

# COVID-19 in Roma neighbourhoods in Bulgaria

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## ■ LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ACC</b>	access control checkpoint
<b>ES</b>	an elementary school
<b>FG</b>	a focus group
<b>MATH</b>	multi-profile hospital for active treatment
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>p.p.</b>	percentage point
<b>PS</b>	a primary school
<b>RHI</b>	Regional Health Inspectorate

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## ■ SUMMARY

This report presents an analysis of the findings of a study of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the anti-covid measures on Roma neighbourhoods in the period of March-December 2020. The field studies were carried out in the period from 20 October to 10 December 2020 in 9 Roma neighbourhoods and a village<sup>1</sup> and they covered 492 interviewed members of households of 1,794 persons in total, 77 participants in the focus groups in the local communities and 51 interviewed experts from the municipal administration, Regional Health Inspectorates (RHI), doctors, health mediators, pastors and NGOs. Five of the examined neighbourhoods had specific anti-covid measures applied, that is restricted movement of the neighbourhood residents and access of outside persons by means of access control checkpoints. The other five neighbourhoods did not have such measures applied.

**DOES THE VIRUS EXIST AND HOW DANGEROUS IS IT?** High level of awareness of Covid-19 can be observed in the examined neighbourhoods: 2/3 of the Roma shared that they follow the news about the virus and the majority of the other respondents also receive information about the pandemic, mainly from the television without deliberately following it and paying particular attention.

The majority of the residents in the examined Roma neighbourhoods are aware of the virus-related risks: the ratio is 2:3 in favour of those who admitted to be scared. The Roma neighbourhoods in the municipalities of Blagoevgrad, Kazanluk and Nova Zagora seem to be most skeptic about the risk of the virus, as between a half and two-thirds of the respondents in these neighbourhoods claimed to not be afraid of the virus: “I don’t believe that there is something like that, it’s a lie”, “I’m not scared of such things, they’re telling us lies from the Ministry”, “Whatever they say on the news is a lie, they’re just scaring us”.

The issue of low trust in the institutions has been exacerbated in the pandemic: half of the respondents claimed that they did not trust anyone about Covid-19 information. Still, television stations, which are also the most common source of information about the pandemic, enjoy the greatest trust in this respect.

The combination of imposed emergency measures to restrict the movement of the residents of Roma neighbourhoods and the increased negative attitudes to them by the other local community members (out of fear that their fellow citizens from the neighbourhoods spread the disease), on the one hand, and the absence of a large number of

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study, the term Roma has been applied, as per the National Roma Integration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2012–2020), adopted by the Parliament, according to which the term “Roma” shall be a term “covering both Bulgarian citizens in a vulnerable social and economic situation, who identify themselves as Roma, and citizens in a similar situation, who have been identified as Roma by the surrounding community regardless of the way the latter identify themselves”.

infected and sick people in the respondents' immediate environment, on the other hand, gives rise to the feeling of unfair treatment and discrimination.

Approximately a fourth of the respondents support the measure prohibiting citizens from neighbourhoods with a large number of infected people from leaving them unless they state a very serious reason to do so, the majority of 57% is against the measure and 18% are not sure. Out of the 10 studied localities, it is only in the village of Izgrev and Kazanlak that this measure has been identified as acceptable by the majority.

**“WE WERE KEPT AS IF IN A CONCENTRATION CAMP”.** The fact that special anti-covid measures have been imposed only on the residents of neighbourhoods or settlements with predominantly Roma population, without any reference to the health and epidemiological indicators that make them different from other neighbourhoods where such measures have not been imposed, constitutes unfair treatment.

The claims that specific restrictive measures have been imposed only on the Roma neighbourhoods because the residents do not comply with the general anti-covid measures and are a “disease incubator” do not rest on any evidence.

The media coverage of the topic has been mainly in the form of brief factual publications and hardly any media analyses can be found about the issue of the lawfulness of setting up access control checkpoints in neighbourhoods with predominantly Roma population. A number of media tactics familiar from previous periods that promote negative prejudices about the Roma can be seen against the background of the pandemic: the image of “a public enemy” and “a threat” is shaped, the ethnic background of the offenders is indicated and there are limited opportunities to present the position of the members of Roma communities.

**“IF THE VIRUS DOES NOT KILL US, HUNGER WILL”.** After the pandemic has started, major indicators of the well-being of the households in the examined neighbourhoods have considerably deteriorated. During the declared state of emergency approximately two-thirds of the households faced income loss and shortage of funds to meet their daily needs including buy food compared to the previous 2–3 months; the most affected neighbourhoods were in Aytos, Sliven, Kazanlak and Nova Zagora. Following the end of the state of emergency slightly more than half of the surveyed households still faced the same issue. However, if the number of households left without a job is added up, the share of the affected households will increase to approximately 70%.

When the findings were compared with data from a nationally representative survey carried out by Alpha Research in February 2021, it turned out that 12.4% of the families in the country altogether reported loss of income due to the pandemic, i.e. decreased income affected approximately 4 times more households in the 10 surveyed communities.

Unemployment is a permanent challenge in many of the surveyed neighbourhoods but it has increased during the pandemic and has been reported as a major issue in the aftermath of the state of emergency. During the state of emergency, only one-fourth of the households did not suffer a blow to employment due to the measures and, in some of the

neighbourhoods (Sliven, Kyustendil, Byala Slatina and Maglizh), approximately four-fifths of the households had neither of the partners working.

**“HOW CAN WE WASH OUR HANDS WHEN THERE IS NO WATER?”** is a question that applies to many Roma neighbourhoods to a different degree and extent but becomes prominent in the context of the pandemic with a view to the opportunities to comply with the anti-covid measures. Lack of water has been a problem for some households in the 10 surveyed neighbourhoods even before the declared state of emergency: 23 households with about 102 members (5.7%) have no access to water at all and 118 households with 448 members (25.0%) have an outside water tap. However, the issue is much more serious in some neighbourhoods and affects a considerably larger number of the residents: e. g. 20.3% of the members of the surveyed households in *Predel* neighbourhood in the town of Blagoevgrad have no access to water; 44.6% of the members of the examined households in *Shesti* neighbourhood in Nova Zagora, 41.1% in *Svoboda* neighbourhood in Maglizh and 37.4% in *Carmen* neighbourhood in Kazanlak have only an outside tap.

**OVERCROWDED HOUSING** is another challenge related to the ability to comply with the self-isolation requirement during a quarantine. 123 of the surveyed households with 300 members in total have one shared room for sleeping. Once again, the issue is much more serious in some of the neighbourhoods: e.g. 17 households in *Predel* neighbourhood in Blagoevgrad with 76 members in total have a single room (4.5 persons per room on average), 9 households in *Svoboda* neighbourhood in Maglizh with 32 members in total have a single room (3.5 persons per room on average).

**DISTANCE LEARNING... “WITH HANDOUTS FROM THE MEDIATOR”.** Against the backdrop of the pandemic and the introduced distance learning, the share of children in the surveyed communities who had their own personal computer/tablet stands slightly in excess of 40%. During this period one in 10 school-age children has received a tablet from school, an NGO or a private individual and 10% more have received printed learning materials provided by mediators or pastors. Nevertheless, almost a fifth of the students in the surveyed communities did not have the technical means and were not provided with learning materials.

**“WHAT I NOTICED IS THAT THE NEIGHBOURHOOD STEPPED UP TO HELP. GENEROSITY IN PEOPLE FOUND ITS EXPRESSION”.** The most common model of support in the concerned neighbourhoods during the pandemic has been help from neighbours/fellow neighbourhood residents. Support to the people in need has been also provided by representatives of NGOs and religious communities.

Municipalities mainly helped provide masks and disinfectants as well as food products.

Health mediators stand out, who have actively helped the institutions and the neighbourhood residents: they provided them with personal protective means and disinfectants; assisted the Red Cross in the distribution and handing out of personal protective means, disinfectants and food to the severely materially deprived people in the neighbourhoods and distributed learning materials to the children.

Approximately 60% of the respondents shared that no-one helped community members during the state of emergency and 73% shared the same about the period following the state of emergency.

## Recommendations

Anti-covid measures should be applied by guaranteeing equal and non-discriminatory treatment of all citizens and the competent authorities should enhance monitoring and control mechanisms to prevent the risk of discrimination.

What is needed to build and maintain trust in institutions, particularly in emergency situations, is communication between the representatives of institutions and citizens that is free of prejudice and delivered in a comprehensible language.

The key measures to support the people affected by the pandemic include the following: setting up compensation schemes for extremely low-income people that are not included in the labour market and providing additional programmes for retraining and readjustment to the labour market for the long-term unemployed. In addition, enhanced control and incentives to comply with the requirements of labour and social security law are needed. Support to children from vulnerable groups should include provision of technical means (a laptop, a tablet) and Internet connection for them to take part in distance learning.

Social workers and health mediators should enjoy the guaranteed status of “first-line workers” during the pandemic and the financial incentives for them should be supplemented with measures for professional development and support such as training, supervision and intervention, etc.

Investment in the development and upgrading the infrastructure of Roma neighbourhoods is needed in the long run to ensure equal access to social infrastructure and services.

# 1 PREPARATION AND CONDUCT OF THE STUDY

## 1.1. Goals and objectives of the study

After Bulgaria declared a state of emergency on 13.03.2020, hate speech targeted at the Roma increased through allegations emphasizing that the neighbourhoods with predominantly Roma population spread Covid-19. Despite lack of information and specific data about the spread of infection among the Roma, access control checkpoints were set up in many Roma neighbourhoods (in Sofia, Yambol, Kyustendil, Perushtitsa, Kazanlak, Sliven, Nova Zagora, Bukovlak, Peshtera, Izgrev, Straldzha). Measures were introduced in certain areas without carrying out an in-depth preliminary assessment and justification or any preliminary discussion of their efficiency as well as without informing the population sufficiently well in advance.

Therefore, the study aimed at establishing whether Roma neighbourhoods faced specific problems (and/or manifestations of common problems) in the pandemic; if yes, what gave rise to the problems; what interaction took place between the residents of neighbourhoods with predominantly Roma population, local authorities and NGOs in the context of the pandemic.

The field study aimed at gathering information by means of quantitative and qualitative methods. The data analysis helped formulate specific recommendations about the measures which could be applied in a situation of an epidemic in the neighbourhoods with predominantly Roma population as well as recommendations which could help the following stakeholders make strategic and practical decisions: national, regional and local public institutions, non-governmental and financing organizations.

## 1.2. Selection of the localities to study

The field study was carried out in the period from 20 October to 10 December 2020 in 9 Roma neighbourhoods and a village. Taking into account the time of the emergency pandemic situation in the country and the related anti-covid measures as well as the likely access to the neighbourhoods and the available local assistants, 9 urban neighbourhoods and a village with predominantly Roma population were selected, which were located in different areas across the country and had diverse social, demographic and economic characteristics. Five of them had access control checkpoints set up and 5 of them did not. Annex 1 contains brief descriptions of the selected neighbourhoods and Annex 2 presents more details about the methodology and the toolkit used.

The following limitations should be taken into account when the findings are interpreted:

- The study is not representative neither of “the Roma neighbourhoods in Bulgaria” nor “the Roma in Bulgaria”. The data apply only to the surveyed neighbourhoods.
- Due to the random selection of households, whose members were interviewed, the data can be considered representative at the level of the neighbourhood. However, the margin of error is quite big due to the relatively small sample for each of the 10 places.
- Despite the fact that the field work has been carried out relatively smoothly, it is worth mentioning that it has been carried out in a time period clearly cut into two halves by the stricter restrictions declared on 27 November 2020.

## 2 THE PANDEMIC: THE NATIONAL HEALTH, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

### 2.1. The health context

#### *Main health and demographic indicators*

As of 31.12.2019 Bulgaria had a population of 6,951,482 people, which accounted for 1.4% of the population of the European Union.<sup>2</sup>

The downward birth rate in the country tends to be a permanent trend and the birth rate in 2019 was 8.8‰, lower than the EU-28 average (9.5‰).<sup>3</sup> The low birth rate in Bulgaria is due to the impact of a number of demographic, social and economic factors. Bulgaria has a high general and premature mortality rate: the mortality rate in 2019 was 15.5‰ and it remained much higher than the EU-28 average of 10.2‰.<sup>4</sup>

The natural population growth rate in Bulgaria has been negative since 1990 and in 2019 it was -6.7‰, the highest negative value since the beginning of the millennium.<sup>5</sup>

Bulgaria is the country with the highest standardized mortality ratio among the EU-28 of 1,631 per 100,000 people (given the average rate of 998.1 per 100,000 people in the Member States) and the reasons for the mortality rate remain the same. Some of the key causes of deaths in 2019 were diseases of the circulatory system which accounted for 64.4% of all deaths and cancer incidence in 16.9% of the cases.<sup>6</sup>

The average life expectancy rate in Bulgaria in 2019 was 75.1 years unlike the average rate for the EU-27, which is 6 years higher, 81.3 years.

Data from the draft National Health Strategy 2021–2030 show that the number of hospitalizations in the inpatient wards of hospitals has increased from 2,401,759 (34,188.6 per 100,000 people) in 2018 to 2,412,523 (34,584.4 per 100,000 people) in 2019.

<sup>2</sup> NSI, Population and demographic processes, 2019, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat, Live births and crude birth rate (online data code: TPS00204).

<sup>4</sup> Eurostat, Deaths and crude death rate (online data code: TPS00029).

<sup>5</sup> NSI, Population and demographic processes, 2019, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Draft National Health Strategy 2021–2030, p. 9.

Poverty and the ensuing barriers considerably impede access to healthcare. In 2019 the share of people at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion stood at 32.8% and the country was ranked last for this indicator among the EU-28, where its value was much lower, i.e. 21.4%.<sup>7</sup>

### *The pandemic*

Until the end of the third quarter of 2020, Bulgaria was one of the EU Member States least affected by Covid-19 in epidemiological and economic terms. As the two indicators are visibly connected, the economic situation, even though with a certain delay, also started changing for the worse with the growing incidence rate in the fourth quarter of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021.

As of the start of the pandemic to approximately 20 October 2020, the Bulgarian population was hardly restricted in its freedom of movement, which decreased by 5%. However, mobility started being restricted afterwards, which coincided with the first serious increase of the people infected with Covid-19. As of mid-March 2021, the general mobility of the population decreased by 17–20%, which is an indirect indicator of compliance with social distancing.<sup>8</sup> Masks are regularly worn in public places by 35–40% of the population. As of early October 2020, the number of people wearing masks in public places has started growing, exceeded 60% by mid-December 2020 and has remained about 55% and more afterwards. The healthcare system resources have been underused by the end of the first week of October but then started being growingly used and reached a peak by around 10<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> December and then started going down again.

This study covers the period when the Covid-19 pandemic in the country has had limited impact and therefore the opinions and attitudes of the respondents reflect their experience from a more peaceful situation. The field study was carried out in the period when the pandemic started escalating for the first time but many of the questions to the respondents retrospectively inquired after the initial months of the pandemic in Bulgaria in March 2020 before it started spreading on a larger scale in the autumn months.

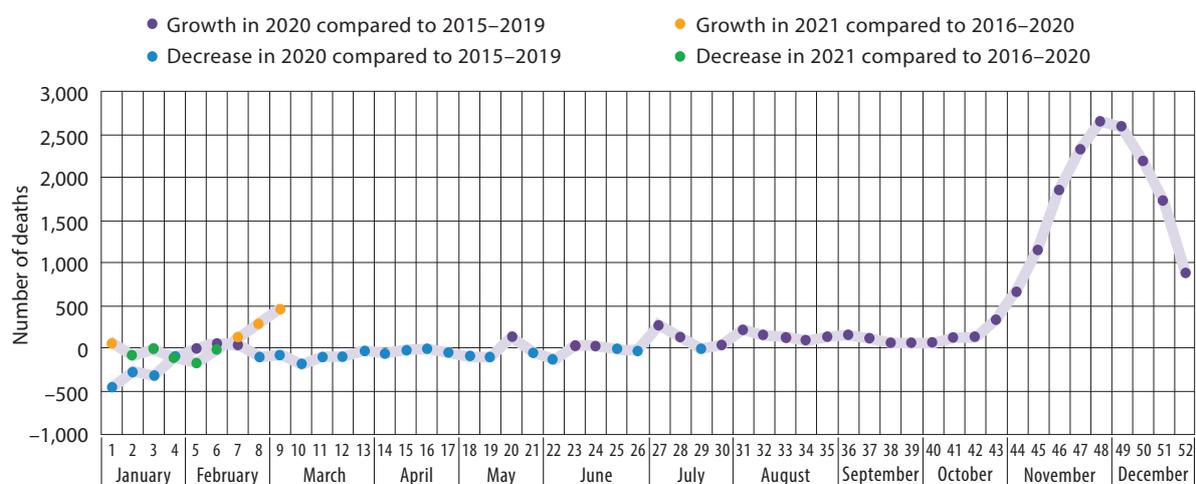
With the growing spread of the pandemic in the last quarter of 2020, the epidemiological indicators dramatically deteriorated (Fig. 1). The healthcare system was on the brink of collapse in December. Bulgaria was among the EU Member States with the highest total excess mortality rate in 2020 for both men and women.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Eurostat, People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex (Code: ilc\_peps01).

<sup>8</sup> The source of data is the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, <https://covid19.healthdata.org/bulgaria?view=social-distancing&tab=trend>.

<sup>9</sup> The excess mortality indicator compares the average value for the previous 4 years (2016–2019) with the value in 2020.

**Fig. 1. Change of number of deaths in 2020 and 2021 compared to the average number of deaths in the previous five years**



**Notes:**

1. Data for 2020 and 2021 are preliminary.
2. The data include all Bulgarian citizens currently residing in Bulgaria regardless of the place of death and foreign nationals currently residing in Bulgaria who died in Bulgaria.
3. The data are distributed by weeks according the date of death.
4. Change is calculated as an absolute difference between the number of deaths in 2020 and 2021 and the average number of deaths per week in the last 5-year period.

For the sake of comparison, Table 1 also shows excess mortality in Belgium, which according to most medical indicators has been the EU Member State most affected by Covid-19 and one of the most affected countries in the world.

**Table 1. Total excess mortality in 2020 by gender (%)\***

Gender	Total	Men	Women
EC-26	109.6	110.6	109.0
Belgium	116.2	116.2	116.2
Bulgaria	114.8	117.0	112.5

Source: Eurostat, 2021

\* Deaths in 2020 regardless of the cause expressed as % of the average number of deaths in the period 2016–2019.

**Table 2. Total excess mortality in 2020 by age groups (%)**

Age group	Below 10 years	10–19 years	20–29 years	30–39 years	40–49 years	50–59 years	60–69 years	70–79 years	80–89 years	90 and more years
EU-26	91.6	95.1	91.0	97.7	101.1	95.9	104.2	111.4	104.6	118.0
Bulgaria	78.7	91.4	86.1	103.7	113.1	113.3	113.8	125.0	108.6	114.4

Source: Eurostat, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Excess\\_mortality\\_-\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Excess_mortality_-_statistics)

Excess mortality in Bulgaria is fully comprised of the age groups of over 40. Mortality is insignificant in the age group of 30–39 and it is lower in the group of children and young people below 29 than the rate registered 4 years prior to the onset of the pandemic (Table 2).

## 2.2. The economic situation in 2020

The economic crisis caused by Covid-19 reached the Bulgarian economy with a certain delay compared to the most advanced economies in Western and Central Europe. The delay was mainly due to both economic and epidemiological factors. The spread of the pandemic in Bulgaria was delayed due to the country’s position closer to the periphery as regards passenger flows.

Compared to the average EU indicators, Bulgaria has been relatively less affected with regard to the functioning of the economy in the second quarter of 2020 but relatively stronger hit during the third quarter of 2020, when the usual seasonal economic boom can be observed across Europe (Table 3).

**Table 3. GDP growth for the period from the beginning of 2019 to the end of the third quarter of 2020, quarterly data (%)**

Period	2019-I	2019-II	2019-III	2019-IV	2020-I	2020-II	2020-III
<b>EU-27</b>	1.8	1.5	1.6	1.3	-2.6	-13.9	-4.2
<b>Bulgaria</b>	4.2	3.8	3.3	3.1	2.3	-8.6	-5.2

Source: Eurostat, 2021

In 2020 the employment rate in Bulgaria decreased compared to the respective quarters of 2019. The greatest drop by 2.7 percentage points was recorded in the second quarter of 2020, which means 183,000 fewer employed people. After the situation improved in the summer and autumn months, 96,000 fewer people were employed in the fourth quarter of 2020 compared to the same quarter of 2019 (Table 4).

Unemployment rate also rose dramatically in the second quarter of 2020 (Table 5). Increased unemployment rate among women has been more pronounced but has started from lower levels prior to the onset of the economic crisis caused by Covid-19 (Table 6). No significant difference has been observed in the growth rate of unemployment in towns and villages, the towns having an insignificantly higher growth rate. Towns and villages have kept the great gap in unemployment rate, i.e. the unemployment rate in the villages is higher by 4–5 percentage points.

**Table 4. Employment rate in 2019 and 2020, quarterly data (%)**

Year \ Quarter	Quarter			
	I	II	III	IV
<b>2019</b>	52.7	54.7	55.3	54.0
<b>2020</b>	52.4	52.0	53.5	52.9

Source: NSI, 2021

**Table 5. Unemployment rate in 2019 and 2020, quarterly data (%)**

Year \ Quarter	Quarter			
	I	II	III	IV
<b>2019</b>	5.0	4.2	3.7	4.1
<b>2020</b>	4.6	5.9	4.8	5.2

Source: NSI, 2021

**Table 6. Unemployment rate among men and women from 2019-I to 2020-III, quarterly data (%)**

Gender	2019-I	2019-II	2019-III	2019-IV	2020-I	2020-II	2020-III
<b>Men</b>	5.4	4.6	3.9	4.4	5.0	6.3	5.4
<b>Women</b>	4.6	3.8	3.5	3.8	4.2	5.6	4.3

Source: NSI, 2021

The rise in unemployment has not affected equally all regions in the country. The labour market in Central and Northeastern Bulgaria seemed to be slightly affected in the second quarter of 2020. Unemployment has increased greater in Southern Bulgaria but the rise in the Southwestern and South Central regions has started from very low levels before the crisis so that unemployment has remained low below 5%. The Southeastern and Northwestern regions seem to be the ones hit the hardest; the Southeastern region recorded the highest rise by 3.9 percentage points, and the Northwestern region, which recorded a rise of 2.6 percentage points, used to have the highest unemployment rate prior to the crisis: the unemployment rate is 2 to 5–6 times higher than in the other statistical regions (Table 7).

The classification of reasons used by the NSI shows that the top reasons for the loss of job are lay-offs and dismissal as well as the end of seasonal work.

**Table 7. Unemployment rate by statistical regions during the second quarter of 2019 and 2020 (%)**

Planning region	2019-II	2020-II
<b>Northwestern</b>	11.4	14.0
<b>North Central</b>	6.0	5.8
<b>Northeastern</b>	5.7	6.5
<b>Southeastern</b>	3.7	7.6
<b>Southwestern</b>	2.0	3.9
<b>South Central</b>	2.8	3.9

Source: NSI, 2021

The impact of Covid-19 on unemployment started hitting home in the second quarter of 2020. Unemployment started going up immediately after the third quarter of 2019 but it is seasonally on the rise during the winter months. In contrast, unemployment starts seasonally going down in the second quarter of the year. However, in 2020 unemployment kept on rising but the usual seasonal drop started in the third quarter of the year.

It is worth mentioning that Bulgaria used to be slightly affected by the pandemic until the end of the third quarter of 2020. Covid-19 infection rate used to be very low compared to the seriously affected countries in the EU and the region and to the healthcare system capacity to take in the people in need of treatment.

## 2.3. Covid-19 and the Roma community: the national context

The Roma community once again turned out to be the most vulnerable one in the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic made the long-term unsolved issues in the Roma neighbourhoods stand out even further and lead to a severe crisis in some settlements. Public health particularly in the situation of emergency which occurred has been directly linked to the housing policy of the local government to the Roma. The Roma in many settlements live in neighbourhoods segregated outside the settlement, on unregulated land, in rundown dwellings, sometimes without electricity and water supply. Some of them do not even have a registered address. Multi-member families in many Roma neighbourhoods live in crowded houses, sometimes even in a single room. That is why even where the Roma follow social distancing rules towards people outside the household, the Roma living in overcrowded neighbourhoods are exposed to a higher risk of infection.

Failure to have water supply and organize waste collection in many Roma neighbourhoods is a huge obstacle to complying with the anti-covid measures in the pandemic. Some municipalities did not take any steps to provide water to the neighbourhood residents without water supply. The appeals to wash hands and observe personal hygiene stumbled upon the reality. Lack of water supply during the state of emergency was established in the Roma neighbourhoods in the towns of Nikolaevo, Lukovit, Tsarevo, Yablanitsa, Kazanlak and Lovech and many villages. Particularly dramatic was the case of the suspended water supply to 70 Roma shacks in Tsarevo during the pandemic by order of the mayor.<sup>10</sup>

Lack of registered address makes it difficult to quarantine contact persons and provide first necessity products to socially disadvantaged marginalized families.

With the spread of the virus, many Roma families which were left without a job and income became even further impoverished. The lack of healthcare insurance and means of subsistence further impeded their access to medical care.

In many places the Roma were subject to ethnicity-based restrictive measures and stigmatization at odds with the public health principles and the appeals for solidarity and unity of the nation. The access control checkpoints set up at the entrance of some Roma neighbourhoods restricted the access of the Roma residents to food stores, pharmacies, ATMs and administrative services outside the neighbourhood. An isolation room was opened for the Roma in *Nadezhda* neighbourhood in the town of Sliven. The Mayor of the town of Varshets issued an order prohibiting more than one person per household to leave the territory of Iztok neighbourhood. The Roma neighbourhood of *Lukovitsa* in the Peshtera, where 3 infected persons were diagnosed, was locked down.

Many Roma families were left without a living cut off in their neighbourhoods. Each Roma neighbourhood has poor marginalized families who were on the brink of physical survival. The children in these destitute families were particularly vulnerable, being exposed to cold and hunger. Many Roma children did not have any PCs or tablets for distance learning.

Against the backdrop of the pandemic what did not come to an end was hate speech and adversity and insinuations of representatives of institutions, politicians and the me-

<sup>10</sup> According to data of the National Network of Health Mediators.

dia that the Roma community was a threat to the public and that special measures were needed. The latter discourse resulted in further social distance, escalation of social tension between the Roma and the rest of the public and marginalization of the whole Roma community. At the same time volunteering campaigns and self-help and solidarity groups were organized in many Roma neighbourhoods to support the people most in need of food, masks and disinfectants. Roma emigrants sent funds to health mediators to provide food for the poor, the sick and the elderly most in need.

### 3 MAJOR ISSUES IN THE SURVEYED NEIGHBOURHOODS

The Roma community faced unexpected problems in the Covid-19 pandemic both regarding daily routine and communication but also organization of healthcare, education, production and social care. The examined neighbourhoods were not spared these issues, sometimes in a specific form. This report is mainly focused on the problems in Roma neighbourhoods which the interviewed residents and experts emphasized. Such problems are those related to unemployment and employment without a labour contract. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, the latter issues made it impossible to obtain any assistance from the state and left the majority of Roma households in poverty, and often hunger.

Some of these issues have not been caused by the pandemic but have become particularly acute and visible during this period, e. g. the overcrowded Roma neighbourhoods, which seriously hampered compliance with the quarantine restrictions. There are problems specific to some neighbourhoods only. For instance, the long-standing issue with the lack of water supply in some parts of the neighbourhoods in the towns of Kazanlak and Sliven, which is an insurmountable obstacle, impeding compliance with personal hygiene recommendations.

#### 3.1. Is there a health problem: “We’re fine, we’re not sick”

The awareness and attitudes of the residents of the examined neighbourhoods to the Covid-19-related health issues do not differ significantly from the ones established by other surveys about Bulgarians in general. Some people are afraid of the virus, others do not believe that it exists, yet others do not trust the institutions warning them of a serious threat to everyone’s health, i.e. there is a virus but the danger is exaggerated for political reasons, etc.

That is why the analysis has focused on the distribution of the different opinions by location and the factors behind the specificity in the examined communities.

The first assumption was that where there were differences, they were due to the specific anti-covid measures imposed, the so-called lockdown of neighbourhoods.<sup>11</sup> The hypothesis was that the five neighbourhoods that were locked down should have had different awareness of the health issues from the other neighbourhoods but only where the lockdown was due to numerous cases of infected persons; in the latter case, the residents of these neighbourhoods should have been likely to feel greater fear than the ones in the other neighbourhoods.<sup>12</sup> It turned out, though, that data did not confirm this assumption: there was a difference but not along the lines of locked down vs. not locked down neighbourhoods. Fear of Covid-19 has been most widespread in the Roma neighbourhoods of Montana, Kyustendil and Aytos, where between 76 and 84% of the respondents shared their fear of the coronavirus. The residents who claimed that they were afraid of the coronavirus also accounted for the majority in most of the remaining neighbourhoods.

The findings of the study have shown that some of the neighbourhoods where access control checkpoints were set up did not have any known cases of residents who were infected, admitted to hospital or died prior to the lockdown. The neighbourhoods were locked down **out of precaution**, most probably acting on the assumption, explicitly or more clearly made that: first, the residents would not (or could not) follow some of the anti-covid measures, and, second, that many people would return there from abroad after losing their jobs.

*“As of 19 March the Roma neighbourhood in the town of Kazanlak has been fully locked down. The authorities are concerned that many people who returned from abroad have registered in the neighbouring municipalities.”<sup>13</sup>*

*“Some of the grounds for locking down the neighbourhood are that the neighbouring municipalities have information about people who returned from the critical hotspots and who are quarantined. These measures will protect the residents of Carmen neighbourhood and the whole town”, the mayor added.”<sup>14</sup>*

It is not possible to verify this assumption about all locked down neighbourhoods. However, it is true that apart from *Nadezhda* neighbourhood in Sliven (and to some extent *Iztok* neighbourhood in Kyustendil), there is no data about higher incidence in the neighbourhoods for the whole period since early March 2020. What is more, an interviewed doctor from the town of Maglizh shared that he could not understand how it was possible that there were no infected people among the Roma from Svoboda neighbourhood when there were such cases in the other parts of the town.

The questionnaire allowed the respondents to estimate the number of fellow residents in their neighbourhood or the village (Izhev) who returned from abroad. Four in five respon-

<sup>11</sup> The terms “lockdown” and “locked down” and their derivatives in this report are used for brevity and mean temporary restriction of movement by the introduction of a special access control regime.

<sup>12</sup> The research team sent letters to the relevant municipalities and Regional Health Inspectorates requesting access to information about the residents of the respective neighbourhoods who were quarantined, infected, admitted to hospital or died, but the team did not receive any response or the response was that no such data could be provided.

<sup>13</sup> Roma neighbourhoods under lockdown, they find it hard to observe personal hygiene, <https://www.bgonair.bg/a/2-bulgaria/1890151>, 19 March 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Carmen neighbourhood in Kazanlak is guarded 24/7, <https://nova.bg/news/view/2020/03/19/281910/>, 19 March 2020.

dents shared that they did not know the number of fellow neighbourhood residents who came back from abroad. That did not allow us to have an accurate estimate of the scale of people coming back from abroad. Thus, in Byala Slatina, for instance, the only respondent who gave us a specific answer said that more than 30 people returned from abroad, which could arbitrarily mean many. Other respondents also provided specific answers in some places and their answers considerably differed. It can be assumed that provided that the people who returned from abroad had been that many, the residents would have known. However, we cannot be certain whether the respondents had any information about returning migrants or something did not allow them to talk openly about this issue.

It can be assumed based on the data that where local authorities took steps to explain, including meet with the residents, the respondents were more likely to consider the measures to be well-founded, even where the measures were specific such as a neighbourhood lockdown. This is the case with *Carmen* neighbourhood in Kazanlak, where the mayor visited the neighbourhood and explained to the residents why the specific measures were necessary; as is the case with the voluntary patrols in *Svoboda* neighbourhood in Maglizh, which were assisted by the municipality to “protect the neighbourhood from outside persons”. Regardless of the different opinions about the latter emergency measures, they have been received in general with understanding by the neighbourhood residents and despite the difficulties have been regarded as imposed “for our own good”.

In a situation of a not fully clear risk, people may be prone to misinterpret in many wrong ways their personal experience, which makes communication by the official national and local authorities dealing with the pandemic even more important. Apart from providing information, this communication has also a symbolic value, which is very important to build the interconnected trust and sense of justice. The combination of emergency measures (restricting the free movement of the residents of Roma neighbourhoods) and prominent negativism displayed towards them by the other residents of the settlement (out of fears that the Roma are carriers of infection), given the objective lack of infected and sick people among the neighbourhood residents, gives rise to the feeling of unfair and discriminatory treatment. The study showed that during the first wave of the pandemic in Bulgaria, the respondents had limited first-hand experience with the virus, as in very few cases they knew or had seen in person someone infected with Covid-19. The data for Bulgaria from that period confirm that the spread of the virus has been limited in reality.

The majority of the residents of the examined Roma neighbourhoods believe that the virus is dangerous, the total ratio in the study being 39%:61% in favour of those who admitted to be afraid. Considerably higher levels of disbelief in the danger of the virus have been observed in Blagoevgrad, Kazanlak and Nova Zagora, where half of the residents of the first two communities and two-thirds of the respondents in the third one stated that they were not scared of the virus: “I don’t believe that there is such thing, it’s lie”, “I’m not scared of such things, the Ministry is lying to us”, “Whatever they say on the news is a lie, they’re just scaring us”.

Approximately one in eight Roma does not believe that Covid-19 is a real threat because they believe that the virus is not scary and they will not catch it.

The Roma in general follow the news about Covid-19, the ones who do not do it regularly account for approximately a third of all respondents with significant differences observed

among the neighbourhoods. The respondents from Nova Zagora are the ones least interested in any Covid-19-related information: 80% of them, much more than in any of the remaining places, are not interested in any such information. Disinterest, as it can be seen from the other responses, does not necessarily mean that the respondents have not come across such information at all. It is rather that they are not knowingly looking for it and do not pay particular attention to it. Disinterest in Nova Zagora, for example, goes hand in hand with particular mistrust of Covid-19-related information. In Kyustendil, Montana, Kazanlak and Maglizh, however, almost all respondents are actively looking for Covid-19 information, the four locations being affected to a different extent by the infection and the economic consequences and imposed measures.

Low trust in institutions, as well as among people, has been discussed as a problem of the Bulgarian society for years.<sup>15</sup> This problem has been particularly exacerbated under the state of emergency and in an emergency situation. Most probably, the lower the trust in the institutions imposing anti-covid measures, the less likely people are to comply with them. People are particularly ill-prepared individually to assess risks, which are new or latent, and can in no way assess the likelihood of such risks to occur based on their experience. In such an uncertain situation, it is particularly important to have a certain reliable source of information everyone can rely on to make personal decisions, even where people do not agree with the imposed restrictions.<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to understand that it is important to comply with such measures, when public figures, including medical experts, send controversial messages via the national media. A key question is who the residents from the examined neighbourhoods trust as a source of Covid-19 information.

Serious mistrust or criticism towards the most frequently used sources of information has been observed in these neighbourhoods. Trust stands out as a phenomenon different from interest in obtaining information: the respondents may also show interest in information that they do not trust. Half the respondents trust no source, mistrust being particularly high in Kyustendil, Nova Zagora and Aytos. A considerable number of the respondents in some of the surveyed neighbourhoods pointed out television as a trusted source of information, mainly bTV and Nova TV to a less extent. Television enjoys great trust in *Nadezhda* neighbourhood in Sliven: almost 80% of the respondents in the neighbourhood trust this source of information, just like almost 60% of the respondents in the village of Izgrev, 44% in the Roma neighbourhood of Byala Slatina, 28% in *Kosharnik* neighbourhood of Montana.

A surprisingly small share of respondents claimed that they trusted “their relatives/friends”, 5.9% of all the respondents in total, *Kosharnik* neighbourhood in Montana being the only one where the share is higher, 32%.

Family doctors enjoy unusually high trust in *Svoboda* neighbourhood in Maglizh (40%) and *Kosharnik* neighbourhood in Montana (32%), two of the locations that have been very little affected by the pandemic until the onset of the second wave.

<sup>15</sup> See the series of surveys of Open Society Institute – Sofia about trust in institutions in Bulgaria, <http://www.opendata.bg/opendata.php?q=3&i=739&t=2>.

<sup>16</sup> Where people trust to a great extent a given source of information, they are ready to observe the prescribed measures even when the latter measures differ from individual preliminary assessments or convictions.

Compliance with anti-covid measures declared by the respondents is different in the examined neighbourhoods.

In response to the question about the anti-covid measures observed during and after the state of emergency, only 7 respondents from Iztok neighbourhood answered “all measures imposed in the country”, while the number of respondents who gave the same answer in Carmen neighbourhood in Kazanlak is 34.

It is not easy to trace a clear causal link between readiness to observe the measures and other circumstances. Some of the possible explanations include trust built between the Roma community and local authorities and the way in which the need to introduce such measures has been explained to the residents of the relevant neighbourhood.

The findings of the study show that the restrictive measures imposed might have an indirect impact on the overall health status of the population.

*“The pandemic had a negative impact on my work with people. The people are anxious, tension can be felt. First-line specialists are under constant pressure, physically exhausted. Prevention has not been well organized. The flow of patients coming to me for a medical checkup dropped. People have cowered, they are afraid they might get infected from a visit to the hospital and it has negatively affected my work as a whole” (a pediatrician, Blagoevgrad).*

Limited access to healthcare during the emergency situation due to the pandemic has directly affected the immunization of the youngest children. Data about the 10 examined neighbourhoods show that about half of the children aged 0–7 in the interviewed households that had to be vaccinated as per the existing Immunization Calendar of the Republic of Bulgaria<sup>17</sup>, had their immunization calendar disrupted for a period of 9 months (Table 8).

**Table 8. Answers about children aged 0–2 and 6–7 to the question: “Have you been to the family doctor of the child/ren for immunization since 15 May?” (where there are children in the household!)**

Answers	Number of children	Share of children (%)
No, the child/ren in this period did not have his/her/their planned compulsory immunization	46	34
No, I am afraid to take the child/ren for immunization now	26	19
No, the family doctor has not invited us for immunization	37	28
Yes, a visit for immunization	13	10
No answer	12	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Health, Compulsory Immunization and Re-immunization, <https://www.mh.government.bg/bg/informaciya-za-grazhdani/imunizacii/>.

40% of the children who missed their immunization schedule did so because their parents were afraid to take them for immunization during this period, and the majority of these children (60%) had not been invited by their general practitioner.

The imposed restrictions can be expected to have negative consequences in the long run for health and social work as well. Unlike education provided by educational establishments, where the time limits of the imposed restrictions have been clearly laid down, prohibition of informal social awareness-raising activities has not had any specific parameters, including a time frame. Direct communication in the social work of health and labour mediators, as well as social workers, in the vulnerable communities often has no efficient alternative.

*“The pandemic limited our communication with the people, it definitely left us without real contact with the people. As I said, the pandemic restricted our talks that we delivered about early marriages, we used to have local active groups, carried out different health education talks, all these activities were simply prohibited. That was the major impact of the pandemic. Otherwise, we managed to carry out the campaign about teeth health but in compliance with the anti-covid measures and the effect was not the same”* (a health mediator, Blagoevgrad).

The delayed negative implications of the lack of direct social work and communication during the pandemic and the restrictive measures imposed as a result most probably will start surfacing in the medium and long term.

### 3.2. From a health problem to unemployment: “If the virus does not kill us, hunger will”

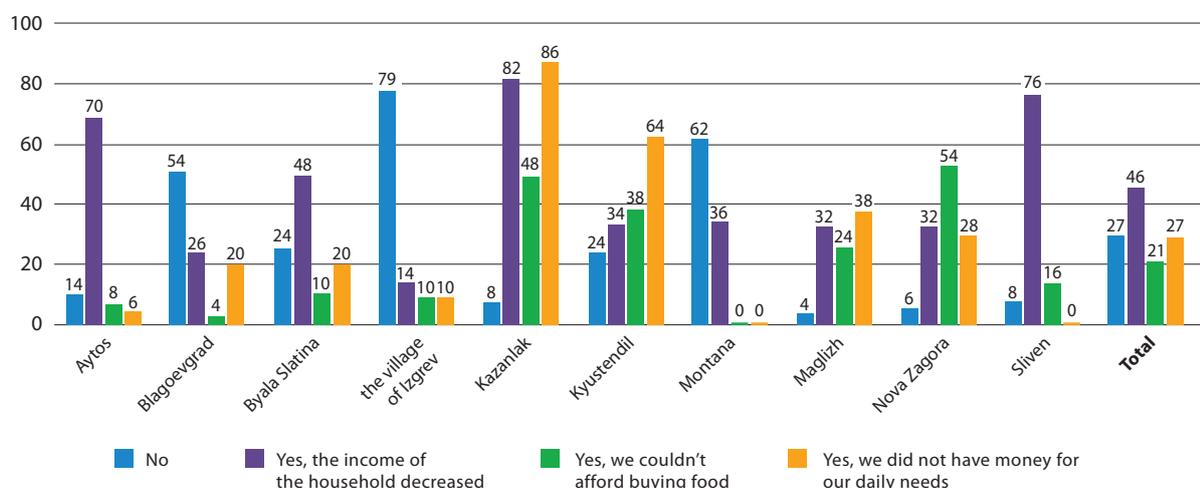
Major indicators of the well-being of the households in the examined neighbourhoods have deteriorated considerably since the pandemic started.

The households’ income has significantly decreased during the state of emergency. Approximately two-thirds of the households shared that compared to the previous 2–3 months they had lost their income or had faced shortage of funds to meet their basic needs (Fig. 2).

The greatest share of respondents who stated that **the household income decreased** during the state of emergency has been recorded in:

- *Carmen* neighbourhood, Kazanlak: 41 households, 82% (locked down since 19 March 2020);
- *Nadezhda* neighbourhood, Sliven: 38 households, 76% (locked down since 25 April 2020; with the highest number of households where none of the household members worked during the state of emergency: 42 households, 84%);
- *Strandzha* neighbourhood, Aytos: 35 households, 70% (the neighbourhood was not locked down).

**Fig. 2. Answers to the question: “In comparison to the previous 2–3 months, has your household had any financial difficulties during the state of emergency (13 March – 13 May)? If yes, what kind of?”\* (%)**



\* The question allowed the respondents to choose more than one answer. The chart shows some of the answers. The other answers referred to “less significant” difficulties such as “we did not have masks and disinfectants” and to the common problem “we did not have funds to meet our daily needs”. The case in Kazanlak is worth mentioning, where approximately two-thirds of the respondents referred to the difficulty “we could not reach a doctor/pharmacy”.

The remaining neighbourhoods, regardless whether they were locked down or not, had considerably fewer number of respondents affected by decreasing income (below 50%).

A comparison has been made, even though the question has been formulated in a different way, with families and not households for the whole period from the beginning of the pandemic.

Data from the nationally representative survey carried out by Alpha Research in February 2021 show that **12.4% households reported income loss due to the pandemic.**<sup>18</sup>

Data from a survey in the 10 Roma neighbourhoods show that **the household income decreased in 224 cases (45.53% of the examined households) during the state of emergency and in 180 cases (36.59% of the examined households) in the period between 13 May and November 2020.**

The greatest share of respondents who stated that **the household did not have money to buy food** during the state of emergency has been reported in:

- *Shesti* neighbourhood, Nova Zagora: 27 households, 54% (locked down since 19 March 2020). The respondents in this neighbourhood who shared that their income decreased during the state of emergency are considerably fewer than the ones who shared that they did not have money to buy food. The latter probably shows that dire

<sup>18</sup> After a year of the Covid-19 pandemic: how has our life changed?, [https://alpharesearch.bg/post/976-godinasled-nachaloto-na-kovid-pandemiata-kak-se-promeni-jivotut-ni.html?fbclid=IwAR12MPMF7Cki0QkMdJ-dpwt\\_ORI5z2keeYbkFoMxoY9ZK29hUOZZiNBpH0](https://alpharesearch.bg/post/976-godinasled-nachaloto-na-kovid-pandemiata-kak-se-promeni-jivotut-ni.html?fbclid=IwAR12MPMF7Cki0QkMdJ-dpwt_ORI5z2keeYbkFoMxoY9ZK29hUOZZiNBpH0).

poverty was widespread in the neighbourhood even prior to the pandemic, which made the residents even more vulnerable;

- *Carmen* neighbourhood, Kazanlak: 24 households, 48% (locked down since 19 March 2020).

The residents of the examined Roma neighbourhoods in Nova Zagora, Kyustendil and Maglizh also remembered considerably struggling during the state of emergency to meet their needs of food or other basic needs. The neighbourhoods in Kyustendil and Maglizh were not locked down during that period and the access control regime in Nova Zagora did not result in major restriction of movement.

The specific anti-covid measure imposed, i.e. lockdown of neighbourhoods, could have aggravated in some places the negative economic impact of the pandemic on the residents but it was not the leading factor for the worsened economic situation. The other factor that had significant impact was the reduced demand for workforce by employers due to the shrinking of businesses during the pandemic both as a result of the anti-covid measures imposed and the general drop of economic activity and consumption.

The majority of households in the examined communities which did not struggle during the state of emergency compared to the previous 2–3 months were recorded in:

- the village of Izgrev<sup>19</sup>: 33 households, 78.57%;
- *Kosharnik* neighbourhood, Montana: 31 households, 62% (with the greatest share of employed members of the examined households as of the time of carrying out the study: 52.5% of all members; with the greatest share of households, where all members employed prior to the state of emergency continued working during the time the state of emergency was in force, 80%);
- *Predel* neighbourhood, Blagoevgrad: 27 households, 54% (ranked second in terms of a share of households, where none of the employed prior to the state of emergency lost their job during it, 50%).

Unemployment is a permanent challenge in many of the examined neighbourhoods but it has escalated during the pandemic and has been reported as a leading problem in the period after the state of emergency.

When it comes to employment and unemployment respectively, it is not possible to ignore the fact that out of those who claimed “I have a job”, an unknown number of people have in mind “I work without a contract”. Thus, people who claim that they are (un)registered unemployed, in an unknown number of cases, perform work, receive some remuneration for it without a contract. Therefore, in the context of a pandemic, the people employed in this way (again an unknown number of them) do not receive a compensation when they lose their job and are left without income.

Some Roma neighbourhoods have a group of extremely marginalized families that are set apart and earn a living by gathering wood, picking up herbs, mushrooms, “scavenging through trash bins” and “living day by day”. They are called “wagoners”, “bin scavengers”, “aliens”, as they might have recently settled in the respective neighbourhood or on its periphery, often without any registered address. There are such families in the neighbour-

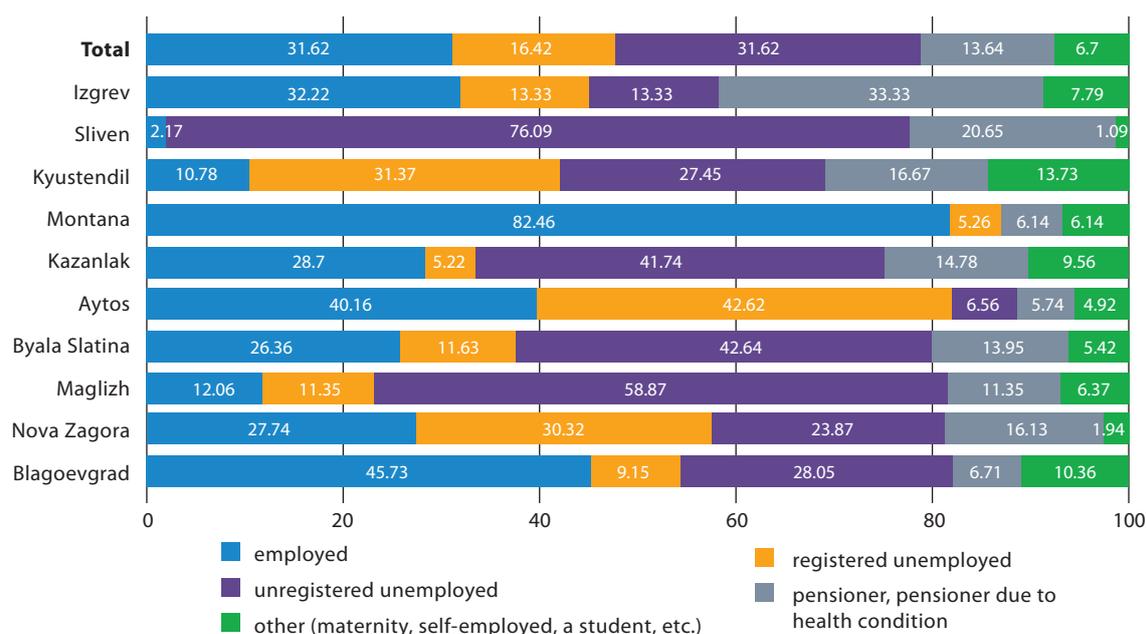
<sup>19</sup> The village of Izgrev was locked down after the state of emergency was lifted, from 11 to 25 June 2020.

hoods in Blagoevgrad, Kyustendil, Maglizh, Nova Zagora and Sliven. An expert said that “they hardly made ends meet, had a meagre meal once a day to save more food for their children” (NGO, Maglizh).

*“Trash bin scavengers. At the beginning of the pandemic, they were not allowed to go out and scavenge the bins. Prior to the pandemic they used to go out in the morning with the containers to scavenge and make money to buy some bread, and then they were banned to do so” (a health mediator, Blagoevgrad).*

The neighbourhood residents from the group of those unregistered in employment bureaus are highly likely to have stayed without a job prior to the pandemic as well. The highest number of such people has been registered in Sliven, Maglizh, Byala Slatina and Kazanlak of between 41.7% and 76.1% but their number has also been high in *Iztok* neighbourhood of Kyustendil and *Predel* neighbourhood in Blagoevgrad, about 28%.

**Fig. 3. Distribution of people aged 18 and more by occupation (%)**



There are some neighbourhoods, where economic hardships due to unemployment are considered to be a permanent challenge, aggravated by the pandemic and the introduced restrictions. “I’d say that the Northwestern region has been most affected by unemployment. That’s it. The people are looking for work, but there is no work. There are some temporary employment programmes for people below 29 but during the pandemic the 14-day work obligation<sup>20</sup> was waived to avoid many people gathering in the same place and unemployment is a major issue here, the people are left without jobs” (NGO, Byala Slatina).

<sup>20</sup> The interviewed expert referred to the obligation of people on social benefits to do community service for a period of 14 days, 4 hours a day. The temporary suspension of this obligation out of precaution did not aggravate the situation related to unemployment, as the beneficiaries of social benefits are unemployed in principle. We gave the example to illustrate the difficulties related to providing occupational safety in a pandemic.

Montana, which is located in the same region, seems to be an exception, at least at the time of carrying out the study: *Kosharnik* neighbourhood has been left almost unaffected by unemployment due to the pandemic, as 83% of the adult respondents are employed.

The Roma are particularly vulnerable on the labour market during an economic crisis and they are often the first to be dismissed or made redundant for various reasons. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the grounds for dismissal could be related either to the pandemic or to the aggravated economic situation, which forced employers to shrink their business, suspend it for a while or close it down altogether.

The following fact has to be added, i.e. the attitude of the other residents of the settlement to the residents of the neighbourhood. A case in point is the town of Kyustendil. *Iztok* neighbourhood was not “locked down” during the state of emergency<sup>21</sup>; however, upon declaring the state of emergency on 13 March some of the employed residents of the neighbourhood were either dismissed or were not hired despite the fact that the employers did not suspend their production and agricultural business.

*“People complained that whenever they were seen [the employer would say]: “Those from the neighbourhood, oh, no, no, no... there is no work, no work”. People shared that even after the quarantine period Bulgarians used to work, while the Roma received an additional phone call telling them: “You cannot come to work now.” Our members continued to be kept without a job and income. Imagine how one would feel as a person, not a sick person, but a person. Mental breakdown, undermined respect, undermined dignity, no feeling of humane treatment and equality. To be shunned from... It has been many a time that I’d go to the town and whenever people would see me that I come from the neighbourhood... they would leap not just a step aside, but 5 meters away” (Focus group, Kyustendil).*

*“We were treated really awfully, really bad, they stared at us with malice. ... that’s how they stared at us with malice in supermarkets and pharmacies and I’ve seen it being said to us that we were to blame, the other people from the town told us that and we were really hurt because it is a global problem after all and we’re not to blame” (Focus group, Sliven).*

Respondents from *Nadeshda* neighbourhood in Sliven also mention such overall negative treatment.

The Roma in some places, as in the case above with *Iztok* neighbourhood in Kyustendil, have been dismissed “preventively” or have not been hired “preventively”, as an interviewed expert from Maglizh shared. Employers claimed to act out of precaution due to fear of spread of the virus but similar treatment towards the Roma has been observed during the last global recession as well, without any health risk at the time. The Roma are often hired informally, based on oral arrangements, or under contracts that do not provide for permanent commitment by the employer and can be easily terminated. This is the case with

<sup>21</sup> *Iztok* neighbourhood in Kyustendil was locked down after the state of emergency was lifted, from 17 June to 7 July 2020.

most contracts for temporary or seasonal work in agriculture and even with some employers in tourism.

*“The majority of the Roma in Svoboda neighbourhood depend on temporary employment, agricultural work. They earn a living by taking part in seasonal harvesting of cherries, roses and others, this is in general their main, secure work during the year. However, in the spring and early summer of 2020, many of them could not perform this work for various reasons. Troubles in the rose farming business, traditionally grown in the region, reluctance among local farmers to hire them for the spring harvesting due to failure to provide them with personal protective equipment and disinfectants and fear of inspection” (NGO, Maglizh).*

The data about the employed household members during the state of emergency show that only one-fourth of the households did not have their employment worsened by the measures and that some of the neighbourhoods suffered drastic rise of the unemployment rate:

- In one-fourth of the interviewed households, **all of the household members**, who worked prior to the state of emergency, **kept their jobs. These are the households that supposedly did not struggle due to the pandemic.**
- Approximately four-fifths of the interviewed households **did not have any household member employed** in the neighbourhoods in Sliven, Kyustendil, Byala Slatina and Maglizh.

Apart from unemployment which the residents of the examined neighbourhoods suffered, they also had to deal with the image created and amplified by the media that the Roma in general and the Roma returning from abroad on a mass scale were the main sources of virus transmission. This image has been largely created following the lockdown of some Roma neighbourhoods as early as 19 March 2020 without any data of increased incidence of cases in them, i.e. **preventively**.<sup>22</sup> The media amplified this image by publications such as the following:

*“A patient of Pulse Hospital tested positively for Covid-19 and was urgently transferred to the infectious diseases ward of the Multi-profile Hospital for Active Treatment (MHAT). He said that he was at a wedding in a famous local restaurant, which immediately sent the Regional Health Inspectorate and the police in the Roma neighbourhood of Blagoevgrad but there were no positive COVID-19 tests.”<sup>23</sup>*

*“The Roma neighbourhood of Blagoevgrad got packed to the brim by police because of the wedding guest with coronavirus. The number of infected cases in Blagoevgrad and the region is on the rise. 19 cases were reported today. The infectious diseases ward of the MHAT of Blagoevgrad is full.”<sup>24</sup>*

<sup>22</sup> The arguments used to justify the imposition of this measure are further analyzed in the report.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.e-79.com/news-140104.html>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.konkurent.bg/news/15944815194523/47-godishen-svatbar-umrya-ot-koronavirus-sled-2-sedmichni-maki>; you can find more information about the media approach in the section about media influence.

The next question is about hardships that the household faced in the period from the lifting of the state of emergency on 13 May to the time of the study. **The main hardship** since 13 May **has been lack of work**. It is difficult to establish whether lack of work in all examined locations is a specific problem faced by the residents of the neighbourhood or whether it is a common problem of the residents of the region.<sup>25</sup> However, it is certain for *Iztok* neighbourhood, Kyustendil, locked down in June – July of 2020 for three weeks, that lack of work mentioned as a hardship by 31 respondents is directly linked to the lockdown of the neighbourhood and consequently to the failure of the residents to take part in the cherry tree harvesting traditional for this region. What is more, as we have seen, dismissal and refusal to hire Roma from the neighbourhood started as early as March 2020.

Few Roma neighbourhoods or settlements have been locked down in the period following the end of the state of emergency. *Iztok* neighbourhood in Kyustendil and the village of Izgrev have been the two places locked down among the examined neighbourhoods. It is mainly the residents of the Roma neighbourhoods in Sliven, Kazanlak, Kyustendil, Maglizh and Aytos who reported hardships after the end of the state of emergency and in the following months.

The people least affected by hardships in the two examined periods have been the residents of the village of Izgrev, where the share of pensioners is one-third, or approximately 2.5 times higher than the average for all 10 examined communities and decreased income has affected hardly 1 in 7 households.

## 4 RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC

The responses to the pandemic in the examined neighbourhoods can be examined along two lines: anti-covid measures to contain the spread of the virus and actions to support the people who were unable to deal with the consequences of the pandemic. Along the first line, what is worth considering is whether specific measures were imposed on the Roma neighbourhoods in question and if yes, the impact of the measures, how the neighbourhood residents received the measures and how the local authorities justified and explained the need of such measures. The analysis focused on the 5 neighbourhoods included in the sample for the very reason that they were “locked down”. However, data from the field study show that specific measures have been imposed on other neighbourhoods as well.

With regard to supporting people in need, the analysis focused on the steps taken by the local institutions, the self-organization of local Roma communities and the work of NGOs.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, shortage of work for the residents of *Strandzha* neighbourhood in Aytos is more of a common problem for the people who depend on seasonal work in tourism at the Black Sea Coast.

## 4.1. Anti-covid measures: “We were locked as if in a concentration camp”

From a legal point of view<sup>26</sup> law enforcement authorities have a number of legitimate grounds pursuant to the Health Act and the Act on the Measures and Actions during the State of Emergency to introduce special measures in the territory of the country, including restrict temporarily movement to protect public health. However, measures should be imposed in line with the requirements of the Protection against Discrimination Act and Article 6 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, which lays down equality of citizens before the law.

The introduction of a special access control regime aiming at restricting free movement of the citizens only from the neighbourhoods with predominantly ethnic minority (mainly Roma) population during the Covid-19 pandemic, without any arguments presented as to why such special measures are introduced only in these territorial units and without any differences present from other areas in the same settlements that would provide grounds for different measures, constitutes unequal treatment. In this sense the specific measure, i.e. setting up access control checkpoints to restrict free movement from and into the neighbourhoods concerned with predominantly Roma population, violates the provisions of the Protection from Discrimination Act insofar as it constitutes less favourable, disproportionate or particularly unfavourable treatment of the residents of these neighbourhoods, stemming from a seemingly neutral provision, criterion or practice.<sup>27</sup>

Access control checkpoints in the examined territorial units have been introduced under the pressure of a dynamically developing health and social phenomenon (the Covid-19 pandemic); however, the latter situation does not waive the responsibility of the government to apply appropriate (initially capable of reaching the goal) and necessary (in the absence of less harsh, more lenient) measures to achieve the goal. In addition, the measures should not cause troubles to the affected citizens that are disproportionate to the pursued goals and should not damage excessively the lawful interests of the residents of the neighbourhoods in question.

The restrictive measures identified in this study are numerous and various: a permission to exit the neighbourhood only through an access control checkpoint (*Izgreva*, Kyustendil), a requirement to prove legitimate reasons to exit the neighbourhood, a curfew, mandatory wearing of masks (Kyustendil), prohibition of people who returned from abroad to enter or exit (Kazanlak, Maglizh), prohibition for more than two persons to ride in a car (Nova Zagora, Sliven).

It is worth mentioning that the actions taken by the local institutions to set up access control checkpoints have often served to demonstrate power, i.e. only some of the entry-exit

<sup>26</sup> The team would like to acknowledge the support of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee whose lawyers consulted the team about the lawfulness of the security checkpoints set up in the examined neighbourhoods.

<sup>27</sup> The unlawful discriminatory treatment of the examined neighbourhoods can be seen from the statement made by the mayor of Sliven Municipality at the Municipal Council session that the infected citizens were definitely not only the residents of *Nadezhda* neighbourhood, even though the Municipal Crisis Staff had already made the decision to introduce an access control regime restricting the movement of the residents: “which neighbourhood do the infected people come from? All neighbourhoods... *Rechitsa* neighbourhood seems to be the greatest problem, in fact, not *Nadezhda*” (Minutes No 7 of Session No 7 of Sliven Municipal Council held on 23.04.2020, p. 61–63). The lockdown of *Nadezhda* neighbourhood in Sliven is examined in greater detail in the section below.

points were closed. The latter means that the exit and entry into the neighbourhood has not been restricted or cannot be fully restricted in practice.<sup>28</sup>

**A statement of the mayor of Sliven Municipality at the Municipal Council session<sup>29</sup>:**

*“People say, I’ve heard even a female doctor say that there are plans to lock down certain neighbourhoods, a neighbourhood. The neighbourhood is not a town. We discussed such issues from the very beginning, when we adopted the set of measures and analyzed different opportunities and risks of one or another decision. We did such an analysis when we secured a checkpoint and increased police presence in Nadezhda neighbourhood. What I mean is that the neighbourhood is not a town. The neighbourhood does not have or many neighbourhoods do not have ATMs, there are no doctors, for instance, no gynecologists, no pediatricians, no medical specialists, no hemodialysis or chemotherapy, no pharmacy. There is no pharmacy in some neighbourhoods, not many, but in Nadezhda neighbourhood, in particular. Many people work outside the neighbourhood. If this is a town, most of the people live and work in a town. But when it comes to a neighbourhood, most people do not work there. They work outside it. When it comes to Nadezhda, let me give you an example with the community services provided by the people from the neighbourhood: landscaping, undertakers, cleaning. We are talking about hundreds of people whose absence from work will create troubles for us as a town, when we do not have Plan B. So, the same restrictions that we have, even less harsh, are valid for Faculteta neighbourhood in Sofia. The people there go to work, to a doctor, to an ATM to withdraw money, go shopping, go to a pharmacy. So, there are no decisions which are simple and quick. There is no such single solution that you make and solve the problem completely”*

As mentioned already, an extreme measure, a lockdown, has been imposed on five of the examined neighbourhoods. Two of them, *Carmen* in Kazanlak and *Shesti* in Nova Zagora, have had this measure imposed “preventively” days after the state of emergency has been declared.

Most interviewed citizens of *Shesti* neighbourhood believe that no special anti-covid measures have been imposed on their neighbourhood. They believe so probably due to the fact that the access control regime in the neighbourhood has been much more lenient than the regime in other locations. Only several respondents pointed out: “there were people sent by the mayor, the neighbourhood was sprayed with a machine” and just one respondent said “we were locked down”. However, in response to the question about how they evaluate the specific measure “neighbourhood lockdown”, approximately half of the respondents said that “it’s not possible/it’s not fair/they cannot close just our neighbourhood”. However, it is possible that the “failure to remember” the specific measure might stem from its more lenient enforcement: the

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the media publications about a security checkpoint in *Carmen* neighbourhood, Kazanlak (Nova TV, <https://www.vbox7.com/play:c9805d8660>) or the confession made by the District Governor of Sliven Tchavdar Bozhursky on 25 April 2020 that “the measures applied are not sufficiently efficient” (bTV, [https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/zhiteli-na-slivenskija-kvartal.html?fbclid=IwAR2GjX7GSZZ9mrShi282yn7g0tGq3P9mSI0BvQ7EIEtk9iQAb\\_KXwm1iEAo](https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/zhiteli-na-slivenskija-kvartal.html?fbclid=IwAR2GjX7GSZZ9mrShi282yn7g0tGq3P9mSI0BvQ7EIEtk9iQAb_KXwm1iEAo)). These measures in effect have only made it more difficult but have not restricted communication between the neighbourhood residents and the other residents of the town. In addition, some respondents in the study reported “a breach” of the system of restrictions: “There was abuse even at the access control checkpoints. Give a chocolate and enter, no chocolate and you cannot enter. There were such cases, I saw it myself and that’s why I share it” (a neighbourhood resident, Kyustendil).

<sup>29</sup> Minutes No 7 of Session No 7 of Sliven Municipal Council held on 23.04.2020, p. 63.

participants in the focus group shared that it was not clear what the security checkpoint at the entry into the neighbourhood was for: “There was no point of having the barrier, it was just for show. They did not stop to check absolutely anyone”. The interviewed doctor and health mediator shared the same. Still, in the opinion of the health mediator, even though it was not clear to what extent the security checkpoint was efficient, it had some effect on the neighbourhood residents towards taking more seriously the measures. The checkpoint also boosted the negative attitude to the neighbourhood residents, as the participants in the focus group shared: “The people from the neighbourhood used to be treated differently even prior to the pandemic, now even more so. Discrimination is growing. They are afraid that we may infect them”.

The mayor Nikolay Grozev justified his decision for bTV: *“The majority of our fellow citizens from Shesti neighbourhood are not so well educated, they do not watch the Bulgarian National Television, do not read newspapers and are not aware of the serious implications of the spread of coronavirus. We imposed this harsher measure in order to protect the life and health of all citizens in the municipality”*<sup>30</sup>.

Unlike Nova Zagora, 41 respondents from *Carmen* neighbourhood in Kazanlak are aware that they and their fellow residents have been subject to “specific measures”. The description of the measures varies: “the neighbourhood was locked”, “the neighbourhood was surrounded by police to comply with the measures”, “we could not leave the neighbourhood”, and more residents shared that “the streets and yards/houses were sprayed”, “they sprayed just once”. The opinion about the measures also varies but two clear groups can be established, a smaller group “agreeing” with the measures and a larger group “denying” the need of locking down the neighbourhood: **18 respondents accepted “the specific measures”**: “it was necessary to protect the people, it was good”, “the measures were useful”, “it was good for the neighbourhood”, “it was good to avoid visits from other towns and villages”. The rest believed the lockdown was not justified. Some simply said that “it was not good to have us locked”; others pointed out firmly that “we were kept like prisoners”; yet others focused on the difficulties the neighbourhood residents faced due to the lockdown: “it was hard for me to go round the neighbourhood with my hurting legs”, “it was hard because I had to go round the whole neighbourhood to get to the pharmacy”.

*“The lockdown of the entrances to Carmen neighbourhood from the north side was only done out of security, prevention and compliance with the measures. The neighbourhood has several entrances and the ones that remain open will be the entrances on the western side. People will have access through them and the police will be able to fulfill strictly its duties for quarantine control”, the mayor of Kazanlak Galina Stoyanova explained.*

*“Some of the reasons for the lockdown of the neighbourhood are that the neighbouring municipalities have information about people who returned from the critical hotspots and are currently quarantined. These measures will protect the residents of Carmen and the whole town”, the mayor added.”*<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Nova Zagora introduced an access control regime for the residents of the Roma neighbourhood, <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/30494861.html>, 18 March 2020

<sup>31</sup> Carmen neighbourhood in Kazanlak under 24/7 security: <https://nova.bg/news/view/2020/03/19/281910/>, 19 March 2020.

*Nadezhda* neighbourhood in Sliven is a different case. In response to the Application for Access to Public Information, Sliven Municipality provided the following answer:

“Sliven Municipality has not issued an order to introduce an access control regime in *Nadezhda* neighbourhood.

Therefore, I hereby enclose the following:

- Order No РД-01-143/ 20.03.2020 of the Minister of Health, a copy of 1 page, A format, that the competent authorities of the Ministry of Interior have the powers to set up security checkpoints.
- Minutes from the Municipal Crisis Staff session held on 19.03.2020 about the analysis and new measures related to the spread of the coronavirus – a copy of 1 page, A4 format, with deleted personal data”.

The following decision has been recorded in the above minutes:

“2. To organize permanent police presence in *Nadezhda* neighbourhood and strictly observe that the order of the Minister of Health be complied with”.

Despite the above statement made by the Municipality that there no order has been issued to introduce an access control regime, a security checkpoint has been set up, as the field study data confirm. The neighbourhood was in fact locked down on 24 April 2020. As for the “competences of the authorities of the Ministry of Interior to set up security checkpoints”, the Minister of Health refers in his order to the competences to set up security checkpoints “at the entry-exit points into district cities”, not at the entry-exit points of neighbourhoods in the cities.

48 respondents from *Nadezhda* neighbourhood mentioned that their neighbourhood was subject to “specific measures”: “the neighbourhood was closed/locked”, “the police”, “a security checkpoint”. The neighbourhood lockdown is evaluated in definitely negative terms: “it was very bad to use the police to lock down the place, we were like prisoners”, “we were constantly checked like prisoners”, “we shouldn’t be guarded by the police”, “it’s not right/normal/good to lock us down”, “they locked down the neighbourhood but there were no sick people”, “we got poorer”.

In some cases the specific measures imposed on the Roma neighbourhoods have been explained in the following way, though off the record: “they do not observe the anti-covid measures”; “they gather in crowds”, “they don’t wear masks”, “they don’t have personal hygiene habits”... Statements have also been made by representatives of the local authorities that the neighbourhood lockdown protected the other residents of the town and that the “increased police presence” disciplined the neighbourhood residents. However, as mentioned above, Roma neighbourhoods have been locked down without any evidence that the neighbourhoods “spread the virus”, while disciplining people to obey the anti-covid measures also presupposes providing them the conditions to do so.

*“The worst part was that despite all demands from everyone to observe personal hygiene and so on, the worst part was that we did not have water and still do not have ... and the people answered to the appeal “wash your hands!” with “How can we wash our hands when there is no water?” (Focus group, Sliven).*

“How can we wash our hands when there is no water?” is a question which can be asked to a different extent and range for many Roma neighbourhoods. Lack of water in some of the households in the 10 examined neighbourhoods is a well-known problem dating back prior to the state of emergency: 23 households with 102 members (5.7%) do not have any access to water and 118 households with 448 members (25.0%) have an outside tap. However, the problem is much more serious in some neighbourhoods and affects much greater majority of the residents: 20.3% of the members of the examined households in *Predel* neighbourhood in Blagoevgrad have no water supply; 44.6% of the members of the examined households in *Shesti* neighbourhood, Nova Zagora, 41.1% in *Svoboda* neighbourhood, Maglizh and 37.4% in *Carmen* neighbourhood, Kazanlak, have only an outside tap.

Overcrowding of dwellings is another challenge to placing under quarantine the residents of these neighbourhoods. 123 of the examined neighbourhoods with 300 members in total have just a single room for sleeping. However, the issue is once again much more serious in some neighbourhoods: 17 households in *Predel* neighbourhood, Blagoevgrad, with 76 members in total (on average 4.5 persons per room), and 9 households in *Svoboda* neighbourhood in Maglizh with 32 members in total (on average 3.5 persons per room) have just one room.

Compliance with hygiene requirements is hampered by the fact that many households do not have money even to buy food and cannot afford to buy masks and disinfectants, especially during the first weeks of the state of emergency, when these items have been either unavailable or hard to find and too expensive.

All the interviewed experts agree that at the beginning of the pandemic the anti-covid measures **were not observed in the neighbourhoods**, given the fact that the neighbourhoods were more or less isolated from the rest of the towns, there were no sick relatives and neighbours and the information from the media was controversial. However, the experts note that with the advance of the pandemic, the attitudes changed.

Thus 42.0% of all respondents claimed that their household complied with all anti-covid measures **during the state of emergency**, unlike *Nadezhda* neighbourhood in Sliven and *Shesti* neighbourhood in Stara Zagora, where none of the respondents gave the same answer, and unlike *Carmen* neighbourhood in Kazanlak, where 68.0% of the respondents answered in this way. The neighbourhoods with the highest number of respondents who gave this answer are a special case: 98.0% of the respondents in *Kosharnik* neighbourhood in Montana (the highest share of employed and the highest education level of respondents), 93.0% of the respondents in the village of Izgrev (considerably fewer employed and lower education level of the respondents).

The importance of this answer should not be overestimated, as it is possible and probable that “all measures” mean different things and “we complied with all measures” might refer to one measure at one point, another measure at a different point. What is worth noting are the considerable differences in the data provided by the neighbourhoods and it is worth finding out which action/inaction of the local institutions/people influenced them.

## 4.2. Coping/survival strategies

The findings of the field study show that all examined neighbourhoods had immensely struggling households, families with many children, lonely older people, single parents as well as “trash bin scavengers” in some neighbourhoods without any permanent income. All the neighbourhoods had people who lost their jobs or were deprived of the opportunity to carry out their routine seasonal work in agriculture and tourism.

If the findings from the focus groups and interviews with experts are added to the findings of the field study, several support models can be outlined, particularly during the state of emergency:

### *Mutual support: “Our neighbourhood stepped up to help, generosity in people found its expression”*

The interviewed residents of the respective neighbourhoods most often mentioned support from the community during the pandemic.

In **Iztok neighbourhood, Kyustendil**, 49 out of 50 respondents mentioned that their neighbours/fellow residents together with the churches and Largo Association helped the residents in need both during and after the state of emergency; 27 respondents said that a health mediator helped the residents providing them with masks and disinfectants during the state of emergency and 22 respondents mentioned the same about the period since 13 May. None of the respondents mentioned any support from the municipality in the whole period since 13 March 2020. The participant in the focus group shared that: “People from LARGO organization and the church were there preparing food packages. The packages

*“What we saw here did not happen elsewhere. The NGOs did not do it, it was the community who did it ... The community which considered the problem together, how many hungry people there are, who they are, how much they struggle in poverty, where they are. Unlike other municipalities where we had to step in. The community organized itself here. A community that is capable of organizing itself and is united. They also trusted the municipality and they decided to address their problems together. There is communication in this municipality between the Roma, NGOs, the community. (...) They have established relations and interaction between Bulgarians and the Roma in Maglizh and the pandemic has not changed that” (NGO, Maglizh).*

*“We are grateful to our fellow residents who live abroad, they helped not just once, not once but many times... They sent us money because they have a bellyful of food.”*

*“I remember how an elderly lady, a pensioner, came to me when we were raising money from the whole neighbourhood, from businessmen who had food stores so that we could buy food and make food aid packages to give out... an elderly lady, a pensioner approached me and said: “Sasho, I also want to be a part of it. I don’t have a lot of money, just 1 BGN but what you are doing is very good!” (Focus group, Sliven).*

were distributed to the people in need and the unemployed”; “They distributed even medicines”; “They also gave out to widows”; “and to orphans”; “The aid packages were not enough to give out to everyone. It was decided that poor families with many children, lonely widows and orphans came with priority”; “I was not in the country at the time but I watched live broadcasts that there were soup kitchens and food was distributed”; “Well, they passed along the streets in carts and gave out food to help us”; “I have a neighbour from the other part of the neighbourhood, she cooked meals in large pots every day in front of her home and gave out to the people in need”; “What I noticed is that the neighbourhood got active to help. People started showing their generosity”.

*“We are grateful to all of our relatives who are abroad. A group of boys got together, organized themselves and raised money and bought food” (Focus group, Nova Zagora).*

*“The government doesn’t do anything, neither does the municipality to help the people who are in dire need. They demand masks and disinfectants, but people cannot provide themselves with such and the municipality does not help” (a pastor, Nova Zagora).*

This mutual assistance model could also be observed in *Svoboda* neighbourhood in Maglizh, in *Carmen* neighbourhood, Kazanlak, to some extent and in *Strandzha* neighbourhood, Aytos (during the state of emergency), *Nadezhda* neighbourhood, Sliven, *Sheshti* neighbourhood, Nova Zagora, mainly with the help of family members from abroad.

### *Aid from the municipality*

17 respondents from **Predel** neighbourhood, Blagoevgrad, pointed out that the municipality helped with masks and disinfectants, 9 respondents mentioned food products, 2 respondents “warm meals”, while 5 respondents pointed out that the health mediator (who is employed by the municipality) distributed masks and disinfectants. The data are similar for both periods. The participants in the focus group firmly believe that the aid had not been properly distributed and did not meet the needs adequately and a participant even said that the aid was distributed “arbitrarily”. The health mediator maintained that the aid was directed only towards the most vulnerable households: “At the beginning of the peak of the pandemic we distributed masks and disinfectants. 34 bin-scavenging families received food products, cleaning products, masks and many other things under a project implemented by ROMACT. The aid package per each family amounted to 107 BGN. Trash bin scavengers were most affected by the pandemic and we provided them with these packages”.

Two-thirds of the respondents in **the village of Izgrev** pointed out that the municipality helped by providing food products during the state of emergency and only one-fifth noted that the aid continued after the end of the state of emergency.

It becomes clear from the interviews with the experts and the answers to open-ended questions in the questionnaire that health mediators<sup>32</sup> carried out a number of various

<sup>32</sup> It is worth considering that health mediators are employed by the municipality, i.e. the activities that they carried out have been coordinated with the municipal administration, although neighbourhood residents rarely regard them as representatives of the local authorities. What is more, in many cases the residents do not recognize them as “health mediators”, but as people they can approach for advice and seek help from. In this sense health mediators are regarded more as members of the community than as municipal servants.

activities supporting the institutions and the neighbourhood residents. They sought out and distributed prescriptions to the people under quarantine helping the Regional Health Inspectorate and the police, organized disinfection of the neighbourhood, assisted the Red Cross in the distribution and delivery of masks, disinfectants and food products to the struggling people in the neighbourhoods, provided masks and disinfectants under projects of the National Network of Health Mediators, delivered learning materials to the children who did not have access to distance learning. In some of the neighbourhoods (*Carmen* in Kazanlak and *Nadezhda* in Sliven) local pastors worked together with health mediators.

It has to be added that all respondents from all neighbourhoods mentioned that they had received masks and disinfectants from the local offices of the Red Cross in the period since 13 May 2020.

### *No help from anywhere – everyone has been left to themselves*

*“Support from the municipality, apart from leaflets, explanatory materials, when it comes to that, I do not know of any other support from the municipality”*  
(a pastor, Byala Slatina).

The majority of the respondents (approximately 60%) shared that during the state of emergency no-one helped the people from the community, the share of people who did not get any help in the period following the state of emergency rising to 73%.

The residents of the neighbourhoods of Byala Slatina and Montana who took part in the study are firmly of the opinion that no-one helped the people in need during and after the state of emergency. There is no data of any help in the interviews with the experts as well.

It is only the focus group in *Kosharnik* neighbourhood, Montana, that mentioned an occasional delivery of packages with cleaning materials to the families in dire need, an initiative connected to the Network of Health Mediators.

It should be noted that the dissemination of information, leaflets, advice from health mediators as well as from the representatives of the Regional Health Inspectorate, the municipality, medical specialists... is definitely not regarded as assistance by the residents of the relevant neighbourhoods.

Disappointment with lack of support results in greater mistrust of public institutions and further diminishes the legitimacy of their authority in the community.

Most probably mistrust will turn out to be a major obstacle to information campaigns and actions in these communities that are targeted at overcoming the pandemic and its consequences, including the motivation to be vaccinated.

*“The big contradictions that we see on the news and in other shows, the people are disappointed. They lost trust. They are deeply doubtful of anything they hear”*  
(a pastor, Blagoevgrad).

### 4.3. Distance learning... “with handouts from the mediator”

Distance learning created a lot of trouble and hardships to many families. Where parents could not help their children and/or when distance learning in an electronic environment has turned into a distribution of a sheet of paper with an assignment, delivered by volunteers to the doors of the pupils (due to lack of electronic devices), the loss for the children has been much more severe and the implications long-standing.

The attitude to distance learning of the children in the examined neighbourhoods does not differ from the one registered across the country: some of the interviewed parents believe that their children managed to deal with it; others noted that many children started lagging behind because none of the family members could help them; others point out the fact that no learning in an electronic environment could take place when children do not have electronic devices (or Internet access) and receive a list of assignments “on paper”.

The findings of the study show that the school-age children in the examined neighbourhoods are 380. Out of them:

- 42.4% or 161 pupils have their own personal computer/tablet. The greatest share of pupils from the interviewed households who have a personal computer / a tablet have been recorded in *Strandzha* neighbourhood, *Aytos*, *Kosharnik* neighbourhood, *Montana*, *Iztok* neighbourhood, *Kyustendil* and the village of *Izgreve*;
- One in 10 school-age children or 39 pupils received a tablet from school, an NGO or a private individual: such support has been most prominent in *Strandzha* neighbourhood, *Aytos*, *Svoboda* neighbourhood, *Maglizh* and *Nadezhda* neighbourhood, *Sliven*.

The latter data show that slightly more than half of the school-age pupils from the examined households had the necessary technical means for distance learning.

Approximately 10% or 36 students received learning materials on paper provided by an education/health mediator or a pastor: such assistance was provided mainly to the pupils in *Svoboda* neighbourhood, *Maglizh*, and *Nadezhda* neighbourhood, *Sliven*, where more than 40% of the school-age pupils benefitted from it.

**Almost one-fifth of the school students or 70 children did not have electronic devices and no one provided them with learning materials. The share of these students in the interviewed households in *Predel* neighbourhood, *Blagoevgrad*, and in the Roma neighbourhood of *Byala Slatina* exceeded 50%, and in *Shesti* neighbourhood, *Nova Zagora*, was 28%.** No such cases have been registered in the interviewed households in *Strandzha* neighbourhood, *Aytos*, *Kosharnik* neighbourhood, *Montana*, the village of *Izgreve* and *Svoboda* neighbourhood, *Maglizh*.

## 5 THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA: THE MAIN MEDIA APPROACHES AND TECHNIQUES

This section has focused on media publications about the examined neighbourhoods from the period following the state of emergency declared in the spring of 2020. This is not an exhaustive review of more than 100 online publications in the local and national media.

The pandemic has been among the top media publications since the spring of 2020. The report titled *How Public are the Public Media* also illustrates the latter phenomenon, noting that “The programmes broadcast by the Bulgarian National Television 1 (BNT1) are unequivocally dominated by the topic of Covid-19” (53.4% of the analysis units are devoted to it) and when publications about healthcare are added (25.6%) more than three-fourth of the analyzed units in the BNT programmes for the period addressed the pandemic in its health and/or institutional dimensions<sup>33</sup>. The report also notes that the public Bulgarian National Television and Bulgarian National Radio have addressed much more rarely such subjects of public importance as “social politics” and “education” and have addressed them fully through the point of view of the anti-covid measures<sup>34</sup>.

The subject of the Roma communities from the examined neighbourhoods can also be found in the publications of local and national media devoted to the pandemic and the resulting restrictive measures.

The media coverage observed does not differ in general in terms of attitude and choice of topics and issues related to the Roma communities from the typical one for most media in the previous periods.<sup>35</sup> The pandemic has been the reason “to recycle” clichés associated with negative prejudice: **Roma weddings** – Roma birth rate – a threat to the majority by the quickly growing Roma minority – now in the context of the pandemic<sup>36</sup>; **poor personal hygiene** (“Roma neighbourhoods under lockdown, they find it hard to observe personal hygiene”<sup>37</sup>, “About 25 000 people live in *Nadezhda* neighbourhood and they have a security checkpoint at the entrance. They live in dwellings without electricity and water”<sup>38</sup>) and **primitivism** (“The residents of *Nadezhda* neighbourhood in Sliven

<sup>33</sup> How public are the public media?, Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia and For a New Partnership in Journalism Foundation, Sofia, 2021, p. 51–53. The media monitoring covered six weeks from 19 October to 29 November 2020 and included the prime-time news of the two media and eight current-affair TV shows (p. 13).

<sup>34</sup> How public are the public media?, Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia and For a New Partnership in Journalism Foundation, Sofia, 2021, p. 51.

<sup>35</sup> See the studies of Open Society Institute – Sofia, Project VS/2010/0536 Equality as a Path to Progress, Monitoring of media coverage of equality and discrimination based on sex, race, ethnic origin, religion, disability, age and sexual orientation, 2012, and Mapping the Roma Communities in Sofia and Vidin, Open Society Institute – Sofia, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Darik Radio, A man has COVID-19 after a Roma wedding in Blagoevgrad, <https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/myzh-e-s-covid-19-sled-romska-svatba-v-blagoevgrad-2231135>.

<sup>37</sup> Roma neighbourhoods under lockdown, they find it hard to observe personal hygiene, <https://www.bgonair.bg/a/2-bulgaria/189015-romski-mahali-v-kazanlak-i-nova-zagora-sa-pod-blokada-zaradi-kovid-19>.

<sup>38</sup> bTV, The residents of Nadezhda neighbourhood in Sliven in an attempt to take the law in their hands and attack the bTV team, [https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/zhiteli-na-slivenskija-kvartal.html?fbclid=IwAR2GjX7GSZZ9mrShi282yn7g0tGq3P9mSIOBvQ7EIEtk9iQAb\\_KXwm1iEAo](https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/zhiteli-na-slivenskija-kvartal.html?fbclid=IwAR2GjX7GSZZ9mrShi282yn7g0tGq3P9mSIOBvQ7EIEtk9iQAb_KXwm1iEAo). It should be emphasized that the information also includes inaccurate generalization, as by far not all neighbourhood residents live without electricity and water.

threatened the bTV team with stones at the attempt to check if the anti-covid measures are complied with in the area<sup>39</sup>, “Residents of the Roma neighbourhood *Nadezhda* in Sliven sneak out through holes in the concrete fence raised around the neighbourhood and thus skip checks at the security checkpoints<sup>40</sup>).

The number of investigative reporting materials and critical analyses in the media about the lawfulness of setting up access control checkpoints in the neighbourhoods with predominantly Roma population is exceptionally limited. There are also hardly any in-depth analyses of the topic, which is also due to the small number of publications and their mainly informative nature. These findings about the limited role of the media as a watchdog and the limited capacity of the civil society to provide protection from unequal, unfair and discriminatory treatment of the examined neighbourhoods illustrate another aspect of the vulnerability of the residents during the pandemic, namely the lack of opportunities to receive support, have protection of their violated rights.

Some of the publications are based on examples of single cases of infected Roma, which have been interpreted as having major significance for the alarming spread of the pandemic. For example, a news announcement about a single infected Roma is interrupted by a link to information about the spread of the virus across the country<sup>41</sup>.

Similar suggestions have been made by combining data about a single case of a patient with Covid-19 of Roma origin who died and the increased number of people admitted to hospital in Blagoevgrad, without reporting their breakdown by ethnic groups.<sup>42</sup>

The media practice observed in a number of previous studies of mentioning in the crime news the Roma origin of the persons involved still remains, this time mentioning the Roma origin in the context of the pandemic and the related restrictions: e.g. “Half-naked Roma with COVID-19 escapes a hospital in Sofia<sup>43</sup>. The same publication includes a humiliating media reference, emphasizing that “a male Roma, with a naked upper body” with Covid-19 ran away from the hospital and creating the impression that the man has been admitted to the hospital and has left the hospital at odds with the rules, at his own discretion and quickly, without putting any clothes on, while the man has been actually detained by the police to be tested and to establish whether his health condition allowed him to be detained in custody.

When the actions of the law enforcement authorities in the Roma neighbourhoods are described, military terminology is used, which creates the impression of actions taken

<sup>39</sup> bTV, The residents of *Nadezhda* neighbourhood in Sliven in an attempt to take the law in their hands and attack the bTV team, [https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/zhiteli-na-slivenskija-kvartal.html?fbclid=IwAR2GjX7GSZZ9mrShi282yn7g0tGq3P9mSIOBvQ7EIEtk9iQAb\\_KXwm1iEAo](https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/zhiteli-na-slivenskija-kvartal.html?fbclid=IwAR2GjX7GSZZ9mrShi282yn7g0tGq3P9mSIOBvQ7EIEtk9iQAb_KXwm1iEAo).

<sup>40</sup> Darik Radio, Roma skip a check by sneaking through the holes of the concrete fence in *Nadezhda* neighbourhood in Sliven, <https://dariknews.bg/regioni/sliven/romi-biagat-ot-proverka-prez-dupki-v-betonnoto-zagrazhdenie-na-kvartal-nadezhda-v-sliven-2223275>.

<sup>41</sup> Darik Radio, <https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/myzh-e-s-covid-19-sled-romska-svatba-v-blagoevgrad-2231135>.

<sup>42</sup> Konkurent, 47-year-old wedding guest died of coronavirus after suffering for 2 weeks, <https://www.konkurent.bg/news/15944815194523/47-godishen-svatbar-umrya-ot-koronavirus-sled-2-sedmichni-maki>.

<sup>43</sup> Half-naked Roma with COVID-19 escapes a hospital in Sofia, 13 April 2020, [https://www.struma.com/sinya-lampa/polugol-rom-s-covid-19-izbyaga-ot-bolnica-v-sofiya\\_162928](https://www.struma.com/sinya-lampa/polugol-rom-s-covid-19-izbyaga-ot-bolnica-v-sofiya_162928).

against “a public enemy”: “raid”, “occupied”, “operation”, “forced the authorities”<sup>44</sup>, etc. For instance, “Kazanlak defends against COVID-19 by a total blockade of the gypsy neighbourhood”<sup>45</sup>; “Struma.com! Operation Respect! A surprising police raid of the Roma neighbourhood of Blagoevgrad, 10 arrested”<sup>46</sup>.

The headings and texts of the publications present the Roma mainly as the object of the action described. The representatives of the public institutions and professionals outside the neighbourhood communities are the main subjects of the action in the media publications. As a consequence, it is the representatives of public institutions that are respectively the prevailing spokespeople about the restrictive measures in the Roma neighbourhoods. The voice of the residents of the examined neighbourhoods and their representatives is reported to a limited extent.

An important exception are the media publications about the role of health mediators, whose work in the pandemic has been evaluated in mainly positive terms.<sup>47</sup>

The few publications presenting in positive terms the residents of the neighbourhoods in question include also the publications about the initiative in Maglizh to support medical specialists and about a squad of volunteers supporting the Ministry of Interior<sup>48</sup>, as well as information about a charity campaign of Roma working abroad to support their fellow neighbourhood residents in Aytos.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Good news, no positive coronavirus tests in the Roma neighbourhood of Blagoevgrad, [https://www.struma.com/obshtestvo/dobra-novina-nyama-polojitelni-probi-za-koronavirus-v-romskata-mahala\\_165996/](https://www.struma.com/obshtestvo/dobra-novina-nyama-polojitelni-probi-za-koronavirus-v-romskata-mahala_165996/).

<sup>45</sup> Kazanlak defends against COVID-19 by a total blockade of the gypsy neighbourhood, [https://blitz.bg/obshtestvo/regioni/kazanlk-se-otbranyava-ot-covid-19-s-totalna-blokada-na-tsiganskata-makhala-karmen-video\\_news733773.html](https://blitz.bg/obshtestvo/regioni/kazanlk-se-otbranyava-ot-covid-19-s-totalna-blokada-na-tsiganskata-makhala-karmen-video_news733773.html).

<sup>46</sup> Struma.com! Operation Respect! A surprising police raid of the Roma neighbourhood of Blagoevgrad, 10 arrested, [https://www.struma.com/obshtestvo/v-struma-com-operaciya-respekt-iznenadvashht-policeiski-shurm-v-romskata-mahala\\_162682/](https://www.struma.com/obshtestvo/v-struma-com-operaciya-respekt-iznenadvashht-policeiski-shurm-v-romskata-mahala_162682/).

<sup>47</sup> The mediator Biser Andreev distributes learning handouts to children during the pandemic, <https://bnr.bg/vidin/post/101257609>; Bulgarians and Roma – we can all get infected or why mediators do not wait for the state to act, [https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2020/03/19/4043303\\_bulgari\\_i\\_romi\\_-\\_vsichki\\_moje\\_da\\_se\\_razboleem\\_ili/](https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2020/03/19/4043303_bulgari_i_romi_-_vsichki_moje_da_se_razboleem_ili/).

<sup>48</sup> A squad of volunteers in Svoboda neighbourhood in Maglizh, <http://maglizh.com/posts/2265/Dobrovolenotriad-v-kv-Svoboda-gr-Maglizh.html>; The residents of the Roma neighbourhood in Maglizh applaud medical specialists, <https://nova.bg/news/view/2020/05/01/286658/%D0%B6%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%BA%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BB-%D0%B2-%D0%BC%D1%8A%D0%B3%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B6-%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%85%D0%B0-%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5/>.

<sup>49</sup> Roma working abroad raised money for their fellow neighbourhood residents in Aytos, <https://www.dunavmost.com/novini/romi-koito-rabotyat-v-chuzhbina-sabraha-pari-za-sakvartaltsite-si-v-aitos>.

## 6 RECOMMENDATIONS TO NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS, NGOS AND FINANCING ORGANIZATIONS

### Non-discrimination

Anti-covid measures should be applied in a way that leaves no room for doubt of any discrimination. Where the measures affect groups such as the Roma that are subject to prejudice and are at risk of being treated with discrimination, even greater attention should be paid.

Even the most seemingly harmless measures should be imposed based on health arguments, without relying on generalizations based on prejudice on the grounds of ethnic origin. This is valid to an even greater extent when it comes to serious measures such as the introduction of any regime restricting free movement of citizens, i.e. an access control checkpoint, a curfew or others.

It is also advisable that the ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Commission for Protection against Discrimination carry out an analysis of the systems and channels for receiving alerts, monitoring and taking measures in the event of discriminatory imposition of restrictions on citizens' rights in the context of a state of emergency and an emergency situation due to an epidemic.

### Building trust in the institutions

**Trust in the institutions and their spokespeople** is key for the success of each public policy. However, it is decisive in time of a pandemic when it is necessary and inevitable to reformulate priorities and introduce unexpected restrictions changing the daily routine of citizens and when fear of the unknown and the impossibility to plan in the short and longer run give rise to permanent feeling of anxiety in people.

It is possible to build trust in the institutions in a pandemic provided that a clear evidence-based action plan is adopted **on a national level**, which is later promoted gradually with well-thought-out messages and in a comprehensible language, including via the media.

**Local authorities** should be aware of and recognize differences between the groups of population living in the community and should be capable of communicating with them via appropriate approaches and means, including in a comprehensible language, as well as translate and specify decisions adopted at a national level in line with local specificity.

**Local authorities** should recognize the need of cooperation with civil society organizations and communities to solve the urgent issues in the municipality.

We have observed good examples of communication during the pandemic between local authorities and Roma communities in some of the examined municipalities, which rely on a good previous record of already built and well-maintained relations.

*“The main lesson learnt is that the care taken of people in the “peaceful” years, that is the years before Covid, has paid off to the municipal authorities, that is the trust built in the Roma community members. Owing to this trust the residents of the municipality helped the municipal authorities do their job better persuading the residents that the measures were needed and receive cooperation and support by the Roma” (Maglizh Municipality).*

## Communication with citizens which builds trust

Trust-building public communication has a number of important features. It should be as follows:

**1. carried out in a persistent and consistent manner:**

*Unfortunately, absence of persistence and consistency cannot be easily made up for in a situation of emergency.*

**2. free of prejudice:**

*The messages conveyed by the institutions should include **no** generalizations and characteristics attributed to certain communities and groups.*

**3. respectful of the dignity of the recipients:**

*Communication should not make insulting and humiliating references. Where such references are suggested by understatement and allusion, the latter communication results in a less favourable climate for communication due to the breach of the requirement for sincerity (see item 5).*

**4. personal and immediate:**

*It does not mean that communication should be carried out in person but that communication should not be anonymous. Institutions should not refer (via the media) to the members of the community in third person plural by attributing them various characteristics. The reasons should be explained to the affected citizens as well, not simply to the general public.*

**5. sincere:**

*What is shared with the media and the other communities is the same which is shared with the Roma community.*

**6. showing trust:**

*Institutions seeking trust from citizens should declare clearly their own trust in citizens. This rule has been complied with in many cases, but not always, in the communication delivered by the institutions responsible for the anti-covid measures at national level*

*but it has been almost always breached with regard to the Roma at national and local level.*

**7. carried out in a citizen-friendly, comprehensible manner and willing to convey all the necessary information:**

*It is fully possible to convey the essence of complex scientific and epidemiological arguments in a comprehensible language without distorting information but it is a serious challenge and it requires special effort and attention. This principle has not been always complied with even at national level during the Covid-19 pandemic. Dissemination of trustworthy and reliable information cannot take place via the media only and requires involvement of competent specialists who enter into various relations of trust with the citizens as part of their professional duties such as doctors, health mediators and social workers. Health and education mediators and other community workers have greatly contributed to the dissemination of information to the Roma communities during the pandemic. It is very important to provide them with additional support, including information materials and guides, assist them in their effort to inform and persuade the communities they work with particularly in the context of the vaccination campaign that is gaining momentum and the need of regaining trust in compulsory immunization.*

## Support for the people affected by the pandemic and the most vulnerable

The analysis of the situation in the Roma communities during the pandemic showed that the majority of the most vulnerable households remained outside the scope of the anti-covid social and economic measures. **It is necessary to set up compensation schemes for extremely low-income people who do not participate in the labour market.** Such schemes might also reach people who lost their income from the informal economy.

Long-term unemployment during the pandemic poses the risk of loss of skills and competences in some of the work force. That is why it is necessary to invest additionally in programmes for retraining and readaptation to the labour market of people who have been excluded from it for a long time. Some of these programmes should include providing psychological support and overcoming common fears stemming from the pandemic.

Further effort is needed to **prevent the dropping out of students from compulsory education** following the shift to distance learning by providing them with electronic devices (a laptop, a tablet) and an Internet connection.

Provision of social services during a pandemic should be encouraged including by granting social workers the status of “first-line workers” during the pandemic. Social work can greatly contribute to mitigating the pressure of the pandemic on the most vulnerable families as well as boosting trust in anti-covid measures and vaccination. Municipalities should grant professional status to boost motivation and then ensure higher remuneration to “first-line” workers in the fight against the pandemic who are directly involved in “field work” such as health mediators. Apart from financial incentives, measures for professional development and support should be provided such as training, supervision and intervision, etc.

## Long-term challenges and policies

The pandemic and the anti-covid measures necessary to counter it exacerbated old problems that have been left unsolved for a long time in many and different areas of social life. Reducing vulnerability to infectious diseases in the longer run has to do with policies aiming at improvements in education, the labour market, infrastructure and housing.

## The labour market

**The goal of cutting the share of informal employment** can be achieved by stricter control over the conclusion of contracts as well as additional incentives to meet the requirements of labour and social security legislation.

## Education and development of the work force

It is necessary to take measures to overcome differences in the opportunities for participation in digital education and distance learning including direct investment to provide basic electronic devices but also effort to have equal access to acquisition of digital skills and competence to take part in the digital economy and society.

## Amenities

Action is needed at national and local level to **improve the living conditions in Roma neighbourhoods**, which are characterized by the following features: the street network is partially/fully missing, which is an obstacle to carrying out daily waste removal activities (waste collection, cleaning up) as well as providing rapid access if necessary to ambulances and fire engines; many neighbourhoods have households that are not included in the utility infrastructure of the town such as water supply and sewerage system and the electrical grid, etc.

Incentives should be planned at national and local level to open pharmacies and set up ATMs to improve access to them for the residents of isolated and remote neighbourhoods and villages.

ANNEX 1

## ■ BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SELECTED NEIGHBOURHOODS

### Neighbourhoods where access control regime was introduced:

- 📍 *Iztok* neighbourhood, the town of Kyustendil;
- 📍 *Carmen* neighbourhood, the town of Kazanlak;
- 📍 *Nadezhda* neighbourhood, the town of Sliven;
- 📍 *Shesti* neighbourhood, the town of Nova Zagora;
- 📍 the village of Izgrev, Venetz municipality.

### Neighbourhoods where access control regime was not introduced:

- 📍 *Kosharnik* neighbourhood, the town of Montana;
- 📍 the Roma neighbourhood, the town of Byala Slatina;
- 📍 *Svoboda* neighbourhood, the town of Maglizh;
- 📍 *Strandzha* neighbourhood, town of Aytos;
- 📍 *Predel* neighbourhood, the town of Blagoevgrad.

### 📍 *Iztok* neighbourhood, the town of Kyustendil

*Iztok* neighbourhood is located in the northeastern part of Kyustendil. It is located between Banshtitsa River, Sofia – Gueshevo road and Sofia-Gueshevo railway line and the Industrial Zone of the town. A tall concrete fence has been raised along its northeastern part for years. According to unofficial data, approximately 12,000 people live there.

The neighbourhood has been growing each year. It is divided into two halves by a large square in the centre lined by well-kept houses. The largest area of the place is occupied by the Old neighbourhood located along the banks of Banshtitsa River, where the houses are built from makeshift materials, the streets are left unpaved, 50% of the households have no water supply and sewerage system. The other half is the so-called New Neighbourhood, where all the houses are maintained, the streets are paved, there is a water supply and sewerage system (though with low water flow). The new part of the neighbourhood has been expanding actively for several years now and some of the houses have been built on unregulated land.

The neighbourhood has the following amenities: *Ivan Vazov* 4th Elementary School, *Dream* Kindergarten (the branch based in Iztok neighbourhood), *Vassil Levsky* 1965 Community Centre, a police department, a pharmacy and a functioning ATM. There are two health centres and Public Support Centre supported by the Foundation for Health and Social Support. There are 5 churches available in the new part of the neighbourhood and all of them are well-cared for. The neighbourhood has lots of clothes shops, food stores, groceries, several “discount” shops, cafes, fast food facilities, night bars. All of these amenities are distributed across the neighbourhood and they are in a very good condition, well-kept, clean, well-equipped and furnished.

## **Carmen neighbourhood, the town of Kazanlak**

*Carmen* neighbourhood is located in the eastern part of the city. The neighbourhood borders on a wall to the north along which the main street of Kazanlak runs, a railway line to the south, a paved street to the west and industrial warehouses to the east. The wall used to have entrances along its length but they were walled up during the state of emergency. The main entrance/exit is from the western side from a big street that is paved only at the beginning and it is the preferred entrance because it leads to the town centre. The neighbourhood consists of visibly different parts: the main part is made up of massive houses; to the south is the emblematic block of flats called *Carmen* and also to the south another area called *Kazmera* lies, where the most marginalized and poor Roma live.

The neighbourhood does not have any paved streets, any street lighting. There is street lighting only near the blocks of flats that are at the beginning of the neighbourhood but technically outside it. There is a water supply pipeline but there is no water pressure and the people cannot get water from it. There is no sewerage system, no green spaces. There is a bus stop close to the main entrance to the west.

The neighbourhood has *Anton Strashimirov* Elementary School based in an old building that has been repaired and well-maintained, a very well-kept church in the centre, several food stores, three small bars, two Bulgarian savoury pastry shops, a pawn house and a large restaurant used for weddings, all the latter buildings being taken care of and located in the northern part of the neighbourhood.

## **Nadezhda neighbourhood, town of Sliven**

*Nadezhda* neighbourhood is located in the southeastern part of the city. It is surrounded by a wall. There are two official entrances/exits: for pedestrians and for motor vehicles. The entrance for pedestrians is via a subway passing under the railway line; the subway is in a poor condition and 5,000–6,000 people use it every day. This is the preferred entrance/exit from and into the neighbourhood, as it is closer to the town and it is in a better position. This entrance is close to the “centre”, which is the most spacious area in the neighbourhood. A paved street with a pavement leads to it. The entrance for motor vehicles is at the other side of the neighbourhood.

The areas close to the two entrances are lined with solid two- or three-storey houses, have asphalt-covered streets with pavements. The further one enters into the neighbourhood,

the poorer the living conditions become. The houses on the periphery, close to the garbage dump, are rickety shacks without any basic living conditions. They have been built, re-built and extended with flimsy materials and narrow entrances. The streets are muddy and dusty, narrow and unpaved; cars cannot enter the streets and people walk past each other with difficulty in the narrow streets. The neighbourhood has a huge problem with water supply. There are no green spaces, houses are erected on every free piece of land. There is just a small green area in the centre with 2–3 benches perched on it, which is not maintained. There is a bus stop near the entrance for motor vehicles. Waste is collected and removed in carts and dumped at the end of the neighbourhood, where a garbage dump has gradually piled up.

The kindergarten is near the entrance, it is in a newly-built and good-looking building with 3–4 children’s playgrounds in the yard. The neighbourhood has a police department, a deputy mayor and a general practitioner but no pharmacy, many small shops, mainly for clothes and food, many churches and a mosque.

## *Shesti* neighbourhood, the town of Nova Zagora

*Shesti* neighbourhood is located in the southern part of Nova Zagora. The neighbourhood borders a railway line to the south, connecting the cities of Sofia and Bourgas, an industrial zone to the southeast, a cemetery to the north and another neighbourhood to the northeast. Despite the lack of any spatial division, the neighbourhood has clearly delineated boundaries. It has one official entrance/exit, an asphalt-covered street leading to the town centre and a couple of unofficial entrances/exits.

The central shopping street leads to a small square. The houses in the area of 1–2 blocks away from the square are robust, solid, many of them lately repaired and quite well-looking. The sight changes to the south and to the east, as the houses get more and more uncomely, alternating with “shacks” called “salmi” by the locals. A lot of new development is taking place, mainly when the number of household members grows after a wedding or the birth of a child.

The main street leading to the town centre is paved, having good road surface at the beginning but the further one enters in the neighbourhood, the worse the road surface becomes until it fully vanishes and there are pavements only at the entrance of the neighbourhood. A small number of the houses in the neighbourhood have a water supply and sewerage system, mainly the old houses at the entrance. However, the residents believe that the water is unfit for drinking and cooking, the majority of the houses rely on water pumps. Most houses are connected to the electrical grid. There are no green spaces. The children play in the street, in the school courtyard or on the field close to the railway line.

The neighbourhood has the following amenities: *Hristo Smirnenski* Elementary School located in a building that is not maintained, with a courtyard and broken outdoor sports facilities, a police department, an office of the electricity distribution company EVN – Bulgaria, a large and well-kept mosque and a few small Evangelical churches. There are all sorts of shops selling food, “discounted” items, clothes, shoes, jewellery, hair salons and barber shops, most of which are good-looking, some even sell luxury items and are no worse than a shop from the town high street but others are rundown, and a few cafes.

## The village of Izgrev, Venets Municipality

The village is located close to the main road between Shumen and Silistra and it has an entrance/exit on its eastern and western part. The western entrance/exit is also the exit from the main road between Shumen and Silistra and it leads to the main street of the village, while the other entrance/exit to the east leads to the neighbouring village of Takach. The village is surrounded by fields and arable land.

There is no separate Roma neighbourhood. The central streets around the town hall are in a good condition, paved well with asphalt and have street lighting. Some of the smaller streets have not had their road surface renovated and are almost left without lighting. All houses exit into small streets leading to the main village street where the shops, the school, the kindergarten and the square are located. There are many two-storey houses, some smaller dwellings and few brick houses. Only the main street has street lighting. There is a bus stop of intercity buses at the fork of the Shumen-Silistra road leading into the village.

The town hall, the mosque, the wedding salon, the post office and the community centre are located in the centre of the village and the buildings lining the main street have been renovated and well-kept. The village has a kindergarten in a renovated building with PVC windows and a children's playground with swings, slides, climbing frames and well-kept green areas. The building of the elementary school is renovated, has PVC windows and a large courtyard with sports facilities and a green space.

There are two food stores along the main street, one of them at the centre, close to the town hall and the mosque and the other in the eastern part. Both food stores are renovated, well-kept and well-stocked, offering household goods as well, as there are no other shops in the village.

The village has no pharmacy and an ATM.

## Kosharnik neighbourhood, the town of Montana

*Kosharnik* neighbourhood is located in the northern part of the town of Montana but it is fully separated from the town, surrounded from all sides by green areas and close to the town cemetery. The international E-79 Vidin – Montana road passes near the neighbourhood. The main entrance/exit is located at the southeastern side, a street with a pavement, street lighting and an asphalt-covered surface. The second entrance/exit is at the southwestern part. There is no street lighting and pavements and it can be used only by pedestrians.

The neighbourhood is divided into three parts, first, second and third centre. The Bulgarian community lives in the first centre, the better integrated Roma in the second centre and the less integrated Roma in the third centre and upwards, where the asphalt-covered road ends and illegally-built dwellings start; that's the part where many of the residents have come from many other places.

The majority of the legally-built houses are connected to the water supply and electricity distribution network and have access to the sewerage system. Public transport bus service runs through the central part of the neighbourhood. The two bus stops in the first and second centre are not designated with a special road sign. The neighbourhood has no green spaces and children's playgrounds.

The neighbourhood has *Spring 8th* Kindergarten at the beginning of the first centre. It is in a two-storey building with PVC windows and it has a courtyard, a green children's playground with a swing, a slide, a climbing frame and other facilities. *Kosharnik* neighbourhood has *Georgi Benkovski* Primary School, which is close to the second centre. The school is in a one-storey old building which looks like a warehouse but has been renovated and has PVC windows. The school is surrounded by a concrete fence and it has a children's playground in the courtyard with a swing, a slide and a green space. The courtyard has an asphalt surface and sports facilities in it.

The neighbourhood has a health centre, a prayer house, a youth dance club, a post office in the first centre, some food stores, most of which are located in a separate room of a dwelling or a separate floor of a house, a well-kept Bulgarian pastry shop in the centre of the neighbourhood and a clothes shop close to it.

## The Roma neighbourhood, the town of Byala Slatina

The neighbourhood is located in the southwestern part of the town and does not seem to differ from the other parts at first sight. It has a green space with climbing frames and benches, though not well-kept, and it has trees lining the streets. The neighbourhood has five entrances/exits, three of them with paved streets and street lighting and the other two having street lighting but unpaved streets. The central area of the neighbourhood is the one where the shops and the school are located. The residential houses do not differ considerably, it is rather that big two-storey brick houses alternate with smaller ones immediately next to them. The houses on the outskirts are more densely built, the streets are narrower and unpaved, without street lightning. There are no streets in fact to the south of *Latinka* Street as well as to the west of *Acacia* Street in-between *Lomska* and *Latinka* streets, as this is the poorest and most marginalized part of the neighbourhood, with illegally-built dwellings and without access to utility infrastructure.

The building of *Hristo Smirnenski* Primary School is rather old not well-kept, surrounded by a fenced courtyard.

The neighbourhood has two big and renovated food stores, one of them very well-stocked, having a clothing and household goods section. There is also a café and a pub but they are very small and not in the best shape as buildings.

## Svoboda neighbourhood, the town of Maglizh

*Svoboda* neighbourhood cannot be found on the map of the town. One can guess that it is located in the southeastern part of the town, as this is where there are streets without any names. The neighbourhood borders I-6 road to the south, on the other side of which arable land is located and tobacco crops are grown. The street leading to the main entrance/exit of the town is to the west and there is a bus stop of intercity buses on this street, right next to the neighbourhood; an open field not used for farming extends to the east and an asphalt-covered street separating Roma houses from Bulgarian houses runs to the north. The neighbourhood has three entrances/exits in the southern part, which are dirt roads, unpaved and without pavements, partially lit; there are several entrances/exits in the northern part, which are partially paved and have street lighting.

The neighbourhood is divided into two delineated parts, a northwestern part (called northern) and a southeastern part (called southern). The houses in the northwestern part are solid, have water supply and running water but no sewerage system and the streets have lightning. The houses in the southeastern part are small and have a single room. The streets are unpaved, there are several shared outside taps. The prayer house of the Evangelical church is in the centre between the two parts of the neighbourhood and it is regarded as the neighbourhood centre.

*Svoboda* neighbourhood has several small cafes and bars, a couple of food shops, a Bulgarian pastry shop and coffee vending machines.

There is no children's playground, no specific space for children to play, no green spaces.

## **Strandzha neighbourhood, the town of Aytos**

*Strandzha* neighbourhood is located in the eastern part of the town, on both sides of *General Gurko* Street. It borders hills and forests to the north and Burgas – Sofia highway to the south. The garbage dump is located in the northern part of the neighbourhood, the poorest houses are there as well. The streets are narrow, surfaced with gravel or simply dirt, narrowing further and further at the end by the houses built. The main entrance/exit is from *Slavyanska* Street, from the side of the Burgas – Sofia highway and further streets run away from it, at the beginning of which Bulgarians live in houses and blocks of flats, there also being a couple of unpaved streets, which are difficult to access and run to the most eastern part of the neighbourhood. The second main entrance/exit is from *General Gurko* Street, which runs from the town until the end of the neighbourhood, changing its name to *Gotze Delchev* Street at the entrance of the neighbourhood. The houses close to the entrance are generally new, well-kept and then the houses start getting lower and older, the most unsightly houses being towards the inner area of the neighbourhood and the streets leading to the hill.

The majority of the neighbourhood is connected to the sewerage system but it is still not developed yet in the newer parts of the neighbourhood. All buildings are connected to the electrical grid.

The neighbourhood has no trees lining the streets, no greenery, no gardens, no children's playgrounds.

The bus to the village of Maglen departs from the bus station in the central part of the town and runs along *General Gurko* Street and *Gotze Delchev* Street. There are two bus stops in the two streets so that the neighbourhood residents can use to bus to get from and to the town centre.

The neighbourhood has *Kalina Malina* Kindergarten located in the centre in a renovated building with PVC windows, an insulated and painted facade, climbing frames, swings and a slide. *Atanas Manchev* Elementary School is at the entrance of the neighbourhood in an old building with a renovated façade and PVC windows. There is a prayer house located in a small street in the inner part of the neighbourhood on the ground floor of a three-storey new house. The neighbourhood has two restaurants and two shops, small shops for "discounted" goods, food and cigarettes along the streets. There is also a grocery, a clothes shop, a second-hand shop, a savoury pastry shop, a hairdresser's and a cafeteria. The shops in the newly-built houses look new, clean, have PVC windows and tiles.

## **Predel neighbourhood, the town of Blagoevgrad**

*Predel* neighbourhood is located in the southeastern part of the town. It borders *Orlova Chuka* residential neighbourhood to the south, a field to the east, the zoo to the north, a concrete fence being raised, *Polkovnik Drangov* Street to the west. The neighbourhood has seven entrances/exits. Getting further away into the inner parts of the neighbourhood, the asphalt road surface and the pavements, street lighting and waste bins start missing, can be occasionally seen or are in a poor condition. The same can be said about the houses: those at the entrance of the neighbourhood are taller (two or three floors) but the further into the neighbourhood, the more the houses gradually are single-storeyed, unfinished and ill-looking. Goats, sheep and horses are raised at the top of the neighbourhood. The more affluent households are at the foot of the neighbourhood, the poorest live at the highest part of the neighbourhood, where electricity gradually disappears and there is no water supply system.

The neighbourhood has a distinct central area called "*the Water Fountain*", where a small water fountain is the main source of water for the people in the higher parts of the neighbourhood. There is a restaurant and a café where weddings, baptism ceremonies, birthdays and other feasts are celebrated with outdoor wooden benches and tables, a large food store, a doner kebab kiosk and a small food shop. There is also a Protestant church in the centre.

There is one kindergarten titled *Zdravetz* in the neighbourhood. The building is in a good condition, two-storeyed with aluminum windows, a sand pit, a swing and a slide in the courtyard, the latter in a poor condition. The kindergarten is surrounded by a yellow iron fence.

There are no trees and green spaces in the neighbourhood.

Table 9 shows data about the number of residents in the respective towns/village and in the examined neighbourhoods.

**Table 9. The population as of 31.12.2019 of the 10 examined settlements and neighbourhoods**

Settlements	Total population	Population of the examined neighbourhoods – an experts' assessment of OSI-Sofia, 2008
the town of Blagoevgrad	68,679	Predel neighbourhood – 6,000
the town of Aytos	19,135	Strandzha neighbourhood – 4,500
the town of Byala Slatina	9,644	the Roma neighbourhood – 2,500
the town of Kyustendil	39,284	Iztok neighbourhood – 11,750
the town of Montana	38,341	Kosharnik neighbourhood – 2,800
the town of Nova Zagora	20,239	Shesti neighbourhood – 8,400
the town of Sliven	84,985	Nadezhda neighbourhood – 12,000
the town of Kazanlak	44,699	Carmen neighbourhood – 2,600
the town of Maglizh	2,957	Svoboda neighbourhood – 1,130
the village of Izgrev	941	–

Source: NSI, 2020, about the settlements, Open Society Institute – Sofia about the neighbourhoods

## ANNEX 2

## ■ METHODOLOGY

THE FOLLOWING MATERIALS HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED FOR THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY:

- **A questionnaire form for the conduct of a standardized face-to-face interview with a household representative.**

The goal was to gather data about: the household members: the social, health and education status of the household members; living conditions in the household enabling compliance with the anti-covid measures: access to drinking water, sewerage and electricity; available bathroom and toilet; hardships the household faced in the period during and after the state of emergency; hardships the neighbourhood residents faced in the period during and after the state of emergency; compliance with the anti-covid measures by the household members and the neighbourhood residents; attitude to potential future anti-covid measures.

The majority of the questions are closed-ended.

50 interviews were carried out in each of the neighbourhoods, 42 in the village of Izgrev.

The data from the questionnaire form were entered and processed with the help of the statistical software STATA.

- **A guide for neighbourhood monitoring.**

The goal was to gather information about the layout of the neighbourhood, its external and internal boundaries, the technical and social infrastructure and the conditions for compliance with the anti-covid measures.

- **A guide for a semi-structured face-to-face interview with experts.**

The goal was to collect information about the problems the neighbourhood and its residents faced in the context of the state of emergency and the emergency situation of a pandemic as well as the measure taken/needed to deal with them.

The chosen experts were a representative of the municipality, a representative of the Regional Health Inspectorate, a doctor who has patients from the neighbourhood, a health mediator, a representative of an NGO working in the neighbourhood, a representative of a religious institution present in the neighbourhood (where available).

The guide has been modified in line with the expert's specific position.

- **A guide for the focus group discussion with the neighbourhood residents.**

The goal was to gain more detailed knowledge of the problems the neighbourhood and its residents faced against the backdrop of the state of emergency and the emergency situation of a pandemic, compliance and attitude towards the anti-covid measures.

■ **Selection of the interviewed experts.**

A team was set up for each neighbourhood with a local coordinator responsible for the overall logistics: communication with the institutions, organization of the focus group discussion, help with the conduct of the survey. The interviewers had to carry out 50 standardized interviews with a representative of households in the specific neighbourhood. The field expert had to carry out the focus group discussion and the planned in-depth interviews.

■ **Selection of the interviewed respondents.**

Random geostatistical samples were made in the ten examined locations using data about the contours of the surveyed territory with compact Roma population in the towns. This territory sometimes overlapped with the administrative boundaries of a neighbourhood and in other cases the territory was informally defined as a “neighbourhood” without any formal definition. No sample has been used in the village of Izgrev due to the small set of Roma households that could be fully covered by the survey. The same is valid for *Carmen* neighbourhood in the town of Kazanlak, as the neighbourhood size, taking into account the predicted negative responses, also allowed for almost full coverage of all households which confirmed their willingness to take part in the survey.

A geostatistical sample was made for the places that have not been fully covered by generating random start points within the outlined contours of the surveyed territory and by randomly circling each point following the guidelines prepared in advance. The geostatistical sample approximates the ideal simple random sample with the increased homogeneity of development of a given territory. The majority of the surveyed neighbourhoods are sufficiently homogeneous in this respect and the Roma community mainly lives in the single-family houses.

■ **The conduct of the field study and the limitations in interpreting the findings.**

The field study was carried out in the period 20 October – 10 December 2020 in the emergency situation of a pandemic and the stricter anti-covid measures applied in the country as of 27 November 2020.

The local coordinators and interviewers did not have difficulties carrying out the study in general. Several local digressions from the planned activities were registered: two municipalities and a Regional Health Inspectorate did not select their representatives for the interview; the interviewer in one of the neighbourhoods was placed under quarantine and the period of interviews planned in advance had to be extended; two municipalities designated a health mediator to be their representative in the interview; 42 direct standardized interviews were carried out in the village of Izgrev due to the fact that some of the respondents refused to take part.