

Journal on Ethnopolitics
and Minority Issues in
Europe

Vol 21, Issue 2

2022

pp. 81-109

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.53779/QPLK4474>

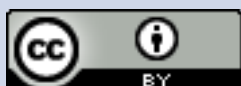
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War against the Poor: Social Violence Against Roma in Eastern Europe During COVID-19 at the Intersection of Class and Race

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Abstract

This article positions the social violence against Roma in Eastern Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic in historical perspective. It is based on primary data derived from the project Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe, collected in 2020 by researchers in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine. This data is contextualised with the help of secondary literature on historical epidemics and pandemics, as well as societal responses to them, with a particular focus on the ensuing scapegoating of minorities in certain cases. The article first makes the case for the importance of historicising such responses to pandemics in different contexts as a safeguard against ‘exceptionalising’ either the ongoing pandemic or the Roma minority. Further, it argues against a reductionist perspective that treats the Roma primarily – or even exclusively – along the lines of their representing a ‘national minority’, a concept that is heavily tilted toward a cultural-linguistic definition of the group. In contrast, it posits that hate speech and racist incidents against the Roma in the context of the pandemic (and more generally) are better understood by factoring in the intersection of race and class, where the long-standing racialization of the Roma in Eastern Europe is inflected by the latter as much as the former. Finally, zooming out from the case study under consideration to consider other instances of ‘Othering’ encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, it draws attention to the different scales at which

exclusion operates, and to the advantages provided by an awareness of the multiple spatial and temporal layers constitutive of such a scalar approach.

Keywords: Roma; Eastern Europe; historical pandemics; cholera; Covid-19; race; class; social violence.

Introduction

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe in spring 2020 and the significant societal disruption it engendered, anecdotal evidence quickly emerged of its differentiated impact on different social groups and the potentially disproportionate one that both the disease and the policies designed to mitigate its spread might have on minorities. In Eastern Europe, concerns about the impact of the pandemic on Roma communities, due to their living conditions and marginalisation, came to the fore, just as a spike in anti-Roma rhetoric and hate speech became immediately visible both in mainstream and social media. With most of the attention focused on EU member states with large Roma populations, primarily Romania and Bulgaria (e.g., Berta, 2020; Gay y Blasco and Rodriguez Camacho, 2020; Korunovska and Jovanovic, 2020; Magano and Mendes, 2021; Matache and Bhabha, 2020; Pop, 2021; Trupia, 2021), there was then, and this continues to be the case today, relatively little data on the situation in non-EU member states. In this context, the research project *Marginality on the Margins of Europe – The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in Non-EU Countries in Eastern Europe*, developed as a partnership between the University of Leicester and the European Centre for Minority Issues, was intended to identify and analyse the impact of COVID-19 on Roma communities in the seven countries in Eastern Europe that are eligible for Overseas Development Assistance (ODA): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine. With all of these seven states classified by OECD as ‘developing countries’, their GDP per capita is lower than that of EU member states. Consequently, “their economies were in a more vulnerable position going into the lockdown period” (Willis, in this issue) in 2020, a factor that accrued on the pre-existing marginalisation of Roma communities within their borders.

Our study adopted a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative data derived from online surveys with qualitative data obtained from semi-structured in-depth interviews carried out with relevant stakeholders from or involved with the seven Roma communities in question.

The field research was carried out by local researchers in the seven countries, and the ensuing data was contextualised with the help of desk research aimed primarily at a close reading of media sources in the relevant languages, including both mainstream and social media (for a full description of the methodology, see the Introduction to this issue). Predictably, the quantitative data revealed the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma communities in the seven countries under consideration across a wide range of descriptors: access to health care, housing, employment, and education. A differentiated effect was noticeable when factoring in gender, with Roma women being more affected than men by the lockdown measures, especially with respect to education, where pre-existing gender inequalities within the communities were exacerbated by the pandemic (see Anzillotti Zamorano, in this issue).

In turn, the qualitative data derived from the in-depth interviews and the results of the desk research pointed to a pervasive pattern of systemic racism in evidence in each of the countries under consideration. These included violent racist incidents, carried out both by non-state actors and organisations and by state authorities, as well as pervasive evidence of hate speech on social media, culminating in instigations to violence, as analysed in Andreea Cârstocea's article in this issue. Drawing and building further on her work, the present article sets out to do three things. First, it places the instances of racism documented in the research undertaken for this project in a broader historical context, using examples from previous cases of epidemics and pandemics in history to contextualise the findings. Emphasising the long-term patterns of social violence in the context of pandemics, I argue that these can be of help in dispelling notions of the allegedly 'unprecedented' character of COVID-19, while simultaneously drawing attention to the persistent exposure of minorities to what Paul Farmer (2003) has termed "structural violence". In a study of the effects of health inequalities on human rights, Farmer (2003, p. 8) defines this as "a broad rubric that includes a host of offensives against human dignity: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender inequality, and the more spectacular forms of violence that are uncontestedly human rights abuses, some of them punishment for efforts to escape structural violence".

Second, and following from the first argument, the article will examine the nexus of class and race visible in the marginalisation of Roma communities in this light, pointing to an understanding that places more weight on the former in the context of epidemics that can be seen to have the character of a 'social disease'. Distinguishing between epidemics caused by different pathogens and/or affecting different groups in society differentially, I argue that the emphasis on social distancing and hygiene in the measures adopted to prevent the spread of

COVID-19 contributed to the targeting of Roma communities. Conscious of the ongoing debate concerning various definitions of anti-Roma racism and/or anti-Gypsyism, understood as “a specific form of racism, an ideology founded on racial superiority, a form of dehumanisation and institutional racism nurtured by historical discrimination, which is expressed, among others, by violence, hate speech, exploitation, stigmatisation and the most blatant kind of discrimination” (ECRI, 2020, p. 3), and drawing on relevant historical examples pertaining to the scapegoating of minorities in the context of epidemics and pandemics, my understanding of racism targeting Roma during the COVID-19 pandemic combines these two approaches. As such, on the one hand it acknowledges the specificity of anti-Gypsyism as an ideology grounded in particular historical conditions having their roots in Roma slavery, and on the other it connects this specific instantiation of racism with other instances of racism aimed at other minority groups in the context of health crises past and present. Along these lines, and driven by the evidence provided by the empirical data collected in the present study, my approach focuses primarily on systemic and structural racism. In a recent special issue of the journal *Health Affairs* on ‘Racism and Health’, Braveman et al. (2022, p. 171) understand these terms to comprise “forms of racism that are pervasively and deeply embedded in systems, laws, written or unwritten policies, and entrenched practices and beliefs that produce, condone, and perpetuate widespread unfair treatment and oppression of people of color, with adverse health consequences”.

Third, broadening the scope of analysis both spatially beyond the seven countries considered in this project and temporally beyond the ongoing pandemic, I make the case for a scalar understanding of racism in the context of epidemics. The article thus concludes by showing how certain patterns of exclusion are reproduced from the local through the national to the global levels in such contexts and argues that such an awareness of scalarity affords valuable insights into the intersection of poverty and race when read against the backdrop of the structuring effects of capitalism.

1. Hate in the time of cholera

One of the leitmotifs of reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic was its ‘unprecedented’ nature. While this may be true in terms of the scope of the measures adopted to contain its spread, testament to the increased state capacity to intervene in society, none of those measures were new and certainly had plenty of historical precedents. Individual quarantine of infected persons

is documented as a form of prevention since the Old Testament, and the “locking up of houses” was a widespread practice during the 1665 Great Plague of London, mandated by the city authorities (Defoe, 2003 [1772]; Pepys, 1665). Closer to the topic of the present article, placing blame on minority groups is well-documented in the historical record (Nelkin and Gilman, 1988), at times leading to outbursts of mass violence from the mass burnings of Jews during the Black Death to more recent epidemics such as outbreaks of cholera in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Cohn, 2007). The standard interpretation sees such patterns as attempts to reassert some sense of agency when confronted with uncontrollable disasters, whereby blame serves as a “means to make mysterious and devastating diseases comprehensible and therefore possibly controllable” (Nelkin and Gilman, 1988, p. 362). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, such a reading could indeed account for the scapegoating of the Roma as a means to cope with uncertainty, to reinforce moral values, and, importantly, to “uphold existing hierarchies – underpinning Roma marginalisation and reproducing it” (A. Cârstocea, 2020). Andreea Cârstocea’s article in this issue, drawing on Cohen (1980) and Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), convincingly presents the spike in racist incidents and hate speech during the first 2020 lockdown as a case of ‘moral panic’, a disproportionate social reaction to an event whereby a “group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen, 1980, p. 9). However, zooming in even closer to the historical record of reactions to epidemics and pandemics reveals a more complex picture, where a group’s ‘minority’ status is compounded by other factors, notably a class component, and where the aetiology, pathology, and transmission patterns of different diseases also play an important role.

In a 1952 article, René Baehrel pointed at the importance of “class hatred” surfacing in times of epidemics: both of the rich viewing the poor as a dangerous class, and of the poor accusing the rich of deliberately poisoning them in an attempt to cull their numbers (Baehrel, 1952). The cholera riots of the nineteenth century provide ample evidence of the latter across Europe, from the Russian Empire to Ireland (Cohn, 2018, pp. 163-262; Snowden, 2019), whereas the reverse situation could be witnessed with social violence during smallpox epidemics in late nineteenth century Canada and the United States (Cohn, 2018, pp. 263-307; Shah, 2001). Evidence of the poor bearing the brunt of pandemics has been well-documented ever since Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*, even in the case of bubonic plague, a disease that killed indiscriminately and spread easily including through inhalation of infected respiratory droplets, as also in the case of COVID-19. Such evidence was all the more visible with epidemics such as cholera, which

is very much a ‘social disease’ where the faecal-to-oral chain of transmission is significantly facilitated by limited access to clean water sources and the bacterium’s passage into the intestine by poor nutrition, or typhus, which is spread by fleas or lice and for which poor sanitation and overcrowding act as major risk factors (Markel, 1997). However, while typhus epidemics could be as lethal as cholera ones, and while they generated associations with both the poor and minorities (e.g., East European Jewish immigrants to the United States), they did not lead to violence or riots (Cohn, 2018, p. 203; p. 536).

It was not just the aetiology of cholera and its differentiated impact that disproportionately affected the poor, but also its symptomatology that was conducive to class antagonism and social violence. The disease “is famously gruesome in its pathology”, has a high case fatality rate, and a violent death through extreme expulsions of liquid from the digestive tract can ensue very rapidly, in some cases in a matter of hours (Snowden, 2019, pp. 235-237). Moreover “cholera continues to horrify” even after death, as “it produces vigorous postmortem muscular contractions that cause limbs to shake and twitch for a prolonged period” (Snowden, 2019, p. 238); this led to suspicions that the victims were being buried alive. The fact that its onset in the nineteenth century coincided in many places with the establishment of the first hospitals, to which the afflicted were taken and from where very few returned, as well as its violent symptoms similar to poisoning and the “strict burial regulations” that called for immediate burial in separate grounds and excluded family members from participating, led to notions “of a diabolical plot to destroy the poor in a literal class war” (Snowden, 2019, p. 251).

The fears of the poor were fuelled by the behaviour of the authorities, who intervened in force, often sending in the army to assist the local police and cordoning off entire areas of the affected cities, invariably those in which the poor lived; “health-care workers and disinfection squads [...] conducted themselves almost like an army in enemy territory” (Snowden, 2019, p. 251). At a time when newspapers were rising in prominence, their accounts of the cholera riots in Naples referred to the population of the Lower City, an area notorious for its poverty and unsanitary conditions, as “‘beasts,’ ‘rabble,’ ‘idiot plebeians,’ and ‘mobs’” (Snowden, 2019, p. 253). Throughout the ‘rebellious century’, when “fear among the social and economic elite was widespread concerning the ‘dangerous classes’”, cholera sparked social violence; it also “formed part of the background to the century’s two most egregious examples of extreme class repression, both of which occurred in Paris, where social tensions ran highest” (Snowden, 2019, p. 255): the crushing of the 1848 revolution and that of the 1871 Paris Commune. The association of social violence with nineteenth and twentieth century cholera epidemics is

impressive in its geographical spread, from the United States across all of Europe and into the Asian parts of the Russian Empire, reaching as far east as China and Japan. Even more so,

across strikingly different cultures, economies, and regimes – East, West, and South in Europe and on the east coast of the US – the content and character of conspiracies, divisions by social class, and the targets of rioters’ wrath were similar. Without obvious communication among rioters from New York to Asiatic Russia or evidence that the protesters (often illiterate) were aware of these riots occurring simultaneously across long distances, the cholera conspiracies repeated stories of elites masterminding a Malthusian cull of the poor, with health boards, doctors, pharmacists, nurses, and government officials as the agents of the planned class mass murder (Cohn, 2018, p. 190).

Once again, the explanation for this can be found in the similar reactions of the authorities. The “poor and marginal – the Irish in Liverpool and Glasgow; tribal Sarts in Tashkent; fig-growers in Puglia; peasants in Hungary” may have varied greatly; but “across diverse political regimes and cultures, from autocratic Czarist Russia to sophisticated Paris and liberal-democratic Edinburgh, the responses were similar” (Cohn, 2018, p. 231). Bourgeois elites blamed cholera epidemics on the irresponsible behaviour and alleged ignorance of the poor, without any serious consideration of the marginalisation that accounted for the terrible living conditions that exposed them to the disease. Being only ever considered in terms of the danger they posed to the elites themselves, who were otherwise for the most part insulated from a disease that thrived in overcrowded, insalubrious neighbourhoods, the ‘dangerous classes’ responded to the (quasi-literal) war waged against them by the authorities’ militarised response to cholera outbreaks by rioting.

The social violence accompanying cholera epidemics also provides a good example of how class hatred could shift to violence against minorities. Importantly, this feature became more prominent toward the end of the nineteenth century, in the 1880s and 1890s, and continuing into the twentieth. This aspect acts as a corrective to the abovementioned notion, widespread in the literature, that violence against minorities in the context of pandemics occurs when diseases are mysterious and their causes unknown. By the late nineteenth century, the germ theory of disease associated with the so-called ‘laboratory revolution’ (Koch, 1890) had identified the causes of cholera (and other diseases), debunking the earlier ‘miasma theory’ that saw such epidemics as being caused by ‘bad air’ emanating from rotting organic matter. However, the violence did not abate with the scientific understanding of diseases and the

identification of the microscopic pathogens that caused them. Cholera riots across the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth century variously targeted Jews, Persian merchants, and Armenians, with a class component overlapping ethnicity in all these cases. “Italians in 1910 blamed the cholera epidemic on Jews and especially on gypsies, claiming that poison began with those groups” (Hays, 2005, p. 349). Such rumours that ‘gypsies’ were spreading cholera in 1910-1911 were endorsed by the Italian “government (led by a Jewish Prime Minister)”, which eventually “expelled them from cities, thereby encouraging incidents of mob violence against them” (Cohn, 2018, p. 259).

Roma, or ‘gypsies’, as they are identified in the historical record at this time, were in fact rarely absent from the ‘usual suspects’ associated with the spread of cholera. This was due to their double exposure, on the one hand being invariably among the poor whom the disease affected disproportionately, and on the other due to their frequent employment as cart-drivers carrying the corpses of the dead (which, as we saw, often still showed what appeared to be signs of life) to unceremonious mass burials. In fact, among “the familiar names given to the disease [that] capture the horror it inspired”, one was “the gypsy” – another was “the monster” (Snowden, 2019, pp. 234-235). Summing up, all the evidence from social violence associated with cholera argues in favour of nuanced interpretations that focus on the scapegoating of minorities in times of epidemics, factoring in both the class dimension of marginality and the specificities of both different diseases and the historical context.

If cholera was the prime example of a ‘social disease’ disproportionately affecting the poor, smallpox, like influenza, was much more indiscriminate due to its airborne mode of transmission, affecting all social classes alike. Moreover, two other factors rendered smallpox an unlikely candidate for social violence. First, smallpox was more or less an endemic disease of childhood, although outbreaks of particular intensity did occur; consequently, it lacked the ‘shock factor’ that cholera and other epidemics possessed. Second, as of the late eighteenth century, it was preventable, as a consequence of the world’s first vaccine, an effective one developed by Edward Jenner on the basis of the related but far less harmful cowpox virus (Jenner, 1798). Interestingly, and similar in many respects to popular reactions to the COVID-19 vaccine, mass mobilisation and violence ensued against the vaccination campaign in England – the first instance of a nationwide vaccine rollout in history –, culminating in the establishment of a National Anti-Vaccination League (King, 2020). This type of violence, however, is less relevant to the present article, although the vaccine did feature prominently among the justifications of instigators of violence in association with smallpox.

Instead, my focus here is on the social violence that smallpox engendered in late nineteenth century North America, targeting the poor once again while having a much more prominent racist component than the cholera riots. The first thing to note here are the different dynamics of the violence. Unlike in the case of cholera, where the violence was much more two-sided and included rioting by the poor against health officials and privileged groups as well as violence by the repressive state apparatus against the ‘dangerous classes’, smallpox violence was decidedly one-sided, invariably instigated by the elites and middle class against the poor and marginal. However, rather than targeting an indiscriminate ‘mob’, “smallpox inhumanity targeted ‘others’ – social and geographical outsiders, the poor, the tramp, the Chinese, the ‘redskin’, and the ‘negro’”, while the perpetrators were “almost always white and male” (Cohn, 2018, p.268; p. 284). At a time of mass migration to North America, a factor which might explain its geographical limitation, contrasting with the quasi-global reach of cholera riots, immigrants perceived as racially distinct were frequently the targets of armed vigilante gangs. The Chinese especially were frequently blamed for smallpox, with organised violence targeting Chinatowns from Calgary to San Francisco. A class component combined with stereotypes about poor hygiene to identify Chinese men and women as “unhealthy” and consequently “dangerous and inadmissible to the American nation” (Shah, 2001, p. 12).

Once again, the fact that smallpox was both well-understood and preventable at this time argues against interpretations that see the scapegoating of minorities as a reaction against mysterious diseases. Instead, they add weight to Samuel K. Cohn’s hypothesis that “modernity, instead of decoupling the disease-hate nexus, intensified its lethality”: “with the colossal exception of the Black Death, with its massacres of Jews, beggars, and others, it was the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which produced the major outbreaks of disease-provoked violence and blame, and they did so when diseases such as smallpox and cholera no longer posed great mysteries” (Cohn, 2018, pp. 1-2). Despite its targeting of marginal groups, we might then read instances of epidemic-related violence not as peripheral to societies but as *constitutive* of a modernity where public health issues were being coded along racial and class lines. Smallpox violence in North America appears to fit such an interpretation, and the disease itself could be read as “a factor heightening racism at the end of the nineteenth century” (Cohn, 2018, p. 284). What appears evident from Nayan Shah’s study of epidemics and race in San Francisco’s Chinatown is also that the categories of race and class were mutually imbricated, and that “racial coding was shaped and transformed by the norms of class through discourses of respectability and middle-class tastes and by the norms of marital heterosexuality” (Shah, 2001,

p. 12). In a pattern familiar from studies of whiteness examining how different immigrant groups to the United States gradually ‘became white’ through social mobility into the middle class, in some cases transforming from marginal ‘others’ not just into deserving citizens but even ‘model minorities’ (Brodkin, 1998), (some) minority groups could ‘integrate’ into mainstream society over time and consequently become part of the ‘healthy’ body of a nation in flux. Not just the Chinese, but also the “Bohemians, Germans, and the lowest of the Italians” who were blamed for the 1881-1882 smallpox epidemic in New York, Chicago, and St Louis “because of their supposed ‘ignorance’ and hostility to vaccination” (Cohn, 2018, p. 296) would no longer be counted among the poor by the 1930s, with marginality pushed further afield the racial gradient. And if smallpox violence in the late nineteenth century was mostly limited to North America, such imbrications of race and class (and gender) with epidemics were a much more global phenomenon. As Shah (2001, p. 6) notes, his study of “contagious divides” in San Francisco “resonates with studies of public health in cities as varied as Cincinnati, Bombay, Atlanta, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, and Los Angeles”.

The heteronormativity mentioned above deserves a brief mention, as it is rarely absent from societal notions of health and disease. Nowhere is this more visible than with venereal diseases, of which syphilis is the foremost example of an epidemic that prompted the ascription of blame to ‘other’ groups. Making its first appearance in Europe in 1494, in the context of a French invasion of Naples, and spreading widely with the return of demobilised soldiers, the disease puzzled physicians due to its polymorphous character (Eamon, 1998, p. 4). Widely believed to have originated in the New World, the fact it was transmitted through sexual intercourse carried strong undertones of immorality and transgression, all the way to allegations of zoophilia by the conquistadores or associations with cannibalism. This in turn led to it being almost invariably assigned to the ‘other’, or ‘the enemy’. “The Italians called it *mal francese* (L. *morbus gallicus*, the French disease), while the French tended to call it the Neapolitan disease. In England it was called the French Pox, while Poles referred to it as the German disease; and in Russia, where the sickness made its first appearance in 1499, it was called the Polish disease” (Eamon, 1998, p. 5). While Native Americans were held responsible for its origins, in a by-now familiar pattern, the “transmission of *morbus gallicus* was blamed on persecuted minorities at home, notably lepers, prostitutes, Jews, and Marranos (converted Jews). The idea that real or imagined enemies spread the contagion intentionally was imbedded in popular culture and in learned works alike” (Eamon, 1998, p. 22). While the similarity of some symptoms to leprosy prompted the association with lepers, and the sexual transmission with

prostitutes, Jews were the minority understood to be the most transgressive in a Christian moral universe, just as they had been at the time of the Black Death. As the disease affected all social strata indiscriminately, the dividing line of propriety in this case was about morality and gender (and women more generally were indeed seen as spreaders of the disease) rather than class. Consequently, the affliction could be embraced by those who opposed notions of bourgeois morality: “libertines could regard ‘the clap’ as an iconoclastic badge of honor, of free thinking in defiance of hypocritical conventions, and of sexual conquest” (Snowden, 2019, p. 239). Once again, instead of an irrational response to the unknown, what we witness with the scapegoating of certain groups for syphilis epidemics is yet another attempt at structuring society, in this case along the lines of normative sexuality.

To conclude this brief historical introduction to the COVID-19 pandemic and its scapegoats, the picture that emerges when comparing different epidemics in various times and places is one where societies not only sought to reinforce their pre-existing boundaries of proper, acceptable behaviour in times of catastrophe, but also constructed them in the process. The targeted groups could differ based on the disease, its aetiology, symptomatology, and transmission, as well as on the segments of society that were most affected. As the case of that ultimate indiscriminate killer, the bubonic plague, shows, the assemblage of the ‘guilty’ and ‘dangerous’ could also be highly heterogenous: “tricksters, gypsies, negroes, knaves, herbalists, street-singers, comedians, whores, and similar oddballs” were expelled from Florence during the plague of 1575-1578 (Cohn, 2012, p. 537). Despite their diversity, what these groups had in common was an association with deviance, a disregard for order, and a fluidity in the crossing of boundaries reminiscent of what Mary Douglas (1966, p. 36) calls “matter out of place”. Her understanding of the structuring effects of notions of ‘purity’ and ‘danger’ and of the analogous and mutually-reinforcing relationship between “the physical experience of the body”, always modulated according to social categories, and “a particular view of society” (Douglas, 1973, p. 93), is indeed frequently encountered in studies of historical epidemics and pandemics.

The Roma, or ‘gypsy’, insistently returns in accounts of different groups blamed for spreading different diseases, always marginal and frequently victimised. While other minority groups, such as the Jews or the Chinese in the United States, eventually left this space of marginalisation, the Roma in present-day Europe are still there, and have not quite ‘become white’, mostly because they have not become middle class. Other notions of Roma crossing boundaries – whether in fantasies of mobility, allegations of immorality, or accusations of

criminality – coalesce in an image of deviance inflected by class and race, spurning and posing a threat to hegemonic notions of bourgeois morality and proper behaviour. Before proceeding to the analysis of anti-Gypsyism and hate speech in Eastern Europe in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is useful to recall that the modern, scientific understanding of epidemics did not prevent instances of hatred and violence against marginal groups, but potentially made things worse. It is also a sobering thought to consider that the germ theory of disease, despite its many advantages, also had negative consequences, directing “public health toward narrow-gauged ‘vertical’ campaigns against single, specific microbial targets and away from ‘horizontal’ programs that focused on the social determinants of disease – poverty, diet, education, wages, and housing” (Snowden, 2019, p. 231). All of these aspects are amply on display in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Hate in the time of COVID-19

Instances of blaming Roma for either spreading the virus or violating lockdown provisions in the context of the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic were widespread across the seven countries included in our research project: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine. Since phenomena such as racism or hate speech are difficult to document through quantitative methods, the survey distributed to members of the Roma communities in the seven countries under consideration included only one question asking whether respondents were directly subjected to accusations of spreading the virus: ‘Were you, or others in your close family, blamed by others for spreading the virus (e.g., by not obeying the lockdown rules strictly enough)?’. To this question, 30% of respondents in Albania answered positively, followed by 17.9% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 17.4% in Moldova, 8.2% in Ukraine, 8% in Serbia, 7.5% in North Macedonia, and 7.4% in Montenegro. Despite the variation among countries, which can be explained both by the frequency of such incidents and by methodological issues (related to the fact that, for safety considerations, the survey was distributed online and/or over the phone, which skews the sample of respondents in terms of their IT literacy and tends to privilege respondents from urban settings over rural ones, excluding also the most marginal within the Roma communities), the positive response rate is generally high, especially considering the question referred to *personal* experiences. The in-depth interviews carried out by local researchers with relevant stakeholders confirmed the widespread nature of such incidents, while providing

interesting information about some of the narratives behind such scapegoating, the types of violence against Roma and its perpetrators, as well as and very importantly, the Roma communities' perception of and reactions to them. And while racism is not amenable to being quantified, the other part of the present explanatory framework – poverty – is. Consequently, the following analysis will refer to survey data for the latter, while focusing mostly on information derived from the interviews for the former. Additionally, desk research on mainstream and social media will be employed for purposes of clarity, or where such data helps nuance some of the interviewees' stories and interpretations.

The most egregious instances of racially-motivated actions by the authorities and violent attacks by non-state groups or individuals were reported in the local, regional, and national media, and can also be found in reports monitoring anti-Roma racism during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., OSCE/ODIHR, 2020a; Rorke and Lee, 2020). These included cases of police brutality, racial profiling, and quarantining of Roma at the border, as well as the death of a nine-months' pregnant Roma woman who was denied emergency care while awaiting the results of a COVID test in North Macedonia; police and far-right violence in Serbia; arson of a Roma camp by the paramilitary neo-fascist group C-14; and orders to deport the Roma from Ivano-Frankivsk in Ukraine (A. Cârstocea et al., 2020; Rorke and Lee, 2020, pp. 29-34; pp. 41-43; pp. 57-59). All of these were recounted by the interviewees as well, with some of them referring to these cases as evidence that the situation in their localities was not 'as bad', an aspect indicative of a normalisation of anti-Roma racism within the Roma communities themselves to which I will return later. Furthermore, Andreea Cârstocea's article in this issue provides a comprehensive analysis of the mainstream media coverage in the seven countries, which included racist references to the Roma and/or directly blamed them for spreading the virus or violating lockdown restrictions. The pattern emerging from all these is in line with two common stereotypes about the Roma that were rendered salient by the pandemic: their allegedly poor hygiene and propensity for transgression of the rules.

Both of these are understandable when factoring in both deeply embedded anti-Roma racism and the peculiarities of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially when placed in the long-term historical context that the first part of this article has provided. Hardly 'mysterious', as some interpretations of scapegoating of minorities in times of epidemics would have it, SARS CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, was well understood and had been genetically sequenced before the pandemic ever reached Europe (Wang et al., 2020). With treatment elusive and work on a vaccine still a long way from completion in the spring and summer of

2020, calls for personal hygiene rules meant to prevent the spread of the virus, doubled by state-enforced lockdowns, were the norm in early responses to the pandemic. In both cases, they intersected with the aforementioned anti-Roma stereotypes, which explains their singling out and condemnation in societies across Eastern Europe and beyond. The mainstream media, as well as non-Roma blaming the Roma for spreading the virus on social media, fell back on ‘cultural’ interpretations pointing at a putative ‘nature’ of ‘the Roma’. Instead, the project data points emphatically to poverty and marginalisation as the main features characteristic of the particular situation experienced by Roma communities during the pandemic, re-coded according to pre-existing racist tropes into a ‘cultural’ argument. Our survey data with respect to housing revealed that 31% of the respondents felt they did not have enough room to comply with lockdown rules within the household. This is consistent with reports by international organisations monitoring the living conditions of Roma communities. In a joint statement issued on International Roma Day 2020, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) pointed to “overcrowding and poor access to sanitation” linked to “longstanding Roma discrimination and marginalization” as the aspect rendering them particularly vulnerable during the pandemic (OSCE/ODIHR, 2020b; see also Korunovska and Jovanovic, 2020). Limited access to clean water is a well-known feature of the poor living conditions experienced by Roma communities across Europe, and one that became extremely salient in the context of COVID-19. In one case reported by an interviewee from Serbia, persons belonging to the Roma community had no water in one settlement in Belgrade; when leaving it to get water from a local reservoir, as they usually did, the police fined them for violating the curfew rules (Interviewee 4, Serbia).

The example above clearly shows the connection between poverty and the two most pervasive racist tropes circulated about the Roma in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: poor hygiene and lockdown violations. The connection becomes even clearer when taking into account the impact that the lockdowns had on Roma persons’ ability to work and the effect this had on their income, translating into increased inability to afford essential items or pay for household utilities. The survey data indicated that only 22% of the respondents were in permanent, regular employment at the start of the pandemic, with the overwhelming majority (76.2%) having their most important source of income in informal work (28.8%), social benefits (20%), temporary contracts (13.7%), or seasonal work (13.7%); 1.6% of the respondents owned a registered business (for a more detailed analysis, see Willis, in this issue). In the context of lockdown measures, the reliance on informal and/or seasonal work resulted

in a significantly reduced ability to work (71% of the respondents answered positively to this question) and an associated reduction in income, which 73% of the respondents said they experienced. The over-reliance on informal work also meant that many Roma were unable to access government assistance schemes, with only 24% responding that they had applied to them (a figure corresponding roughly to that of persons in permanent regular employment). In turn, this translated into an inability to afford food and household essentials – close to a third of all respondents across the seven states claimed this was the case, with the highest figures in Albania (48%) and Ukraine (45%). Consequently, many Roma were cut off from utilities for non-payment: while the average across the seven countries was 8.5%, the incidence was once again the highest in Ukraine (27%) and Albania (16%). This acted as an aggravating factor to the already substandard living conditions in which many of the Roma in the region live.

The nexus of poverty, informal employment, stereotypes about poor hygiene, and a propensity for breaking the rules as components of pandemic-related anti-Roma racism can be illustrated with an example encountered in the case of Albania. All nine interviewees referred to recycling (of scrap metal, plastic, glass, etc.) as one of the main types of informal employment for members of the Roma community – up to 60-70% of them in some localities (Interviewee 5, Albania). As this occupation was discontinued due to the lockdown and the hygiene rules, the recyclers lost their primary or sole source of income which resulted into an inability to afford food. Consequently, some of them violated the lockdown rules and continued recycling. This was answered by police brutality, with images and a video of police physically abusing Roma recyclers going viral on social media (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 4, Interviewee 6, Albania).

In turn, this prompted a wave of hate speech online, establishing not only a connection between recycling work and spreading the virus, but also with the racist trope of the ‘dirty Roma’. In the words of one interviewee, a member of the Minorities State Committee for a city in Albania: “Roma also have been defined as dirty people, as people who spread the virus, and those who do not respect the social distancing. ‘I stay closed and Roma stay in the roads, why should I be infected by them’; in a way there has been a growth of distancing between Roma and non-Roma. Due to [this] people are split into two groups, ‘the dirty ones’ and ‘the clean ones’” (Interviewee 3, Albania). The Executive Director of a Roma NGO accounted for this issue matter-of-factly, in connection to poverty: “That was the only business that could provide money for food for them” (Interviewee 2, Albania). Even the rare sympathetic non-Roma identified its causes in poverty – a young woman in her 20s stated in a comment on social

media: “Why do we have to swear at them, while they are begging for their daily bread; if they have their daily bread, they will not do such things [meaning begging and recycling]” (Interviewee 5, Albania). However, in the eyes of a majority population who has normalised anti-Roma stereotypes of poor hygiene and rule-breaking, this was instead interpreted as further ‘proof’ of the inherent ‘dirtiness’ of the Roma, effecting a division of society separating the pure from the impure. According to Mary Douglas (1966, p. 7), “our idea of dirt is compounded of two things, care for hygiene and respect for conventions”; both of these notions came to occupy centre stage in the context of the first 2020 lockdown, and an element of danger was clearly attached to impurity, with the Roma identified in the East European societies under consideration as the primary transgressors. Although particularly poignant in the Albanian case, the involvement of the Roma in recycling and the problems it led to during the lockdown was by no means limited to this country, with similar stories reported in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Interviewee 6), Montenegro (Interviewee 1), North Macedonia (Interviewee 2), Serbia (Interviewee 8), and Ukraine (Interviewee 8).

In terms of the violence directed against the Roma, the pattern that emerges across the seven case studies is that it was primarily institutional, driven by the authorities. The only exceptions in this respect were in Serbia and Ukraine, where far-right groups (the Leviathan Movement in Serbia and the C-14 group in Ukraine) attacked members of the Roma community. The Leviathan Movement, which presents itself as an animal rights organisation, staged an attack against a Roma family in Belgrade and took their dog under the pretence that the animal was being trained for dog fights (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 4, Serbia). In Kyiv, two members of C-14 carried out an attack with tear gas on a Roma camp, which they then burned to the ground (Rorke and Lee 2020, pp. 57-58). Ukraine was also the only country where violence by neighbours against the Roma community in Konotop was recorded and reported to the police (Interviewee 7, Ukraine). Outside of these exceptions, most of the violence identified in both the desk research and by the interviewees took place online, ranging from jokes and racist memes through more serious racial slurs to instigations to violence as a means of preventing infection. Interviewees from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine consistently pointed out at the prevalence of hate speech on social media. In turn, in North Macedonia, interviewees claimed that “actually the mainstream media is the trigger for the hate speech in the general public”, and that reactions on social media arose as a response to that (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, North Macedonia).

Nevertheless, violence from the authorities was much more widespread than any grassroots

incidents involving non-state actors. Police brutality was the most common and was reported in interviews and desk research everywhere except for Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Albania, as mentioned above, it primarily targeted Roma involved in recycling, found to be in violation of the lockdown rules. In Moldova, cases of racial profiling by police were commonly reported, with only Roma being stopped for questioning on the street, as well as instances where Roma were prevented from leaving the neighbourhoods where they lived despite the absence of formal lockdown measures (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Moldova). As pointed out in the interviews, this happened “especially in cities densely populated by Roma such as: Soroca, Otaci, Edineț” (Interviewee 3, Moldova). Police blockades of Roma neighbourhoods were also reported in Montenegro (Interviewee E, Montenegro), as well as cases of torture of Roma persons who violated the quarantine rules (Interviewee B, Montenegro). Abusive fines, imprisonment, beatings, and torture of Roma persons infringing lockdown measures were reported as being relatively widespread in North Macedonia and Serbia (Interviewee 2, North Macedonia; Interviewee 4, Interviewee 5, Serbia). In Ukraine, the police in Nizhyn engaged in illegal fingerprinting of Roma persons accused of quarantine violations (Interviewee 7, Ukraine), detained people just because they were Roma (Interviewee 5, Ukraine), and selectively placed Roma neighbourhoods in quarantine (Unian, 2020; Interviewee 2, Interviewee 9, Ukraine). The picture that emerges across the seven countries is one reminiscent of the brutal interventions of the authorities in poor neighbourhoods during nineteenth-century cholera epidemics.

Although the police were singled out as the most serious offender, which is consistent with their function of enforcing the lockdown and curfew rules, cases of hate speech and institutional violence were reported in relation to other authorities as well. In Ukraine, health authorities refused services (sending an ambulance, admitting a woman in labour to the maternity ward) to Roma and publicly named and provided the addresses of Roma diagnosed with COVID-19 (Interviewee 2, Interviewee 7, Interviewee 10, Ukraine; A. Cârstocea et al., 2020). In Albania, one of the interviewees stated that “the hate speech comes especially from the politicians mostly” (Interviewee 9, Albania), while a Roma community mediator in Moldova pointed at the racism of a local elected official which he had employed in his electoral campaign (Interviewee 1, Moldova). Also in Moldova, one of the interviewees mentioned the racism of a lawyer who stated “within the hearings of the Court that ‘gypsies are people [who] were inclined genetically to commit crimes’, therefore the person deserves to take a severe punishment” (Interviewee 3, Moldova). The worst such incident carried out by elected

politicians occurred in Ivano-Frankivsk, where the mayor Ruslan Martsinkiv, a member of the far-right All-Ukrainian Union “Svoboda” party, called for the forced eviction of Roma residents and their deportation to Zakarpattia, under the pretext of members of the community violating the quarantine (Hromadske International, 2020; Rorke and Lee, 2020, pp. 58-59). Reminiscent of the social violence during both cholera and smallpox epidemics mentioned above is the pronounced class dimension of the violence against Roma during COVID-19. Outside state institutions, an interesting feature that came out from some of the interviews with regard to online hate speech was that the persons driving it were identified as “intellectuals”, educated, middle-class, “well-off” people (e.g., Interviewee 5, Albania).

The class dimension was also visible in distinctions made among the Roma, as with the case of a quarantine of a Roma neighbourhood where “for some reason, only the baron [local leader] could leave” (Interviewee 2, Ukraine). Talking about the absence of hate speech and institutional violence from the authorities in the region of Zakarpattia, one of the interviewees accounted for it by stating that the Roma in the region “are different [...], many Roma who live in big houses (in Mukachevo). In general, people treat them more [favourably]” (Interviewee 8, Ukraine). When accounting for these class distinctions, most of the Roma interviewees – in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, or Ukraine – pointed at poverty as the structural cause underlying such racist incidents. This is very well summarised in the following statement by one interviewee: “There were some rumours in society: that Roma people from Liubymivka look unhygienic, have an unhygienic lifestyle, and that they can potentially be carriers of infections. And when the whole society focuses on an infection (in our case, the coronavirus disease), they may see a potential threat from people living in poverty” (Interviewee 4, Ukraine). Hardly unprecedented, the patterns of social violence against the Roma that could be observed during the COVID-19 pandemic recall the reactions to cholera epidemics, which bourgeois elites blamed on the irresponsible behaviour of the poor, with no consideration of the living conditions that rendered them particularly vulnerable to the disease. Even more so, given that unlike cholera, COVID-19 is hardly a ‘social disease’, they are also reminiscent of the violence associated with nineteenth-century smallpox outbreaks which also targeted marginal minority groups. Typically ignored by the middle class, marginal groups like the Roma in Eastern Europe become important in times of epidemics due to the danger they are seen to pose to the elites themselves.

Two further observations can be derived from an analysis of the interviews and are worth pointing out. First, there is a noticeable tendency across many of the interviews to downplay

the extent of social violence against the Roma. Talking about the racist jokes distributed online, one interviewee dismissed them as follows: “the only thing I know is that they in European communities consider everything to be hate speech, including telling jokes [...] but these are jokes at the expense of all populations, all nationalities, so I do not see a problem, there are jokes about blondes, about cops” (Interviewee 3, Bosnia and Herzegovina). A Roma community mediator from Moldova talked about “cases of hidden hatred (‘backstage’), discrimination against Roma, but these cannot be classified as racist cases” (Interviewee 4, Moldova). This pattern was evident across the seven countries, with anything outside of actual physical violence against Roma dismissed as not constituting racist incidents. One of the interviewees in Ukraine wrote off the notion of police engaging in random checks and selective quarantining of Roma, despite ample evidence to the contrary in mainstream media, stating that it “happened to absolutely everyone: both Roma and non-Roma people. That is, such incidents are not discriminatory”. The follow-up statement was even more illustrative in this respect:

I know about another incident: Roma people bought potatoes somewhere and sold them in the villages during the lockdown. Potential buyers did not react very well, saying: ‘You are Roma! It’s the quarantine, what are you doing? Have you come here to spread the infection? We don’t know where these potatoes came from. Leave our village’. I doubt whether this is discrimination. But there was something like this (Interviewee 4, Ukraine).

Such minimising of anti-Roma racism in the context of the first 2020 lockdown was doubled by its normalisation. Several interviewees who acknowledged its existence and did not attempt to minimise it simultaneously pointed at the fact that it was not new or in any way surprising, but rather the latest instance of a social reality that the Roma are accustomed to: “people are mostly used to it by now, so they don’t report it” (Interviewee 2, Albania); “we’re kind of used to living with that” (Interviewee B, Montenegro). A pervasive notion of the futility of reporting such instances to authorities came out of numerous interviews. Some of them referred to the extent to which the Roma themselves have internalised anti-Gypsyism and have come to accept it, as they believe the situation is unlikely to change: “Roma agree with the hate speech and they think they cannot do anything with the reality of hate speech, so if people swear [at them] or offend them, they do not react, thinking that there is nothing to be done that could bring a change of the situation” (Interviewee 1, Albania).

The lack of trust in the authorities – entirely justified, based on the evidence of institutional

violence presented above – leads to the second notable observation that can be inferred from the interviews: the reluctance to report racist incidents, or even discuss them under the protection of anonymity, for fear of more serious repercussions. One interviewee referred to her engagement with the authorities as follows: “I fought with these people, but in some cases it is a dangerous and meaningless fight, because these people are anti-Roma racists” (Interviewee 1, Moldova). Another strategy discernible in the interviews that could be related to fear of the authorities was to refer to cases of incidents happening in *other* localities, always *elsewhere*, with the implicit or explicit implication that ‘things are not so bad’ in one’s own. While this could be indicative of the importance of the local dimension in accounting for variations in social violence against the Roma, one which this limited study could not explore in detail, the frequency of such accounts might also suggest that these ‘other’ places where the violence happens might come (close to) full circle if pursued exhaustively.

Referring to the case of a Roma person who had been subjected to torture by the police for an alleged violation of quarantine rules, one respondent accounted for their reluctance to report it as follows: “people do not want to talk about these things because they are afraid of later consequences for them. The problem is that the same person who survived this torture by the police already had problems with the law and that for a while he was in prison, so he is afraid to talk about it” (Interviewee B, Montenegro). In Serbia, an interviewee recounted how their local Roma association reacted against graffiti calling for the murder of Roma only to find itself accused of causing “racial hatred” by taking such action; the person agreed to talk about the incident to the interviewer only on condition that this part of the interview was not recorded (Interviewee 3, Serbia). Another interviewee refused to disclose details about a case of police brutality, stating they “do not have these people’s permission to discuss these cases” (Interviewee 10, Ukraine). The conversation continued as follows:

Interviewer: Could you name the regions and districts where these instances took place?

Interviewee 10: If I say so, it will be mentioned in the report. And if it is read by the police in this area, they will immediately recognize the case because it was under [their] control, and we addressed very high-ranked people to solve this problem.

Interviewer: Are you saying that some means of pressure or other violence can be used against these people by the police?

Interviewee 10: Exactly.

These last two observations suggest that, irrespective of how much evidence of social violence

against the Roma was visible during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, much more of it has probably gone unreported. The involvement of the authorities in perpetrating such violence renders this quite likely and reproduces the social inequalities that account for the marginalisation of the Roma and their exclusion from ‘respectable’ society in times of crisis. Read in such a key, the hate speech and racist incidents on which this article has focused represent only the ‘tip of the iceberg’, the superstructure of an architecture of oppression whose infrastructural roots are firmly planted in social inequality inflected by moral considerations that distinguish between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor.

Such a reading offers some advantages. For one, it firmly positions class and poverty at the centre of debates about the Roma as a marginalised minority and more generally about groups that are simultaneously disproportionately vulnerable to and blamed for outbreaks of epidemics and pandemics. Second, it warns against ‘culturalist’ arguments that, even when well-intentioned, can veer dangerously close to the reified racist assumptions about the allegedly immutable ‘nature’ of ‘the Roma’. Despite its common invocation in minority policies, “cultural difference, verging on a cultural determinism, is one of several forms of essentialism used to explain away assaults on dignity and suffering” (Farmer, 2003, p. 48). It can also serve the convenient function of taking away blame from the elite biases and multiple failures of human rights and minority rights policies and laying it conveniently at the door of the marginalised group whose situation they allegedly aim to redress. Against the evidence of the inaction of state authorities and of the systemic and structural racism embedded in such institutions, the positive stories of efforts toward knowledge production, advocacy, and activism on behalf of the Roma during the COVID-19 pandemic came almost exclusively from civil society organisations, whether Roma ones or other non-governmental groups.

3. Thinking in terms of scale

Bringing together the two parts of this article, the historical and the contemporary, affords some further insight into reading the structural violence against the Roma in Eastern Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic within a broader spatial and temporal framework. First, if we zoom out of the seven countries our study covered and of Eastern Europe as a region, different instances of blaming minority groups for the pandemic emerge. A group historically prominent as victims of violence during epidemics ever since the Black Death made a return as a scapegoat, with evidence pointing to a global rise in antisemitism (Estrin, 2020). Explicit

references to the Holocaust at anti-lockdown protests in 2020 in Germany and elsewhere were mirrored across the Atlantic in the blood libel rhetoric employed by former president Donald Trump and portrayals of Jews by far-right groups in the United States as rats who are “the real plague” (Connolly, 2020; Kushner, 2020). From France, Denmark, and the United Kingdom to India, where numerous incidents of mass violence occurred, Islamophobia fuelled associations of Muslims with the spread of the virus (Hasan, 2020; Slater and Masih, 2020). Meanwhile, in the early stages of the epidemic when it mostly affected only China, some Muslim groups saw it as divine punishment for China’s horrific treatment of the Uighur minority, and there was widespread xenophobia against the Chinese in Singapore (Suleiman, 2020; Thiagarajan, 2020). In the United Kingdom, disaggregated data indicated that racism and discrimination contributed to disproportionate fatalities among persons belonging to BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) groups (Campbell, 2020). While local circumstances differed widely, scapegoating appeared to be a global phenomenon. Despite its different articulations, a common pattern was the targeting of marginal groups whose liminal positions in societies were frequently constituted by their exclusion on criteria situated at the intersection of class and race.

While Romanians and Bulgarians were blaming the Roma for the spread of COVID-19, they found themselves at the receiving end of such exclusionary patterns in Western Europe. In 2020, Armin Laschet, the prime minister of North Rhine-Westphalia (and, since January 2021, Angela Merkel’s replacement as leader of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany), accounted for the coronavirus outbreak in the region by pointing at the entry of Romanian and Bulgarian precarious workers into Germany (Marcus, 2020). There was more than a little hypocrisy in such accusations. As borders were sealed shut and travel within Europe for business or tourism all but ceased in spring and summer 2020, special deals were made between states to allow precarious East European seasonal workers to embark on chartered flights and trains to tend to Europe’s rich: picking Germany’s precious asparagus, British strawberries, and French grapes, while risking their lives in the process (Rogozanu and Gabor, 2020; Mutler, 2020). These structural inequalities, this time on a European scale, exposed the inconsistencies in EU legislation on the equal treatment of labour, and instead revealed a political economy still fundamentally structured by nationality and East-West divisions (Boatcă, 2020). Stories of the “‘modern slavery’ at the heart of [a] German slaughterhouse [coronavirus] outbreak” (Soric, 2020), involving Romanian, Bulgarian, and Polish workers, recall, across spatial and temporal scales, the modern slavery in which the marginalisation of the Roma is grounded, still lacking the recognition it needs as a historical structuring structure in which the groups’

present-day predicament is rooted.

Zooming out of the continent, to the Global South, we encounter a familiar epidemic that had plagued Europe in the nineteenth century: cholera. Banished from the European ‘core’ in the early twentieth century, “ever a social disease”, cholera still flourishes in the world’s ‘peripheries’ “since poverty, overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and unsafe water supplies persist” (Snowden, 2019, p. 261). Cholera reached sub-Saharan Africa in 1971, it is recurrent in Asia, and turned into a major pandemic in South America in the 1990s, starting in Peru. It has reached catastrophic proportions in Haiti, “the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere”, in the wake of the devastating earthquake of 2010 which destroyed the country’s already fragile sanitary and medical infrastructure (Snowden, 2019, p. 267). Not only has the disease not gone away, but neither has the social violence occurring in association with it: “the conspiracies and blaming continue to divide communities along class lines. When cholera reached Peru in 1991, government ministries attacked the poor as ‘pigs’, accusing them of spreading the disease by their ‘pig-like’ habits” (Cohn, 2018, p. 228). The notion of dirt and of the threat it poses to the ‘cleanliness’ and ‘order’ of societies, encountered in our research in the case of the Roma in Eastern Europe during COVID-19, is thus endemic in such instances and quite independent, as the Peruvian example shows, of ethnic or racial stereotypes. Instead, created and reproduced by ruling elites on scales ranging from the local through the national and the regional to the global, poverty appears to be the common denominator triggering such perceptions and the responses they prompt.

The return of cholera in the Global South can also point to a temporality of poverty. During the epidemic in South America in the 1990s, “Peruvian cities presented conditions of poverty, density, and sanitary neglect that were reminiscent of nineteenth-century European cities such as London, Paris, and Naples that had been so favorable for ‘classic’ *V. cholerae*” (Snowden, 2019, p. 264). The conceptualisation of difference as developmental lack and temporal lag is a familiar trope in critiques of liberalism and its nineteenth-century notion of “stages of development” (Fabian, 1983), coupled with the promise of eventual universal emancipation (R. Cârstocea, 2020). As we also know, and have seen amply demonstrated above, cultural and class differences can both invoke the same perceptions of ‘backwardness’, of which acute Western observers travelling to ‘the Balkans’ were already aware in the nineteenth century (see Todorova, 1997). Viewed with a consideration of the different scales *and* the different fault-lines along which these productions and reproductions of difference operate, “what this exposes in turn is the hegemony of the modernisation narrative, whose terms of difference are

articulated not merely according to a developmental geography, but also through categories of class, gender, or religion” (R. Cârstocea, 2021, p. 17). Moreover, temporal awareness of such projected lags and their persistence (whereby twenty-first century Haiti is reminiscent of nineteenth-century London) can also make us aware of the evident failure of liberalism to deliver the promised ‘catching up’. Instead, all evidence points at the fact the gap is broadening rather than closing, and this is true both globally and within societies. In the words of the former US Senator Robert Torricelli talking about the late twentieth-century outbreaks in South America, “the cholera epidemic is the human face of the debt problem, a repudiation of the trickle-down theories that have guided development policy for more than a decade” (cited in Snowden, 2019, p. 265). Similarly, on smaller – local, national, and regional (e.g., ‘the Balkans’, ‘Eastern Europe’) – scales, our study exposes the failures of ‘Roma integration’ policies which were much touted across the region during its ‘transition’ period after the collapse of communism.

Conclusion

Writing about “the growing mortality differentials between whites and blacks” in the United States, the public health expert Vicente Navarro argued that they “cannot be understood by looking only at race; they are part and parcel of larger mortality differentials – class differentials” (Navarro, 1990, p. 1240). In a rare occasion when data was collected along these lines, the salience of class divisions came to the fore irrespective of which indicator of class was chosen. While Navarro warned already in 1990 about the “deafening silence” on the topic of class differentials in morbidity and mortality rates, and the fact that “race is used as a *substitute* for class” (Navarro, 1990, p. 1240; p. 1238), the situation does not appear to have improved much in this respect. Evidence from historical cases of epidemics and pandemics, as well as from our field research carried out during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic point to “the pathogenic role of inequity” (Farmer, 2003, p. 20), to patterns of marginalisation and exclusion that are often articulated around a nexus of class *and* race, where the former seems to take precedence over the latter. This, however, was certainly not the conversation Eastern European societies pointing at the Roma as spreaders of COVID-19 were having in 2020.

One of the jokes in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the first 2020 lockdown went like: “now everyone is like Roma, like gypsies, because our children do not go to school and we don’t even have a job” (Interviewee 8, Bosnia and Herzegovina). What the racist attempt at humour

masks is a fear of social decline in an age of increasing inequality. The shrinking of economies, the furloughed workers, and the stories of those who had no (stable) jobs to be furloughed from exposed the permanent threat of precarity implicit in a capitalism that is as pervasive a system as it is fragile. As graffiti in Toronto bluntly put it, “Corona is the virus. Capitalism is the pandemic” (Bender, 2020). Such stories of marginal groups in marginal places as the one this article and special issue explore can help expose the scales at which inequality operates in conjunction with exclusion, from the local to the global, but also point at the tensions between such scales and their internal heterogeneity. Replicating within the East European societies our project analysed their own second-class status within Europe, on the periphery of the European Union, anti-Gypsyism is profoundly marked by a class component. Grounded in poverty more than any cultural characteristics, which are more of a product than a cause of the marginalisation of the Roma, it serves to displace anxieties about a challenge second in importance to none other than climate change: rising inequality. Its persistence and salience in times of crisis are an indictment of the failure of well-intentioned minority policies designed by well-meaning elites who however do not, and *cannot*, understand the situation they aim to redress from the perspective of the poor. In 1995, the World Health Organization’s *World Health Report* put this bluntly: “Poverty, this report shows, is the world’s deadliest disease. Poverty wields its destructive influence at every stage of human life, from the moment of conception to the grave. It conspires with the most deadly and painful diseases to bring a wretched existence to all those who suffer from it” (WHO, 1995, p. v). These insights were clearly not taken on board during the COVID-19 pandemic. Going ahead, it is doubtful if they can ever be, for as long as ameliorative programmes are designed and implemented by actors and institutions who have only a theoretical understanding of what it means to be poor.

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