

## COVID-19 lockdown of Roma settlements in Slovakia

The controversial lockdown imposed on Roma settlements in Slovakia to prevent community transmission of COVID-19 sparks accusations of discrimination. Ed Holt reports.



The Slovak government has been accused of stigmatising the country's minority Roma population over a controversial decision to seal off entire communities to stop the spread of COVID-19. Local Roma rights groups said that the measure, which has involved isolating Roma settlements and sending army medics in to carry out testing, has stoked stigma and fear among both the Roma and non-Roma population. "They sent the army in, with helicopters, and Roma were asking 'why just us?'. It has created fear," Csaba Horvath, head of the Slovak Roma NGO Opre Roma, told *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*.

Slovakia has had a relatively low number of COVID-19 cases so far (1457 confirmed cases and 26 deaths with 120 645 tests carried out as of April 27). But since confirmation of the first case on Mar 6, there have been fears that an outbreak in Roma communities and other groups threatened by poverty and social exclusion could lead to a rapid spread of the disease.

Slovakia has one of Europe's largest Roma populations with an estimated 500 000—around 10% of the population—living in the country. Many Roma, and some international human rights groups, claim they face systemic marginalisation and discrimination. Around a third of Roma in Slovakia live in segregated settlements where extensive poverty, overcrowding, limited infrastructure, and poor hygiene are common. Health among Roma in settlements is also worse than the majority population and incidence of infectious diseases, including hepatitis, tuberculosis and syphilis, are far more common.

Citing an elevated risk of spread in Roma settlements, on April 1, the Slovak government announced plans

to carry out tests in hundreds of Roma communities after it emerged that a Roma man had broken a mandatory condition to self-quarantine for 14 days after returning to the country from the UK. The government said at the time it had information that more than 1500 people had returned to Roma settlements from abroad since the first identified case in the country. A week later the government sealed off 6000 people in five separate settlements in the towns of Krompachy, Bystrany, and Zehra in the east of the country after infections were identified.

While people outside settlements who have tested positive for the virus are required to self-isolate at home for 14 days, the government justified the complete lockdown of the settlements on specific problems in enforcing quarantine in such communities.

Peter Pollak, a Slovak Roma member of the government's COVID-19 response team, said that while quarantine could be carried out in a home somewhere in a city where an infected person "meets with a small amount of people ... in a settlement the social interaction of a positive person is enormous. We consulted experts and epidemiologists ... this was not a political decision".

Andrej Belak, a specialist in Roma health at the Slovak Academy of Sciences now acting as consultant to the government on the quarantine, told *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* that the decision had been viewed as the best course of action "based on the scientific information available at the time. What we found was that in the space of a few days an infected person [in the settlements] had a very large contact web, hundreds of people".

But local Roma organisations rejected the government's justification and criticised the quarantines as discriminatory and poorly thought through. They condemned the use of the armed forces and claimed food and other basic provisions for people in settlements had not been ensured, leaving some families starving. They also pointed out that the government ignored its own guidelines stating a community should only be put in quarantine if 10% or more of its members are infected. Others said the measures were putting healthy people at risk as those with infections were not being removed from the community.

On April 25, the Bystrany settlement's quarantine was lifted after 16 days as the government declared there was no community infection identified. The other settlements are expected to come out of quarantine during the course of May, but concerns remain over the effects the quarantines have had on relations between Roma, the government and the majority population. Pollak admitted there had been hostility towards Roma among the majority population near the affected settlements before the COVID-19 pandemic and now that it turning into hate.

Abel Ravasz, a former Government Plenipotentiary for the Roma, told the Slovak media: "This [quarantine] is stigmatisation, we're labelling Roma as other people. The coronavirus will be with us a long time and its consequences will be enormous. But we will have to deal with what we are doing with public opinion [on Roma] for a much longer time."

Ed Holt



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