroad' (['В ромските квартали медиатори следят за хора, завръщащи се от чужбина'](#)), *Bulgarian National Radio*, 19 March 2020.

¹⁸ Zehirova, Z. (*Зехирова, З.*) (2020), 'Police officers at the entrance to the neighbourhood: security or discrimination during a pandemic' (['Полици на входа на квартала: сигурност или дискриминация по време на пандемия'](#)), *Dnevnik*, 8 April 2020.

¹⁹ Amnesty International (2020), [Stigmatizing quarantines of Roma settlements in Slovakia and Bulgaria](#), Amnesty International Public Statement, 17 April 2020.

bills.²⁰ In Yambol, the residents of the locked down neighbourhood complained that they could not go to work, there were no pharmacies and cash machines within the quarantined zone, and the streets were no longer cleaned.²¹ There is not official data, however, on the number of residents of Roma neighbourhoods who were actually dismissed from work during the time when the access to the neighbourhoods was restricted.

In **Bulgaria**, Roma children were disproportionately affected by the introduction of online distance learning in schools. The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) (*Министерство на образованието и науката, МОН*) announced that at national level about 10 % of students were not included in distance learning due to lack of electronic devices.²² According to the Center for Interethnic Dialog and Tolerance Amalipe (*Център за междуетнически диалог и толерантност Амалипе*), this share was higher among Roma students. The organisation published a study, according to which distance learning had reached a relatively large percentage of Roma students, but the lack of devices and, in some places, internet connection, were impeding the introduction of distance learning as a fully online learning experience. The study, based on a survey among nearly 200 schools with a significant share of students from vulnerable groups, found that about 24 % of the schools were not able to include more than half of their students in distance learning (including six schools with inclusion rate of between 10 % and 25 % and seven schools with a rate of less than 10 %).²³

In **Bulgaria**, according to independent experts, the epidemic risk in Roma neighbourhoods was higher due to multiple factors: return of persons working abroad, mostly from countries with high infection rates like Spain, Italy and Germany (there is no official data on the number of Roma working abroad and actually affected by the epidemic), overcrowding of neighbourhoods and higher intensity of social contacts, lack of water and sanitation, poor health status of the population due to poverty, and restricted access to healthcare due to lack of health insurance. At the same time, the restrictions were disproportionate (compared to those applied in the other neighbourhoods in the same cities), stigmatising (creating the impression that their purpose was not to protect the Roma community against the infection, but to protect the rest of the population from the

²⁰ Zehirova, Z. (Зехирова, З.) (2020), 'Filipovtsi and Fakulteta – special measures and little information' (*'Филиповци' и 'Факултета' – специални мерки и малко информация*), *Dnevnik*, 27 April 2020.

²¹ bTV (2020), 'The situation in the Roma neighbourhood of Yambol is calm' (*'Обстановката в ромския квартал на Ямбол е спокойна'*), *bTV*, 19 May 2020.

²² Atanasova, V. (Атанасова, В.) (2020), 'How will students without devices graduate' (*'Как ще завършат годината учениците без устройства'*), *Dnevnik*, 13 May 2020.

²³ Kolev, D. (Колев, Д.) and Krumova, T. (Крумова, Т.) (2020), [Distant learning: an opportunity for the development of education or a prerequisite for deepening the educational inequalities](#), Veliko Tarnovo, Center for Interethnic Dialog and Tolerance Amalipe (*Център за междуетнически диалог и толерантност Амалипе*).

Roma) and stereotyping (describing Roma as less disciplined than the rest of the population).²⁴

In **Bulgaria**, there is no publicly available information on the implications of measures on health, housing and food security.

1.3 Estimates of the scale of the impact

In **Bulgaria**, according to official data published by the Employment Agency (EA) (*Агенция по заетостта, АЗ*), the total number of newly registered unemployed persons in April 2020 was 87,063, which was more than two times higher than in March 2020 and more than four times higher than in April 2019. Of all newly registered unemployed persons in April 2020, 5.8 % had self-identified as Roma (self-identification is done voluntarily by filling in the respective field in the registration application).²⁵ The official data did not show a disproportionate increase in the number of newly registered unemployed Roma during the state of emergency: in March 2020, out of a total number of 38,869 newly registered unemployed persons, 7.6 % had self-identified as Roma.²⁶ There is no available data about the types of Roma occupations affected hardest by the pandemic. According to the Employment Agency (EA) (*Агенция по заетостта, АЗ*), the types of occupations affected hardest during the state of emergency were those related to tourism (hotels and restaurants), retail, manufacturing, and culture, sports and entertainment. However, data about the share of Roma in these sectors, who were affected by the pandemic, is not available.²⁷

In **Bulgaria**, according to the media reports, a special access regime was introduced in a total of eight Roma neighbourhoods: Karmen neighbourhood in Kazanlak,²⁸ Shesti neighbourhood in Nova Zagora,²⁹ Nadezhda neighbourhood in Sliven,³⁰ Rayna Knyaginia neighbourhood in Yambol

²⁴ Zehirova, Z. (*Зехирова, З.*) (2020), 'Alexey Pamporov, sociologist: The coronavirus taught us that we need each other as a society' (['Алексей Пампоров, социолог: Коронавирусът ни научи, че сме си нужни един на друг като общество.'](#)), *Dnevnik*, 29 April 2020.

²⁵ Bulgaria, Employment Agency (*Агенция по заетостта*) (2020), Monthly bulletin – April 2020 ([Месечен бюлетин – Април 2020](#)).

²⁶ Bulgaria, Employment Agency (*Агенция по заетостта*) (2020), Monthly bulletin – March 2020 ([Месечен бюлетин – Март 2020](#)).

²⁷ Bulgaria, Employment Agency (*Агенция по заетостта*) (2020), Monthly bulletin – April 2020 ([Месечен бюлетин – Април 2020](#)).

²⁸ Bulgaria, Kazanlak Municipality (*Община Казанлък*), Order No 387 on introducing anti-epidemic measures ([Заповед № 387 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки](#)), 18 March 2020.

²⁹ Bulgaria, Nova Zagora Municipality (*Община Нова Загора*), Order No РД-12-201 on introducing anti-epidemic measures ([Заповед № РД-12-201 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки](#)), 17 March 2020.

³⁰ Bulgaria, Sliven Municipality (*Община Сливен*) (2020), 'Access regime is introduced in Nadezhda neighbourhood' (['Въвежда се пропускателен режим в кв. „Надежда“](#)), press release, 18 March 2020.

(twice),³¹ Fakulteta and Filipovtsi neighbourhoods in Sofia,³² Lukovitsa neighbourhood in Peshtera,³³ and the Roma neighbourhood in Brestovitsa.³⁴ In a number of other Roma neighbourhoods across the country, where the access was not restricted, the local authorities introduced curfews to prevent mass gatherings.³⁵

In **Bulgaria**, an analysis of the non-governmental organisation Center for Interethnic Dialog and Tolerance Amalipe (*Център за междуетнически диалог и толерантност Амалипе*) identified four main challenges for the Roma during the crises: poverty, restricted access to education, unemployment and increase of anti-Roma attitudes. During the pandemic, an increased number of Roma families were affected by extreme poverty, some of which had not been in this situation before the crises. Despite some measures undertaken by the government, many Roma children remained excluded from online distance learning either because they had no electronic devices or because they had limited or no access to internet. The increase in unemployment across the country had a stronger impact on Roma, the majority of whom were engaged in low-skilled labour or seasonal work. The setting up of checkpoints around Roma neighbourhoods also contributed to the increase of unemployment. The fact that these restrictions were justified with the non-compliance with the anti-epidemic measures on the part of Roma led to an increase of anti-Roma attitudes in the society. In conclusion, the analysis noted that some of these problems might worsen in the future because, during the crises, many Roma families living and working in Western Europe had lost their jobs and income, and had returned to Bulgaria.³⁶ There is no official data on the number of Roma working abroad, but according to a national representative survey done in 2019, the share of persons with relatives working abroad was higher among the Roma

³¹ Bulgaria, Yambol Municipality (*Община Ямбол*), Order No РД-02-00257 on introducing anti-epidemic measures ([Заповед № РД-02-00257 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки](#)), 18 March 2020; Atanasova D., (*Атанасова, Д.*) (2020), 'New blockade: checkpoints around the Roma neighbourhood in Yambol with the purpose to limit the infection' (['Нова блокада: КПП-та около ромския квартал в Ямбол с цел ограничаване на заразата'](#)), bTV, 4 May 2020.

³² Bulgaria, Sofia Municipality (*Столична община*) (2020), 'Decisions of the Sofia Operational Headquarters from 15 April' (['Решения на Софийския оперативен щаб от 15 април'](#)), press release, 15 April 2020.

³³ Bulgaria, Peshtera Municipality (*Община Пещера*), Order No 185 on introducing anti-epidemic measures ([Заповед № 185 за въвеждане на противоепидемични мерки](#)), 4 April 2020.

³⁴ Sega (*Сера*) (2020), 'Blockade of the Roma neighbourhood in Brestovitsa because of a new outbreak' (['Блокада на ромския квартал в Брестовица заради ново огнище'](#)), Sega, 29 April 2020.

³⁵ AFIS (АФИС) (2019), 'One third of Bulgarians are "mobile Europeans"' (['Една трета от българите са „мобилни европейци“'](#)), press release, 2 April 2019.

³⁶ Kolev, D. (*Колев, Д.*) (2020), [Roma community in Bulgaria and COVID 19](#), Veliko Tarnovo, Center for Interethnic Dialog and Tolerance Amalipe (*Център за междуетнически диалог и толерантност Амалипе*).

population (51 %) than among persons of Turkish (46 %) and Bulgarian (29 %) ethnic origin.³⁷

In **Bulgaria**, Amnesty International expressed concerns that, while persistent inequalities had left many Roma in an even more precarious position during the pandemic, the measures instituted by public authorities were likely to push many Roma further into poverty and social isolation.³⁸

In **Bulgaria**, there is no available data on the difference of impact on Roma women and children.

2 Specific measures to address the implications of the pandemic on Roma and Travellers

2.1 Measures to tackle the spread of the virus specifically among Roma and Travellers communities

In **Bulgaria**, increased medical testing among Roma communities was done mostly in the neighbourhoods, which were locked down. Thus, for example, after the two Roma neighbourhoods in Sofia were locked down in April, increased testing was carried out among their residents. The local health authorities reported that for the first three days of the lockdown (22-24 April) a total of 695 rapid tests were done and 36 persons tested positive. Those persons were tested with PCR and for nine of them the positive result was confirmed.³⁹ Overall, however, official information about the number of tested persons from Roma neighbourhoods and the results of the testing were not publicly announced.

In **Bulgaria**, the local authorities across the country implemented a variety of approaches to prevent the spread of the virus in Roma neighbourhoods. The local authorities in Sofia introduced regular (twice a day) street cleaning, garbage collection and disinfection in the two Roma neighbourhoods Fakulteta and Filipovtsi. Volunteers from the community were also involved to provide assistance at the police checkpoints. They were handing out declarations to the persons wishing to pass through the checkpoints and were helping those of them were not able to fill them in.⁴⁰ The local authorities in Burgas used a drone to measure the temperature of the

³⁷ Kolev, D. (Колев, Д.) (2020), [Roma community in Bulgaria and COVID 19](#), Veliko Tarnovo, Center for Interethnic Dialog and Tolerance Amalipe (Център за междуетнически диалог и толерантност Амалипе).

³⁸ Amnesty International (2020), [Stigmatizing quarantines of Roma settlements in Slovakia and Bulgaria](#), Amnesty International Public Statement, 17 April 2020.

³⁹ Zehirova, Z. (Зехирова, З.) (2020), "Filipovtsi" and "Fakulteta" – special measures and little information' ([„Филиповци“ и „Факултета“ - специални мерки и малко информация](#)), *Dnevnik*, 27 April 2020.

⁴⁰ Sofia Municipality (Столична община) (2020), 'Roma will help with the filling in of the declarations at the checkpoints in Fakulteta and Filipovtsi' (['Роми ще помагат на КПП-та за попълване на декларации във Факултета и Филиповци'](#)), press release, 17 April 2020.

persons living in the Roma neighbourhoods.⁴¹ This approach was criticised by Amnesty International for being targeted exclusively at the Roma population unlike other European countries, which had used drone technology gauge temperatures of groups of people.⁴² The local authorities in Yambol disinfected the Roma neighbourhood from the air by dispersing, using an airplane, about 3,000 litres of disinfectant. According to local authorities, the substance used was completely harmless for the population.⁴³

In **Bulgaria**, the Roma population was subject to the same rules on physical distancing and quarantine applicable to the rest of the population. To enforce these rules, in some Roma neighbourhoods the police undertook additional measures, mostly consisting of patrolling the area or introducing curfews.⁴⁴

In **Bulgaria**, human rights activists expressed concerns about the lack of information about COVID-19 in Roma language on national TV.⁴⁵ Within the Roma communities, information about the symptoms and prevention of COVID-19 was disseminated by health mediators, including through a special easy-to-read leaflet.⁴⁶

In **Bulgaria**, there is no official data on measures applied by public authorities to provide Roma communities affected by the restrictions with running water and sanitation. The lack of such measures was mentioned by Amnesty International, which expressed concerns that, according to the organisation's own research (not specifically referred to in the publication), the authorities had failed 'to provide the Roma families living in affected settlements with the necessary means to protect themselves' and 'to ensure that they have adequate access to water, sanitation, food, hygiene products and health care'.⁴⁷

⁴¹ 24 Chasa (24 часа) (2020), 'The mediators - with a leading role in the gypsy neighbourhoods, but without the police there is no order' (['Медиаторите - с главна роля в циганските махали, но без полицията няма ред'](#)), 24 Chasa, 6 April 2020.

⁴² Amnesty International (2020), [Stigmatizing quarantines of Roma settlements in Slovakia and Bulgaria](#), Amnesty International Public Statement, 17 April 2020.

⁴³ Bulgarian National Television (Българска национална телевизия) (2020), 'The Rayna Knyaginya neighbourhood in Yambol was disinfected from the air' (['Дезинфекцираха квартал „Райна Княгиня“ в Ямбол от въздух'](#)), Bulgarian National Television, 14 May 2020.

⁴⁴ 24 Chasa (24 часа) (2020), 'The mediators - with a leading role in the gypsy neighbourhoods, but without the police there is no order' (['Медиаторите - с главна роля в циганските махали, но без полицията няма ред'](#)), 24 Chasa, 6 April 2020.

⁴⁵ Metodieva, Y. (Методиева, Ю.) (2020), 'Why are you silent on minorities, Mr. President!' (['Защо се умълчавате за малцинствата, господин Президент!'](#)), Marginalia, 24 March 2020.

⁴⁶ National Network of Health Mediators (Национална мрежа на здравните медиатори) (2020), 'We are raising funds from donations to fight the Coronavirus epidemic' (['Набираме средства от дарения за борба с епидемията от Коронавирус'](#)), press release, 22 March 2020.

⁴⁷ Amnesty International (2020), [Stigmatizing quarantines of Roma settlements in Slovakia and Bulgaria](#), Amnesty International Public Statement, 17 April 2020.



2.2 Measures to support Roma and Travelers communities in regards to medical and social assistance

In **Bulgaria**, a number of measures to support Roma communities in regards to medical and social assistance were implemented through the network of health mediators. The network consists of about 200 health mediators working in 131 municipalities. During the pandemic the health mediators were involved in a variety of activities in support of Roma communities, including: provision of information about the virus and the protection measures against the spread of the infection; communication with individuals and families under quarantine to explain the importance of compliance with isolation; facilitation of access to health professionals when such is necessary; delivery of prescription books and other documents between institutions and patients and provision of assistance for accessing medication; purchase of medicines for patients with chronic diseases, etc.⁴⁸ In March 2020, the National Network of Health Mediators (NNHM) (*Национална мрежа на здравните медиатори*, НМЗМ) issued a set of guidelines to health mediators in relation to the prevention of the spread of COVID-19 epidemic. The guidelines included recommendations to health mediators as to how they could assist the communities they worked with, what safety measures they should apply when carrying out fieldwork (including instructions for the use of protective equipment), and how to inform the communities about the virus and the necessary preventive measures (including an easy-read leaflet for distribution within the community).⁴⁹ During the state of emergency, health mediators also started providing assistance not related to healthcare such as delivery of food, disinfection of public places, distribution of textbooks to children not having devices for online learning, etc.⁵⁰

In **Bulgaria**, there is no publicly available information specifically targeting Roma women and children.

2.3 Measures addressing the needs of Roma children

In **Bulgaria**, according to a study by the Center for Interethnic Dialog and Tolerance Amalipe (*Център за междуетнически диалог и толерантност Амалипе*), Roma children were disproportionately affected by the

⁴⁸ National Network of Health Mediators (*Национална мрежа на здравните медиатори*) (2020), 'We are raising funds from donations to fight the Coronavirus epidemic' (['Набираме средства от дарения за борба с епидемията от Коронавирус'](#)), press release, 22 March 2020.

⁴⁹ National Network of Health Mediators (*Национална мрежа на здравните медиатори*) (2020), Guidelines for health mediators - Coronavirus (['Насоки за здравни медиатори - Коронавирус'](#)), 19 March 2020.

⁵⁰ Angelov, G. (*Ангелов, Г.*) (2020), 'Coronavirus in Bulgaria: who helps the Roma' (['Коронавирус в България: кой помага на ромите?'](#)), *Deutsche Welle Bulgaria*, 9 April 2020.

introduction of online distance learning mostly due to lack of devices and/or internet connection at home.⁵¹

According to media reports, the measures undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) (*Министерство на образованието и науката, МОИ*) included: provision of 461 schools with a total of 1,986 laptops (including 500 equipped with My-Fi devices for internet access with prepaid three-month unlimited access); conclusion of agreements with mobile operators for providing internet connection to students at preferential prices; and revision of the school financing rules to enable schools to cover the internet expenses of students who could afford internet at home.⁵² However, there is no publicly available information on the share of Roma children, who had benefitted from these measures.⁵³ The list of all schools, which received laptops from the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) (*Министерство на образованието и науката, МОИ*), is not publicly available.

In **Bulgaria**, the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) (*Министерство на образованието и науката, МОИ*) undertook measures to improve internet connectivity in Roma neighbourhoods. Contracts were concluded with two of the mobile operators in the country for providing Wi-Fi internet connection in Roma neighbourhoods in the cities of Burgas (Gorno Ezerovo with a population of about 2,800 people, Dolno Ezerovo with a population of about 5,500 people, and Pobeda with a population of about 7,000 people), Sliven (Nadezhda neighbourhood with a population of about 25,000 people), Blagoevgrad (Predel neighbourhood), Plovdiv (Stolipinovo and Sheker Mahala neighbourhoods with a population of about 50,000 people), Sofia (Fakulteta neighbourhood with a population of about 45,000 people), Kardzhali (Borovets neighbourhood), Vidin (Nov Pat neighbourhood with a population of about 5,000 households), and Pazardzhik (Iztok neighbourhood with a population of about 3,500 people).⁵⁴

In **Bulgaria**, the Center for Interethnic Dialog and Tolerance Amalipe (*Център за междуетнически диалог и толерантност Амалипе*) launched a donation campaign for collecting electronic devices for Roma children who were not included in the online learning process due to the lack of such

⁵¹ Kolev, D. (Колев, Д.) and Krumova, T. (Крумова, Т.) (2020), [Distant learning: an opportunity for the development of education or a prerequisite for deepening the educational inequalities](#), Veliko Tarnovo, Center for Interethnic Dialog and Tolerance Amalipe (*Център за междуетнически диалог и толерантност Амалипе*).

⁵² Georgieva, S. (Георгиева, С.) (2020), 'For thousands of children, e-learning is on paper' (['За хиляди деца електронното обучение е на хартия'](#)), *Sega*, 1 May 2020.

⁵³ Georgieva, S. (Георгиева, С.) (2020), 'For thousands of children, e-learning is on paper' (['За хиляди деца електронното обучение е на хартия'](#)), *Sega*, 1 May 2020.

⁵⁴ Bulgaria, Ministry of Education and Science (*Министерство на образованието и науката*) (2020), Building of wireless (WiFi type) zones in order to support the learning processes ([Изграждане на безжични \(тип WiFi\) зони, с цел подпомагане на учебните процеси](#)), 8 April 2020.

devices. The campaign, entitled 'Old technology for a new beginning' („Стара техника за ново начало"), covered the organisation's own network of more than 200 schools (with about 40,000 students), established in the framework of the project 'Every student will be an excellent student' ('Всеки ученик ще бъде отличник').⁵⁵ As of 26 May 2020, the campaign managed to collect and distribute among children about 600 devices. However, the initial survey, conducted among the schools participating in the network, showed that about 6,600 children had no devices enabling them to participate in online learning activities.⁵⁶

3 Any negative public reactions targeting Roma and Travellers or positive change in attitudes towards them

3.1 Negative public reactions

In **Bulgaria**, according to Amnesty International, the introduction of restrictive measures in Roma neighbourhoods was accompanied by 'an increasingly hostile anti-Roma rhetoric, frequently stoked by politicians', who were exploiting the public health crises to 'present Roma as a collective threat to the general population'.⁵⁷ Representatives of the political party IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement (IMRO-BND) (*ВМРО – Българско национално движение*, ВМРО-БНД), a junior coalition partner in the government, made several statements referring to Roma as a potential threat for spreading the infection. On 18 March 2020, the party's vice-chairman and Member of the European Parliament since 2014 Angel Dzhambazki called for locking down Roma 'ghettos', because this part of the population was the 'hardest one to get used to responsibilities'. In his statement, Dzhambazki explicitly noted that his purpose was not to 'divide persons by ethnicity and place of residence' or to 'turn one part of the Bulgarian citizens against another', but at the same time expressed his concerns that, due to the poor living conditions making it harder to maintain high levels of hygiene, Roma neighbourhoods could 'turn out to be the real nests of contagion'.⁵⁸ The statement was quoted by many national and some foreign media.⁵⁹ In a series of posts on his Facebook page (with more than

⁵⁵ For the full list of schools participating in the network and their location, see the [website](#) of the project.

⁵⁶ Nenova, Ts. (Ненова, Ц.) (2020), "Old technology for a new beginning" or the everlasting of humanity' („Стара техника за ново начало" или за непреходността на човешината'), *NGO Information Portal*, 26 May 2020.

⁵⁷ Amnesty International (2020), [Stigmatizing quarantines of Roma settlements in Slovakia and Bulgaria](#), Amnesty International Public Statement, 17 April 2020.

⁵⁸ 24 Chasa (24 часа) (2020), 'Dzhambazki from IMRO: Lock down the ghettos everywhere' (*Джамбазки от ВМРО: Затворете гетата навсякъде*), *24 Chasa*, 18 March 2020.

⁵⁹ For example, see Krasimirov, A. and Tsoleva, Ts. (2020), '[Bulgaria's Roma say some coronavirus measures are discriminatory](#)', *Reuters*, 24 March 2020. For an overview of publications in German sources, see Deutsche Welle Bulgaria (2020), 'In Bulgaria: "If the coronavirus reaches Roma neighborhoods, there will be a catastrophe"' (*В България: "Ако*

70,000 followers), the same politician regularly referred to Roma as a potential threat and called for the introduction of more restrictive measures in Roma neighbourhoods using hashtags like #GhettosUnderQuarantine (*#ГеттатаПодКарантина*), #LawsForAll (*#ЗакониЗаВсички*) and #NoToGypsyOutrage (*#НеНаЦиганскияПроизвол*).⁶⁰ In response to his posts, human rights activists sent a petition to the Bulgarian Members of the European Parliament calling them to publicly differentiate from the statements of their colleague,⁶¹ and another one to the Petitions Committee of the European Parliament calling for the sanctioning of Angel Dzhambazki as a Member of the European Parliament for violating the fundamental rights of Roma.⁶² In an interview for one of the national TV channel, another member of the same political party expressed an opinion that the lock down of Roma neighbourhoods had led to a decrease of the criminality coming from these neighbourhoods.⁶³ Yet another member of the same political party was quoted posting on Facebook that in the locked down Roma neighbourhoods 'gypsies are rebelling because they are not used to obeying the law' and because 'they are used perceiving the state as a dairy cow for benefits and allowances for children, but not as a supreme body that would demand anything in return from them'.⁶⁴

In **Bulgaria**, several senior public officials publicly expressed opinions in favour of the application of more restrictive measures on Roma. In an interview for one of the national TV channels, the Minister of the Interior shared the opinion that coercive measures should be used in Roma neighbourhoods, because the majority of their residents did not understand what was going on.⁶⁵ A former Minister of the Interior publicly expressed concerns that if Roma neighbourhoods were not locked down the next outbreak would come from them, because their residents were not keeping social distance, many of them were illiterate and the messages were not

[коронавирусът стигне до ромските квартали, ще настъпи катастрофа"\), Deutsche Welle Bulgaria, 27 March 2020.](#)

⁶⁰ For all posts of the vice-chairman of IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement (*ВМРО – Българско национално движение*), see his public [Facebook page](#).

⁶¹ Committee of Roma in the European Union (*Комитет на ромите в Европейския съюз*) (2020), Petition to the Bulgarian Members of the European Parliament to differentiate from Angel Dzhambazki ([Петиция до българските евродепутати да се разграничат от Ангел Джамбазки](#)), 20 March 2020.

⁶² Marginalia (2020), 'A petition against hate speech used by Angel Dzhambazki is gaining momentum' ([Петиция срещу езика на омразата използван поредно от Ангел Джамбазки набира скорост](#)), *Marginalia*, 7 May 2020.

⁶³ Nova Television (*Нова телевизия*) (2020), 'IMRO want strict measures against crime' ([От ВМРО искат строги мерки срещу престъпността](#)), *Nova Television*, 20 May 2020.

⁶⁴ Darik News (2020), 'Sidi: The Roma are rebelling because they are not used to obeying the law' ([Сиди: Ромите се бунтуват, защото не са свикнали да спазват законите](#)), *Darik News*, 17 April 2020.

⁶⁵ Nova Television (*Нова телевизия*) (2020), 'Mladen Marinov: Coercion will have to be imposed in Roma neighborhoods' ([Младен Маринов: Ще се налага принуда в ромските квартали](#)), *Nova Television*, 22 March 2020.

reaching them.⁶⁶ The Sofia Regional Prosecutor's Office (SRPO) (*Софийска районна прокуратура*, СРП) publicly recommended the setting up of checkpoints to control the movement from and to the Roma neighbourhoods in Sofia noting that this measure was necessary in response to 'information, published in the media, about gathering and movement of groups of people (more than two adults) in neighbourhoods in the city of Sofia inhabited by persons of different ethnic background, clearly demonstrating their unwillingness to comply with the applicable restrictions'.⁶⁷ In an interview for a local online news outlet, a lawyer from Plovdiv and former member of the local municipal council shared the opinion that the majority of infected persons in the country were Roma, but the authorities were not disclosing this information due to 'misunderstood political correctness'.⁶⁸ In an interview for a national newspaper, a Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy, speaking about the impact of the crises on the employment of Roma, shared the opinion that 'the usual helplessness with which some Roma justified their unemployment, low income and low standard of living, convinced that the state is obliged to do something for them, will no longer work' and that 'the time has come for them to do something for the state in order to improve both their social status and to help our country'.⁶⁹

3.2 Positive change in attitudes

In **Bulgaria**, there was no major positive change in attitudes towards the Roma. However, there were some manifestations of social solidarity and examples of and local initiatives transcending ethnic boundaries. The local health mediators, working with Roma communities, started providing various forms of assistance beyond their responsibilities related to healthcare such as delivery of food, production and distribution of protective equipment (face masks), disinfection of public places, distribution of textbooks to children not having devices for online learning, etc.⁷⁰ The Roma Standing Conference (*Постоянна ромска конференция*) and its partners issued an official statement calling for a change of political rhetoric related

⁶⁶ Novini.bg (2020), 'A coronavirus bomb could explode in the ghettos, a former interior minister warned' (['В гетата може да избухне бомба от коронавирус, предупреди бивш вътрешен министър'](#)), *Novini.bg*, 25 March 2020.

⁶⁷ Bulgaria, Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Bulgaria (*Прокуратура на Република България*) (2020), 'Information from the Sofia Regional Prosecutor's Office' (['Съобщение от Софийска районна прокуратура'](#)), press release, 19 March 2020.

⁶⁸ Bikova, D. (*Бикова, Д.*) (2020), 'Famous Plovdiv lawyer: Why is it not made clear that 90 % of patients with coronavirus in our country are Roma?' (['Известен пловдивски адвокат: Защо не се каже ясно, че 90 % от болните с коронавирус у нас са ромите?'](#)), *Plovdiv24.bg*, 16 April 2020.

⁶⁹ Petrova, S. (*Петрова, С.*) (2020), 'Solidarity during a pandemic' (['Солидарност по време на пандемия'](#)), *Trud*, 4 June 2020.

⁷⁰ Angelov, G. (*Ангелов, Г.*) (2020), 'Coronavirus in Bulgaria: who helps the Roma' (['Коронавирус в България: кой помага на ромите?'](#)), *Deutsche Welle Bulgaria*, 9 April 2020.

to Roma in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷¹ The local authorities in Sliven organised a discussion with representatives of the Roma community in the city to elaborate a common strategy for preventing the spread of COVID-19.⁷² In Samokov, volunteers assisted the local authorities with the delivery of food and essential goods to Roma families.⁷³ In Plovdiv, residents of the local Roma neighbourhood Stolipinovo launched an online blog to bridge the Roma community with the rest of the population.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Roma Standing Conference (*Постоянна ромска конференция*) (2020), 'The enemy is not the Roma, but the virus' (['Врагът не са ромите, а вирусът'](#)), press release, 27 March 2020.

⁷² Sliven Press (2020), 'Institutions and Roma leaders discuss joint action against coronavirus in Nadezhda' (['Институции и ромски лидери обсъждаха общи действия срещу коронавируса в „Надежда“'](#)), *Sliven Press*, 25 April 2020.

⁷³ Bulgarian National Radio (*Българско национално радио*) (2020), 'Volunteers to help the Roma from Samokov' (['Доброволци в помощ на ромите от Самоков'](#)), *Bulgarian National Radio*, 23 April 2020.

⁷⁴ Bozhilova, V. (*Божилова, С.*) (2020), 'Coronavirus in Bulgaria: who helps the Roma' (['„Филибелии“ – това е гласът на Столипиново'](#)), *Deutsche Welle Bulgaria*, 4 May 2020.