

# **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**

*Focus on:*

- *lockdowns of localities*
- *restriction of movement*
- *closure of businesses*

The Czech government declared a state of emergency on 12 March based on Crisis Act No. 240/2000 Coll.<sup>1</sup> and the state of emergency was lifted on 17 May.<sup>2</sup> While it is anticipated that the special crisis measures and the concomitant economic downturn have negatively affected the lives of Czech Roma, the immediate impact of the measures is unclear.<sup>3</sup>

No ministerial or governmental measures target individual Roma people or communities.

### **1.2 Implications of measures**

*Focus on:*

- *Employment*

It is expected that many Roma may have lost their jobs since the beginning of the special measures in connection with the pandemic in March, but there are no estimates of the scale of job loss among Roma.<sup>4</sup>

- *Health*

There are no specific estimates or information (official or from civil society or the media) on the scale of the implications of the measures on the health of Roma, which leads us to believe that the number of Czech Roma who have been infected is very low.<sup>5</sup>

- *Education*

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<sup>1</sup> Czech Republic, Crisis Act No. 240/2000 Coll. ([krizový zákon č. 240/2000 Sb.](#)), 9 August 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Government of the Czech Republic (2020), Government Resolution from 30 April 2020 No. 485 ([Usnesení vlády České republiky ze dne 30. dubna 2020 č. 485](#)).

<sup>3</sup> Telephone interview with the Secretariat of the Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs and the Government Council for National Minorities of the Czech Republic on 12 June 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Telephone interview with the Secretariat of the Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs and the Government Council for National Minorities of the Czech Republic on 12 June 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Telephone interview with the Secretariat of the Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs and the Government Council for National Minorities of the Czech Republic on 12 June 2020.

On 11 March primary and secondary schools as well as universities were closed.<sup>6</sup> School reopened gradually and on 25 May a maximum of 15 children from the first four grades could return to school.<sup>7</sup>

There are no official data on the impact school closures have had on Roma children, but consultations with both governmental sources<sup>8</sup> and NGOs<sup>9</sup> suggest that children from socially excluded localities (who are often Roma) have had inadequate access to online learning and children from poor families may have been particularly negatively affected (for details, see section 2.3).<sup>10</sup>

According to the NGO People in Need the impact of school closures will be more apparent in the upcoming school year as many children may have bad marks due to their inability to fully participate in online learning.<sup>11</sup>

- *Housing*

Little is known of the impact of the coronavirus crisis measures on the housing situation of Czech Roma. There are no reports on unofficial evictions in connection with the pandemic, but in April a number of NGOs and think tanks published an open letter<sup>12</sup> requesting that municipalities cancel the system of declaring some areas ineligible for housing benefits (a 'no-benefits housing zone' - bezdoplatkové zóny) system in order to mitigate the potential negative effects of the pandemic and support poor people in their housing stability.

A 2017 amendment to the Act on Aid to People in Material Distress<sup>13</sup> gives municipalities the option to declare an area a 'no-benefits housing zone', where tenants signing a new rental contract are not eligible for housing benefits. NGOs have criticised this measure claiming that it overwhelmingly

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Health (2020), Special Measure No. MZDR 10676/2020-1/MIN/KAN ([Mimořádné opatření Č. j.: MZDR 10676/2020-1/MIN/KAN](#)) from 10 March 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Health (2020), Annex No. 3 of Government Resolution from 18 May 2020 No. 555 ([Příloha č. 3 usnesení vlády ze dne 18. května 2020 č. 555](#)).

<sup>8</sup> Telephone interview with the Secretariat of the Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs and the Government Council for National Minorities of the Czech Republic on 12 June 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Telephone interviews with the NGOs Slovo 21 and People in Need on 12 June 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Romea.cz (2020), 'Assistance for many Romani students is still needed. The coronavirus may cause the gap between rich and poor students grow, say experts from the organisation ROMEA' ([Pomoc pro mnohé romské studenty je stále potřebná. Koronavirus může ještě více rozevřít nůžky mezi bohatými a chudými, říkají expertky organizace ROMEA](#)), 24 April 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Telephone interview with NGO People in Need on 12 June 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Center for Social Issues SPOT (2020), 'Appeal to restore equal access to the housing allowance for all citizens of the Czech Republic' ([Výzva k obnovení rovného přístupu občanů České republiky k doplatku na bydlení](#)), press release 3 April 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Czech Republic, Act No. 98/2017 Coll. on an amendment to the Act on Aid to People in Material Distress No. 111/2006 Coll., as amended, and the Act on State Social Support No. 117/1995 Coll., as amended ([Zákon č. 98/2017 Sb., kterým se mění zákon č. 111/2006 Sb., o pomoci v hmotné nouzi, ve znění pozdějších předpisů, a zákon č. 117/1995 Sb., o státní sociální podpoře, ve znění pozdějších předpisů](#)), 5 April 2017.

targets Roma people and prevents them from relocating.<sup>14</sup> According to the last (2015) country-wide research mapping socially excluded localities the proportion of households which in 2014 received housing benefits is highest at socially excluded localities, where the majority of inhabitants are Roma.<sup>15</sup> It may thus be presumed that many Roma living in the Czech Republic are dependent on housing benefits and measures curbing housing benefits overwhelmingly negatively affect Roma people.

An article from the online newspaper *Deník Referendum* from 7 May reported that in a hostel predominantly inhabited by Roma in the city of Ústí nad Labem the owner of the hostel used inappropriate language in communication with inhabitants whose children were playing outside (even though no official ban on being outdoors was in place).<sup>16</sup>

- *Food security*

Media reports indicate that at least some Roma communities were threatened by food insecurity.<sup>17,18</sup> The organisation Romano Jasnica was reported to have encountered a fifty percent increase in the demand for food packages in the town of Trmice.<sup>19</sup>

- *Water and sanitation*

No issues information.

### 1.3 Estimates of the scale of the impact

*Focus on:*

- *Number of communities affected by lockdowns*
- *Magnitude of pandemic-induced poverty*

No communities with a high number of Roma inhabitants have been placed under targeted lockdown or quarantine or have in any way been singled out

<sup>14</sup> Roma Civil Monitor (2019), [Civil society monitoring report on implementation of the national Roma integration strategy in the Czech Republic: Assessing the progress in four key policy areas of the strategy](#), Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> GAC (2015), [Analysis of socially excluded localities in the Czech Republic](#).

<sup>16</sup> Dvořáková, P. (2020), 'And you believe the virus is real? Socially excluded localities in pandemic times' ([A vy na virus věříte? Sociálně vyloučené lokality v době pandemie](#)), *Deník Referendum*, 7 May 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Romea.cz (2020), Emil Voráč: 'Government measures in connection with the COVID-19 disease did not stop us; the poorest socially excluded localities were largely forgotten' ([Emil Voráč: Vládní opatření související s nákazou COVID-19 nás nezastavily, na ty nejchudší vyloučené lokality se dost zapomělo](#)), 30 April 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Dvořáková, P. (2020), 'And you believe the virus is real? Socially excluded localities in pandemic times' ([A vy na virus věříte? Sociálně vyloučené lokality v době pandemie](#)), *Deník Referendum*, 7 May 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Dvořáková, P. (2020), 'And you believe the virus is real? Socially excluded localities in pandemic times' ([A vy na virus věříte? Sociálně vyloučené lokality v době pandemie](#)), *Deník Referendum*, 7 May 2020.

by authorities for special intervention measures (except in housing, see section 2.2).<sup>20</sup>

- *Types of Roma and Traveller occupations affected hardest*

No data identified.

- *Difference of impact on Roma women and children*

No data identified for Roma women. For children, see section 2.3 on education.

## **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 Traveller communities**

*Please focus on:*

- *Medical testing*

No data to report in this section. No Roma communities are known to have undergone targeted medical testing.<sup>21</sup>

- *Physical distancing*

No data to report in this section. There is no reason to believe that any Roma communities had high infection rates.

- *Quarantine*

In the Ostrava region authorities responded by allocating guest houses where Roma returning from the United Kingdom who did not have independent housing could spend their mandatory quarantine time.<sup>22</sup> There were no reports of discriminatory practices or abuse against quarantined Roma by authorities in the media or other sources.

- *Provision of running water and sanitation to communities without it*

No data identified.

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<sup>20</sup> Telephone interview with the Secretariat of the Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs and the Government Council for National Minorities of the Czech Republic on 12 June 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Telephone interview with the Secretariat of the Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs and the Government Council for National Minorities of the Czech Republic on 12 June 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Moravskoslezský deník.cz (2020), 'The first Roma living in the United Kingdom have returned to the Moravian Silesian region' ([Do Moravskoslezského kraje se vrátili první Romové žijící ve Velké Británii](#)), 16 April 2020.

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

Please focus on:

- Any related phenomena in the key thematic areas addressed in question 1

**Housing.** Media sources reported that up to three hundred Roma of Czech origin have returned to the Czech Republic from the United Kingdom since March and many more are contemplating their return as well. According to the newspaper Lidovky.cz, returning families normally did not have a negative COVID-19 test or independent housing in the Czech Republic, and thus they spent their obligatory 14-day quarantine with extended family members.<sup>23</sup> The Association of Roma Entrepreneurs and Alliances of the Czech Republic (Asociace romských podnikatelů a spolků ČR) requested that (1) authorities should conduct PCR COVID-19 tests on all people returning from abroad; (2) returnees from abroad who do not have independent living arrangements and have no other choice but to quarantine with their extended families should be given appropriate temporary accommodation; (3) all people who are found to have a positive PCR test and are under mandatory quarantine should be monitored by authorities.<sup>24</sup> In the Ostrava region authorities have responded by allocating guest houses where Roma returnees who do not have independent housing could spend their mandatory quarantine time.<sup>25</sup> Fears that people returning from the UK would contribute to the further spread of the virus have proved unfounded as the number of infected Roma remains very low.<sup>26</sup>

**Food security.** In an interview with the news agency Romea.cz the director of the Roma organisation Khamoro claimed that the government has largely ignored the specific needs of socially excluded localities (where many Roma people live).<sup>27</sup> In March and April the organisation stepped up its support of the Chodov area, where it was supposedly the sole provider of social support services and food packages.

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<sup>23</sup> Křížová, I. (2020), 'The return of Roma to the Czech Republic is made difficult by smugglers. Their integration will be difficult, the children no longer speak the language' ([Z návratu Romů do Česka nejvíc těžší převaděči. Jejich integrace bude složitá, děti už neumí jazyk](#)), Lidovky.cz, 21 May 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Association of Roma Entrepreneurs and Alliances of the Czech Republic (2020), [#KORONAVIRUS](#), undated press release.

<sup>25</sup> Moravskoslezský deník.cz (2020), 'The first Roma living in the United Kingdom have returned to the Moravian Silesian region' ([Do Moravskoslezského kraje se vrátili první Romové žijící ve Velké Británii](#)), 16 April 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Křížová, I. (2020), 'The return of Roma to the Czech Republic is made difficult by smugglers. Their integration will be difficult, the children no longer speak the language' ([Z návratu Romů do Česka nejvíc těžší převaděči. Jejich integrace bude složitá, děti už neumí jazyk](#)), Lidovky.cz, 21 May 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Romea.cz (2020), Emil Voráč: 'Government measures in connection with the COVID-19 disease did not stop us; the poorest socially excluded localities were largely forgotten' ([Emil Voráč: Vládní opatření související s nákazou COVID-19 nás nezastavily, na ty nejchudší vyloučené lokality se dost zapomnělo](#)), 30 April 2020.



- *Highlight any measures specifically targeting women and children.*

No measures specifically addressing Roma women were identified. For children, see section 2.3.

### **2.3 Measures addressing the needs of Roma children**

*Please focus on barriers to education related to schooling in 'online classes format.*

No estimates are available on the effects of distance learning on Roma children and the specific barriers of this group of children can only be deduced from studies focusing either on the general population or on people living in socio-economically disadvantaged localities. According to a 2015 state-wide research mapping the living conditions at socially excluded localities the majority of the inhabitants at these localities are Roma people.<sup>28</sup>

In the first two weeks of April the Czech School Inspectorate conducted telephone interviews with approximately 5,000 principals of primary and secondary schools.<sup>29</sup> The results showed that in approximately 1,000 schools one-third of students do not communicate online with their teachers and in approximately one hundred schools more than half of the students are left out of online learning entirely. The absence of communication between students and teachers is most prevalent in socio-economically disadvantaged regions and is due to the lack of IT equipment or access to the internet, as well as the lack of student motivation or parental support.

In May the Economics Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences CERGE-EI published a study mapping the effects of distance learning on the overall student population based on an online survey with 741 parents.<sup>30</sup> The survey found that approximately 3% of children do not own a computer or do not have quality internet access, whereas 5% have only sporadic computer access because the computer is also used by another family member. These barriers are twice as likely to occur in families where the parents have lower education levels.

At the beginning of April the NGO People in Need conducted a telephone survey mapping the prevalence of internet access and computer or smartphone ownership in 480 families to whom the organisation provides social services and who often live in socially excluded localities.<sup>31</sup> Many of these families are Roma, but no ethnically differentiated data are available. The survey revealed that 421 (87 %) families maintained contact with their children's school in some form, but the rest of the families (13 %) had no

<sup>28</sup> GAC (2015), [Analysis of socially excluded localities in the Czech Republic](#).

<sup>29</sup> Czech School Inspectorate (2020), 'Distance education – Interviews with school principals' ([Distancní vzdělávání - řízené rozhovory s řediteli škol](#)), 15 April 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Korbek, V and D. Prokop (2020), 'Distance education from the perspective of parents' ([Vzdělávání na dálku pohledem rodičů](#)), Institute for Democracy & Economic Analysis, Economics Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

<sup>31</sup> Communication via email with People in Need on 24 June 2020.



contact with the school. Approximately 90 % of the families had some kind access to the internet (usually via a smart phone), but less than 10% of households had stable internet connection and a computer.

The NGO IQ Roma Service estimates that school closures severely impacted the learning trajectory of thousands of children in the Czech Republic. In an interview for *iRozhlas* IQ Roma Servis pointed out that many children have impeded access to the internet, computers, and even telephones.<sup>32</sup> In families with multiple children adequate access to these devices is impossible as several siblings may share one device. In addition, living conditions do not allow children to have a quiet study place at home.

The support of NGOs has been crucial in assisting disadvantaged children in keeping up their studies.<sup>33,34</sup> They have both been providing learning support to children directly in the field or via distance learning and collected and distributed IT equipment for families without computers.<sup>35</sup> According to some media sources, the government did not mobilise any extra resources to support schools and disadvantaged families in the period after the school closures.<sup>36</sup>

In reaction to the school closures, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports set up a website where information is available on online distance-learning methods, including tips to help teachers to maintain contact with children who have problems accessing online learning platforms.<sup>37</sup> The ministry also supported the online television learning programme UčíTelka targeting the lower four primary grades. The programme has been aired by the public television every day from 16 March.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Zíta, M. (2020), 'Teaching without computers or internet. Thousands of children have impeded access to education after school closures' ([Učení bez počítače nebo internetu. Tisíce dětí mají po zavření škol ztížený přístup ke vzdělávání](#)), *iRozhlas*, 9 April 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Interviews with Člověk v tísni (the People in Need Foundation) and the Secretariat of the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic (Council for National Minorities) on 12 June 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Telephone interview with the Secretariat of the Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs and the Government Council for National Minorities of the Czech Republic on 12 June 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Agency for Social Inclusion (2020), 'Donated computers help equal out differences in distance education. Technology is not enough on its own' ([Darované počítače pomáhají vyrovnávat rozdíly ve vzdělávání na dálku. Jen technika ale nestačí](#)), press release 14 May 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Dvořáková, T. (2020), 'How much does the Czech government value education?' ([Nakolik si česká vláda cení vzdělání?](#)), *Deník Referendum*, 20 May 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (2020), '#Distance Education ([Vzdělávání #NaDálku](#)).

<sup>38</sup> Czech Television (2020), [UčíTelka](#).

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

#### **3.1 Negative public reactions**

*Please focus on:*

- *Negative reactions in statements by politicians and public figures*

No anti-Roma statements by politicians or public figures were identified.

- *Hate speech in online and traditional media*

Only a minimal number of media sources inciting hatred against Roma in connection with the SARS CoV-2 virus was identified (none among the mainstream media outlets).

The online news portal *Seznam Zprávy*, which monitors and fact-checks COVID-19-related hoaxes spreading on the internet and social media sites, responded to a news article published by a new website with connections to a far right political party.<sup>39</sup> The original article claimed that thousands of Roma were returning from the United Kingdom as a result of household debt and the text implied that their return could contribute to the spread of the coronavirus in the Czech Republic. The text also implied that Roma people were not observing the mandatory home quarantine measures. According to *Seznam Zprávy*, the original article is manipulative and spreads misinformation.

The newspaper *Parlamentní listy*, a widely read news website that often publishes information of dubious quality, implied in a 17 March article that the Roma were responsible for the lack of face masks and respirators in the Western Bohemian region.<sup>40</sup> The article insinuates that Roma stocked up on masks, which as a result became unavailable even for medical personnel.

- *Any manifestations of antigypsyism or hate crime against Roma and Travellers.*

No such instances were identified.

#### **3.2 Positive change in attitudes**

*Please focus on*

- *Examples of changing narrative regarding these communities in public statements, media coverage*

<sup>39</sup> INICIATIVA C19 DEZINFOSERVIS (2020), 'Misinformation: Roma from Great Britain are not returning because they are in debt' ([Dezinfoservis: Romové se z Británie nevracejí kvůli zadlužení](#)), *Seznam Zprávy*, 23 April 2020.

<sup>40</sup> *Parlamentní listy* (2020), 'And who bought everything up... Emotions in Western Bohemia. Not just because of Roma in masks and respirators. Even one dentist speaks out' ([A kdo všechno vykoupil... Emoce na západě Čech. Nejen kvůli Romům v rouškách a respirátorech. Vyjádřila se i zubařka](#)), 17 March 2020.

The media coverage on Roma has since the beginning of the special measures been uncharacteristically positive.<sup>41</sup> At the beginning of May the public television station ČT1 aired a Roma journalist thanking the Roma for participating in voluntary and official efforts to combat the pandemic on the news programme.<sup>42</sup>

- *Manifestations of social solidarity with Roma and Travellers*

In a public statement for International Romani Day on 8 April, the Commissioner for Human Rights Helena Válková commented that the coronavirus crisis has shown that Roma are eager to help and capable of doing so.<sup>43</sup> Ms Válková highlighted several Roma initiatives for the voluntary sewing of face masks and called on the majority population to remember the present sense of inter-ethnic solidarity once the pandemic is over and life gets back to normal.

- *Examples of and local initiatives transcending ethnic boundaries.*

In March dozens of Roma households responded to the initiative of the Chanov-based association Aver Roma requesting that people hang a heart made out of Christmas tree lights on their window.<sup>44</sup> Peter Bažo, a representative from the association, told the news agency Romea.cz that the hearts are meant to symbolise people's deep-felt thanks to health professionals, the police, fire fighters, shop assistants, drivers, and cleaners in hospitals, who are in the first line of the fight against the new coronavirus.

The journal *Deník Referendum* published an article summarising the voluntary initiatives of various minorities living in the Czech Republic in connection to the pandemic.<sup>45</sup> The article emphasised that not only Roma, but also Vietnamese and Arab minorities and even migrants in detention centres participated in support activities. Most initiatives focused on the sewing of face masks.

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<sup>41</sup> Telephone interview with the Secretariat of the Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs and the Government Council for National Minorities of the Czech Republic on 12 June 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Romea.cz (2020), 'Jarmila Balážová in the Czech Television News: Thank you to Roma who are helping others in this difficult situation' ([Jarmila Balážová v Událostech ČT: Děkuji i Romům, kteří v této nelehké situaci pomáhají ostatním](#)), 2 May 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Válková, H. (2020), 'The Commissioner on Human Rights on the International Romani Day ([Zmocněnkyně pro lidská práva k Mezinárodnímu dni Romů](#))', Office of the Government of the Czech Republic, press release 8 April 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Romea.cz (2020), 'The Roma in Chanov express their thanks to everyone in the front line fighting against the coronavirus. Flat windows were illuminated with hearts' ([Romové v Chanově děkují všem, kteří v první linii bojují s koronavirem. Okna bytů rozzářila srdíčka](#)), 30 March 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Dvořáková, P. (2020), 'All minorities from Roma to Vietnamese to Kurds are helping in critical times' ([V krizi pomáhají i všechny menšiny, od Romů přes Vietnamce po Kurdy](#)), *Deník Referendum*, 27 March 2020.