Minority Communities and Human Rights during COVID-19

ECMI KOSOVO, 2021

Introduction

Human rights are the foundation of addressing the pandemic outburst and choosing the proper responses in addressing the impact COVID-19 is having in people's lives and their livelihoods. Considering that the pandemic is an unprecedented crisis which places countries, respectively government systems, in an emergency state, it is inevitable that the lives of people are affected by these measures that the government undertakes. As such, the UN considers Human Rights to be at high priority, especially for persons belonging to marginalized groups.1 The UN report distinctly states that the fundamental freedoms, freedom of movement, access to healthcare, right to food, water and sanitation, right to work, right to education, need to be taken into account during government issued responses to the COVID-19. "This is not a time to neglect human rights; it is a time when, more than ever, human rights are needed to navigate this crisis in a way that will allow us, as soon as possible, to focus again on achieving equitable sustainable development and sustaining peace" (UN, Covid-19 and Human Rights). Moreover, the report states that the economic and social inequalities along with the inadequate health and social protection systems, are being highlighted during this time of crisis.

The impact of COVID-19 on minority communities poses a challenge to societies due to the fact that the lives, health, and well-being of people living under low socio-economic statues are deeply affected. Depending on the region or country, minority communities often live in housing conditions with a higher number of family members, which results in challenges for physical distance and self-isolation. Moreover, it is more likely that members of such marginalized groups have limited digital access, which results in challenges when it comes to home-schooling or distance learning.[2]

It is undeniable that the rights of marginalized groups, especially minority rights, are at high risk of being disregarded. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe states that "The major social, political and legal challenge facing our member states will be their ability to respond to this crisis effectively, whilst ensuring that the measures they take do not undermine our genuine long-term interest in safeguarding Europe's founding values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law". Hence, the Council of Europe designed a toolkit to ensure that necessary measures are being taken by members of EU during the current crisis. The toolkit includes the Fundamental human rights standards, distinctly including the protection of vulnerable groups from discrimination.3

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[1] COVID-19 and Human Rights We are all in this together, United Nations, April 2020, page 1, https://www.un.org/victimsofterrorism/sites/www.un.org.victimsofterrorism/files/un_-_human_rights_and_covid_april_2020.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3HXWlrd_c3lN7IekyN2IeDMe_lAhhzpWW7_VBWNLvoET2WoOwiMlfTgNQ

[2] Human Rights at the Heart of Response, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, June 2020, page 1https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Minorities/OHCHRGuidance_COVID19_MinoritiesRights.pdf

[3] Secretary General of Council of Europe, Marija Pejčinović Burić, April 2020, https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-rule-of-law/-/coronavirus-guidance-to-governments-on-respecting-human-rights-democracy-and-the-rule-of-law

The following report looks at the responses that the Government of Kosovo has and is undertaking in tackling the Covid-19 crises and the way how these measures have covered, affected and supported the minority communities living in Kosovo.

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Methodology

This report is based on analysis of data pertaining to collected information through ECMI Kosovo's community-based paralegals, the Government reports and the direct interviews with members of minority communities. The data was collected through interviews, reports, and identified cases of discrimination towards minority communities, with an additional focus on women. Report is part of the the Project "HumanRightivism", operated by Community Development Fund – CDF, funded by the Embassy of Sweden in Prishtina/Priština, partial activities implemented by the European Centre for Minority Issues Kosovo (ECMI Kosovo).

Covid-19 Pandemic Reflection On Kosovo

On the 31st of December 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, located in China, reported some cases with pneumonia.[4] These reported cases, on January 12th of 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed a new coronavirus which was the cause of a respiratory illness in a group of people in Wuhan City, the so called COVID-19.[5] On 13th of January 2020, the first positive case with COVID-19 was reported outside China, in Thailand.[6] Since then, the world was awaiting a virus which was expected to appear at any place and at any given time.

As such, in Kosovo, medical teams initially began mobilizing to raise public awareness. Since February 8th, the National Institute of Public Health in Kosovo started communicating through various portals such as websites and other social networks with public, calling for caution.[7] On 27th of February 2020, the Ministry of Health established a Committee for Assessment and Coordination of Emergency Situation with COVID-19. Meanwhile, according to National Institute of Public Health in Kosovo, they took 93 samples tested between 8 February and 12 March 2020 which all resulted in negative results. On 13th of March 2020, the first two positive samples were reported, and after that the number just continued to increase.[8] While, on 15th of March 2020, the government declares a Public Health Emergency.[9] Since the first cases were reported, Kosovo went under lockdown, thus, the freedom of movement was limited, access to work, access to healthcare, especially at the hospital was even more restricted.

On the 12th of March 2020, the Government proposes the Draft Law no. 07/L-001 on the Budget Appropriations of the Republic of Kosovo. Furthermore, on the 14th of March 2020, the first Draft of Law no. 07/L-001 on the Budget Appropriations of the Republic of Kosovo was approved in the first reading and on the 15th of March 2020, the same draft law was approved in the second reading. On the 19th of March 2020, the mentioned law was approved. On the 30th of March 2020, the Emergency fiscal package was approved. Further, on the 3rd of April 2020, the Operational Plan on Emergency Fiscal Package was also approved. While the Draft of the Law no. 09/L-006 on Preventing and Combating COVID-19 in the territory of Republic of Kosovo was proposed on the 15th of April, it only was only later on approved on August 14th.[10]

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[4] Archived: WHO Timeline – COVID -19, World Health Organization, 2020, https://www.who.int/news/item/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] National Institute of Public Health in Kosovo, NIPH Facebook Page
[8] Ibid
[9] The government declares a state of public health emergency, Gazeta Koha, https://www.koha.net/arberi/213457/qeveria-shpall-gjendje-emergjente-te-shendetit-publik/
[10] Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, The Assembly approved the Draft Law on Prevention and Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in the territory of the Republic of Kosovo, 2020 https://kuvendikosoves.org/shq/lajmi/kuvendi-miratoi-projektligjin-per-parandalimi-25621/#

On the 5th of October 2020, the Kosovo Government distributed 10 Million Euros to 38 Municipalities to financially recover due to the situation created by COVID-19.[11] In addition, the Law no. 07/L-016 Economic Recovery – COVID-19 was approved on the 4th of December 2020.[12] Moreover, the Kosovo Parliament on the 25th of March 2020 voted the motion of no-confidence in the government.[13] Thus, the civilians of Kosovo, except for the fear and stress caused by COVID-19 itself, had to deal with an unpleasant situation caused by politics as well. In the middle of the pandemic, Kosovo remains with an acting Prime Minister, acting Minister of Health and later on acting President. Only on the 3rd of June 2020, the new Government was voted by the parliament.

The total lockdown measures taken by the government of the Republic of Kosovo mentioned above reflected negatively on the economy and welfare of Kosovo. In an IMF report in December 2020, concludes that Kosovo's economy will undergo an 8% contraction. As stated in the Kosovo Chamber of Commerce's report, 80% of business reflect dissatisfaction.[14] The During the months of lockdown and then gradual opening, all business very affected in a negative way. An effect that COVID-19 brought to the Kosovo economy is the downfall of seven-hundred and fifty (750) businesses[15]. The Kosovo Business Registry stated that 761 businesses, which employed in total 1,316 employees, have been closed down due to the situation created by COVID-19 and the Government decisions in response to the pandemic. Most of the businesses were in the market sector, processing industry, and the hospitality industry. An Interview of the Economy Expert, Edison Jakurti, provides information stating that 23% of enterprises have let go of their employees, resulting in 29 thousand of employees being left with no jobs. Moreover, in the report, it is stated that 88% of businesses have declared a decrease in circulation.[16] This had an across the board effect, however, these measures effected negatively also members of vulnerable and marginalized groups such as minority communities, women, young people, and people with limited capabilities.

[11] The Pandemic Knows No Gender, Kosovo Women's Network, 2020, Page 76, https://womensnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/KWN-The-pandemic-knows-no-gender_-ENG-1.pdf

[12] Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo, Law NR. 07/L-016 Economic Recovery – COVID-19, 2020, https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=35478

[13] Kosovo Government Falls in Midst of COVID-19 Crisis, Kosovo 2.0, 2020, https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/kosovo-government-falls-in-midst-of-covid-19-crisis/

[14] Kosovo Chamber of Commerce, COVID-19 and its Impact on Economy, page 10, https://www.kas.de/documents/286052/0/Policy+brief+20-11-27+Opportunities+for+Economic+Recovery+and+Economic+Transformation+%28ALB%29.pdf/5858201a-0461-0e21-ade3-2c836d5c9447?version=1.0&t=1609942716662

[15] Pandemia ua ve drynin mbi 750 biznesesve, 22 tetor 2020, Radio Evropa e Lire https://www.evropaelire.org/a/30906924.html

[16] "Efektet ekonomike të COVID-19: Një Analizë e Sektorit Privat në Kosovë" a report by Edison Jakurti, supported by the YES program of GIZ Kosovo https://www.buletiniekonomik.com/2021/03/29/pandemia/

Legal Framework

The republic of Kosovo is composed of a multi-ethnic society that is composed of various ethnic citizens that represent the values that the Kosovo Constitution stands for. On this note, Kosovo's institutional and strategic legal framework on the rights and protection of minority communities is aligned with international human rights standards and treaties. Article 24 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo states: "No one shall be discriminated against on grounds of race, color, gender, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, relation to any community, property, economic and social condition, sexual orientation, birth, disability or other personal status". In line with this statement, the Republic of Kosovo has established an anti-discrimination legislative framework, which is generally considered among the most progressive and expansive in the world in terms of protected grounds and domains for applicability. Although not a member of international organizations and thus not obliged to follow international anti-discrimination legislation, the Kosovo Constitution provides for the direct applicability of specified international agreements, in particular United Nations and European legislation on human rights and anti-discrimination. The Kosovo Constitution directly states and guarantees the equal protection of all communities in Kosovo before the law.17 The rights of minority communities are regulated thoroughly in Kosovo legislation, protecting their right to use their native language(s), protect their cultural, linguistic and religious heritages, protects and promotes the rights and freedoms of minorities in Kosovo in education, economic and social opportunities, as well as health and political participation.18

Reflecting the importance of community rights in Kosovo, the Constitution has an entire chapter (Chapter III) dedicated to the Rights of Communities and their Members. This chapter emphasizes that every member of a community can "freely choose to be treated or not treated as such" (Article 57). It also ensures equal representation in public institutions (Article 61), requires representation of communities through several specific posts at the municipal level (Article 62), community members shall have the right to express, foster and freely develop their identity and attributes as a community (Article 57), and defines the obligations of the state to ensure "full and effective equality among members of communities" (Article 58). Finally, Chapter III also provides for the establishment of a Consultative Council for Communities (Article 60), consisting of, among others, community representatives mandated to enable community members to comment at an early stage in legislative and policy initiatives, and to seek to have their views incorporated in the relevant projects.

Moreover, Kosovo legislation extends the protection and promotion of minority rights through the: "Law on the Protection of Rights of Communities and their Members in Kosovo", which enables communities to maintain, develop and express their identity by providing necessary affirmative measures to promote full and effective equality through specific measures to be implemented by the Government of Kosovo; the "Law on Local Self-government", which establishes the legal basis and framework for sustainable self-government, including the inclusion of minority community

[17] Republic of Kosovo Constitution, Article 3, http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/Constitution1Kosovo.pdf

[18] Civil Society Report on Human Rights in Kosovo, OHCRHR, 2019, page 34, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/kosovo_cso_2019_human_rights_report_en.pdf

populations in municipalities; the "Law on the Use of Languages", which respects the linguistic identity of all people living in Kosovo and creates and environment for all communities to express and preserve their language and culture in municipal institutions, judicial proceedings, education, media, personal names and names of cities, streets and topographic names; the "Law on Education in Municipalities of the Republic of Kosovo", which regulates and ensures the provision of public education at all levels, from preschool to higher education, in Kosovo municipalities. This law particular states the needs of minorities in regards to municipal education; The Law on Pre-University Education in the Republic of Kosovo", which states that minority communities are not to be reduced and limited when it comes to Pre-University Education.

Kosovo ensures the International and European Legislation Standards when it comes to minority communities as well. This includes the "Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which regulates the language rights in society (education, workplace, media and administration), property rights, right to health and social benefits, right to labor, as well as youth participation and empowerment.19

COVID-19 Impact on Minority Communities

The pandemic has affected everyone in unexpected ways and has not left any kind of area unscathed, whether it be human rights employment, education, or health. Considering the major preventative measures in order to try to keep control and maintain the health of the population, Kosovo Government has continuously tried to issue decisions that would protect its citizens. However, it is undeniable that members of marginalized groups, such as Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities, have been affected more deeply from the impacts of COVID-19.

Various authors and organizations have written about how and why the pandemic has greatly affected people that are members of minority communities, such as: "The Outsized Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Minority Communities" by Tara O'Neill Hayes; "A new kind of insecurity: how the pandemic has affected minorities" by Andrea Carlà and "How COVID-19 has Affected Minority Communities" by A Train Education. The factors that increase the risk of COVID -19 for minority communities seems to quite a few. Initially, Discrimination. According to CDC "Discrimination, which includes racism, can lead to chronic and toxic stress and shapes social and economic factors that put some people from racial and ethnic minority groups at increased risk for COVID-19." This distinctively puts minority communities at a great disadvantage when it comes to facing COVID-19.[20]

Another factor that increases the risk of the COVID-19 is the person's Living Conditions. It is generally common that minority groups live in heavy and poor socio-economic conditions that make it tougher for them to take adequate preventative measures regarding COVID-19. According to CDC, "Racial housing segregation is linked to health conditions (e.g., asthma and other

[19] Legal Handbook Vulnerable and Marginalized Groups in Kosovo, ERAC, 2019, Chapter IV, http://equalrightsforallcoalition.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Overview_of_the_legislation_Eng.pdf

[20] Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html

underlying medical conditions) which directly puts people at an increased risk of getting severely ill or dying from COVID-19. Populations with a higher number of racial and ethnic minorities also have higher levels of exposure to pollution and other environmental hazards."[21] Thus, making minority communities in Kosovo even more exposed to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Work conditions is another factor that increases the risk of COVID-19. There are some specific types of jobs which due to working conditions make workers more affected and more exposed to COVID-19. Minority communities have often limited access to healthcare and utilization which makes them even more sensitive to COVID-19. Systematic discrimination of minority communities increases the level of stress, which directly increases chances of getting COVID-19. Further, according to CDC "Minorities may not receive care because of distrust of the healthcare system, language barriers, or cost of missing work."[22] Moreover, the body not receiving the right nutrition leads to diabetes, heart diseases, high blood, and other illnesses that generally are reported as people with severe symptoms of COVID-19.

Education, income, and wealth gaps are factors that influence being more susceptible to COVID-19. Often, members of minority communities have backgrounds with lower levels of education that leads to lower incomes, as well as affecting their mental health during COVID-19. In addition, according to CDC "People in these situations often cannot afford to miss work, even if they're sick, because they do not have enough money saved up for essential items like food and other important living needs."[23] Now considering the restrictions that COVID-19 has brought, the livelihood of minority communities is at extreme risk due to the socio-economic circumstances they are forced to face.

Lastly, another factor that directly increases the risk of COVID-19 is Housing. Commonly, members of minority communities, due to their culture, as well as socio-economic situation, live in homes inhabited by many people of different ages. This makes them even more vulnerable to COVID-19 and also makes it more difficult for them to maintain government guidelines for COVID-19 protection.

Thus, all these factors mentioned above reflect that minority communities in the world, and in Kosovo, are more vulnerable to COVID-19. The pandemic has affected the well-being of all and has changed the course of people's lives, especially of groups that face constant discrimination, such minority communities, emphasizing women that are members of minority communities, women in general, the LGBT community, young people and other groups.

In addition to the fact that COVID-19 affects the minority communities in Kosovo, the pandemic has affected the well-being of individuals and families of Kosovars/Albanians. According to a World Bank report, among the main effects, the "Economic and Social Impact of COVID-19" will be:

1. Fewer jobs and consequently declining employment income due to downsizing of demand and cessation of supplies;

[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

2. Less income from various sources from employment, especially from remittances sent by those who have emigrated to the EU;
3. Potential decline in real income if supply chain disruptions lead to increased pricing or rationing of basic consumer goods such as food, or both;
4. Pressure on service delivery and disruption in education, health and social services (of addressed in other RER entries), thus risking non-compliance of such vulnerable groups as children from disadvantaged groups, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.[24]

Hence, we can conclude that non-majority communities, in addition to being at risk and more prone to becoming infected and having more severe symptoms by COVID-19, have been severely affected socially and economically mainly due to the conditions and circumstances in which they live.

Government decisions upon COVID-19 consequences

Since the first positive cases with COVID-19 were reported, as every country in the western Balkans and beyond, the Kosovo Government was forced to make decisions and take measures in order to maintain the country's health and economy under control. In this flow, the Ministry of Finance and Transfers drafted the initial plan of the emergency package, which was approved on the 3rd of April 2020. The Emergency Fiscal Package of the Government of Kosovo had the amount of €179,650,000, which included 15 measures and targeted different groups and communities.[25]

Table 1: The Emergency Fiscal Package of the Government of Kosovo

Measures	Description	Value €
Measure 1	Double payment of the value of the social scheme	€ 7,650,000
Measure 2	Additional payment of 30 euros per month for all beneficiaries of social and pension schemes under 100 euros	€ 13,000,000
Measure 3a	Financial support for businesses in financial difficulties due to the decline of their activity due to the pandemic: Monthly salaries of workers in the amount of 170 Euros	€ 41,000,000
Measure 3b	Financial support for businesses in financial difficulties due to the decline of their activity due to the pandemic: Rent subsidy	€ 12,000,000

[24] Economic and Social Impact of COVID-19, World Bank, 2020, page 2 https://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/253301590709924620/RER-note-WeBa-poverty-impacts-Covid19-20May2020-2-ALB.pdf

[25] Official website of Ministry of Finance and Transfers of Kosovo, Government Decision Nr. 01/19, https://kryeministri-ks.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Vendimi-i-Qeveris%C3%AB-nga-Mbledhja-e-19.pdf

Measure 3c	Financial support for businesses in financial difficulties due to the decline of their activity due to the pandemic: Employees' pension contributions	€ 8,000,000
Measure 4	Providing interest-free lending to public enterprises (return up at the end of 2020)	€ 20,000,000
Measure 5	Financial support for municipalities affected by the pandemic	€ 10,000,000
Measure 6	Providing a salary supplement in the amount of 300 euros for employees of essential sectors	€ 15,000,000
Measure 7	Additional payment in the amount of 100 Euros for workers of grocery stores, pharmacies, bakeries, for the month of April and May	€ 3,000,000
Measure 8	Payment of monthly assistance of 130 euros for citizens who lose their job	€ 4,000,000
Measure 9	Support for initiatives aimed at improving the lives of non-majority communities in the Republic of Kosovo, which have been hit hardest by the emergency situation due to the pandemic	€ 2,000,000
Measure 10a and 10b	Providing financial liquidity for self-employed micro-enterprises in the amount of up to 10 thousand euros for a period of 2 years	€ 15,000,000
Measure 11	Increase the budget for grants and subsidies for the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development to increase agricultural production	€ 5,000,000
Measure 12	Increase the budget for grants and subsidies to the Ministry of Culture	€ 5,000,000
Measure 13	Support for exporters in the Republic of Kosovo	€ 10,000,000
Measure 14	Financial support for companies that register employees with an employment contract of at least one (1) year during the period of public health emergency situation, from 130 euros to two consecutive months after registration.	€ 6,000,000
Measure 15	Payment of monthly assistance in the amount of 130 Euros for citizens with severe social conditions registered unemployed and who are not beneficiaries of any monthly income from the Kosovo budget	€ 3,000,000

Total € 179,650,000[26]

As can be clearly seen in the table above, only one of the government measures includes help and assistance to minority communities in the country in terms of the consequences of COVID-19. Moreover, if we analyze the amounts of financial means allocated for each measure, measure 9 has the smallest amount of all measures taken. Furthermore, according to the Riinvest Institute report "Emergency Fiscal Package / Implications and Challenges of Implementation".[27] despite the approval of the fiscal package on the 3rd of April 2020, the total distribution of the package was only done by June. Moreover, the report notes that there were many challenges in implementation, and especially in application errors, misuse of applications etc.

Additionally, according to the ADMOVERE report "Challenges of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Kosovo during the Covid-19 Pandemic"[28] of the 27 government decisions on the situation created by COVID-19, only one concerns minority communities. Moreover, on the 23rd of April 2020, the Kosovo government pointed out the criteria for the NGOs that are eligible to take government grants. Respondents criticized the allocation of grants for financial support of non-governmental organizations dealing with issues of minority communities in Kosovo. According to the respondents, the lists of the NGOs that benefited from the grants showed that these criteria were not respected due to the small number of NGOs that deal with communities such as Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities.

Another Kosovo Institution that has received a lot of attention since the beginning of the pandemic is the Ministry of Education, Science. This is a result of the fact that education was regulated on online platforms. The Ministry of Health on its official website has published 6 administrative instructions and a document that explains how to use the zoom platform and online learning schedules. However, none of these guidelines relate directly to minority communities. Only two of these 6 instructions have been translated into Serbian and Turkish.[29]

Moreover, ECMI Kosovo tried to contact the National Institute of Public Health regarding statistics on the number of minority communities affected by COVID-19, but they had no data divided into ethnicities of the infected citizens. Thus, leaving the number of COVID-19 affected minority community's unknown.

[26] Source: Ministry of Finance and Transfers of Kosovo

[27] Emergency Fiscal Package / Implications and Challenges of Implementation, Riinvest Institute, 2020, Page 9, https://www.riinvestinstitute.org/uploads/files/2020/June/30/Pakoja_Fiskale_Emergjente1593500151.pdf

[28] Challenges of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Kosovo during the Covid-19 Pandemic, ADMOVERE, 2020, https://admovere.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Final_-Sfidat-e-komunitetit-rom-ashkali-dhe-egjiptian-ne-kosove-gjate-pandemise-COVID-19-Alb-.pdf

[29] Official website of The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, https://masht.rks-gov.net/udhezimet-administrative

Main Findings

Based on ECMI Kosovo's research and database through contracted community based paralegals, it's evident that that members of minority communities have faced difficulties to have their fundamental rights guaranteed. Human rights challenges that have been apparent for minority communities during COVID-19 pandemic are the right to labor, the right to education, right to information on official languages, right to healthcare, among others.

Regardless of being protected from the Kosovo Constitution, National Law, as well as International Law, minority communities continue to face discrimination and difficulties when it comes to inclusivity in Institutions, public and private, and society. Moreover, the lives of all citizens, globally, have been drastically affected and changed with recommended methods of maintaining and preventing COVID-19. However, for marginalized groups, such as Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities, the impact of COVID-19 has been drastic.

Labor

Taking into account Kosovo's employment sector, members of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities' unemployment rate is high.30 As they face discrimination, the employment sector is quite not favorable towards marginalized groups, adding in the COVID-19 has proved more difficulty for the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. Due to Government decisions to prevent and manage the pandemic caused lock-downs and forced down the functionality of the private sector, as well as recycling waste collectors, a lot of members of minority communities were left with no jobs or no financial income. Informal waste collectors are made up of the poorest individuals in Kosovo, who live below the absolute poverty line. This particularly includes the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian Communities. The Informal waste system is a crucial employment sector that provides financial means to members of minority communities who are Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian. Moreover, the European Commission stated that: "Groups such as the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities, as well as women and disabled people, face greater risks through long-term unemployment, higher participation in the grey economy, low salaries, and lack of opportunities to generate alternative income sources. 6 While 18% of the population lives below the poverty line, only 6% of the population benefits from social assistance services and 11% of the population benefits from the basic pension scheme. As the economy shrinks and unemployment increases, these groups at risk of poverty will be disproportionately affected".31

Based on the research and data collected from community based paralegals through ECMI Kosovo, it has become evident that families that are part of minority communities have not received financial support from the Kosovo Government. There have only few selective cases that were the

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[30] Report on Perspectives of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian youth on decent work opportunities and challenges in Kosovo, International Labour Organization, page 7, states that "… Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities have higher unemployment, inactivity and NEET (not in education, employment and training) rates, higher levels of poverty, lower educational attainment and lower access to other public services than the overall population of Kosovo. Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians have an unemployment rate of 49%, NEET rate of 78%, 57% report food security and 54% use preventive health care services. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms_648875.pdf

[31] European Comission, EU4 Social protection following the COVID-19 crisis, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/ipa_2019_041248.03_eu4_social_protection.pdf

exemption, and received financial support. Taking into account that minority communities mostly work in informal sectors, they do not have an official monthly pay. This does not provide them with the necessary criteria to apply for Government support, leaving them unable to request for help. Moreover, the Serb Community living in Mitrovica North, is totally excluded from the Economy of Kosovo, since the North of Mitrovica is not included in the budged of Kosovo at all. The situations in the North of Kosovo is a large issue, but it needs to be highlighted in this report. The impact of having no financial income for members of minority communities and their families have left them quite in a vulnerable position, exposed to the dangers of COVID-19 with no financial security nor support.

Since there was almost no support from Kosovo Government, activists of minority communities organized and requested help from Diaspora in order to provide sustenance within their capacities to the members of minority communities and their families in the region of Prishtina. Support from Diaspora, based on information provided by community based paralegals, was provided in the form of food packages that would cover the minimum for members of minority communities to survive. Moreover, the KFOS foundation have provided food packages, as well, to the members of minority communities throughout the pandemic.32

Education

The Ministry of Education and Science and Technology (MEST) in Kosovo has not accommodated the needs of students that belong to the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. Due to COVID-19, education has been regulated through online in distance learning. According to MEST, 90% of students in Kosovo have been attending the online distance learning. However, when it comes to the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian community members, the percentage reflects from 30%-50% of students attending online distance learning. Considering that most members of minority communities have low financial income, computers, laptops, telephones, internet or other type of adequate equipment are not easily accessible for these students. Taking into account that the parents of these students lack educational backgrounds, it is hard for them to support and provide necessary help that students from non-marginalized groups have access to from their parents whom have education backgrounds.

The Director of the Kosovo Education Center (KEC), Dukagjin Pupovci, has stated that the 90% of students whom have attended online distance learning are not part of the members of minority communities. That directly reflects that the 10% of students whom have not been able to attend online distance learning includes the members of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian Communities.

Municipalities have provided ten (10) to fifteen (15) laptops to students who are members of minority communities. However, they have not provided further support in providing more laptops or provide financial means to pay for internet for minority community families. Despite this, the KFOS foundation, in cooperation with Local NGO that advocate and protect minority

[32] KFOS Emergency Project to support Minority Communities https://kfos.org/en/news/32/mbeshtetja-e-komuniteteve-rom-ashkali-dhe-egjiptian-ne-situaten-e-krijuar-nga-covid19

communities, have provided educational materials and internet payments to the families in need as contribution to education.

Use of Languages

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an evident lack of information in the Roma language regarding the virus and the dangers that it entails. Members of minority communities have the right to be provided information in their respective languages by law as stated in the Kosovo Constitution as well. Information provided by contracted community based paralegals entails that local NGOs have made several requests to the Ministry of Health in accordance to the agreements between the respective Ministry and the AQH program. The requests clearly stated the need for essential information materials to be provided in the Roma language as well. It has become evident that not all information that is provided in Albanian is available in the Roma language as well.

There is an apparent need to have all information that derives from Government Institutions to be available in all respective languages complying with Municipality populations. The lack of Government Institutions, both local and central, has been a continues issue that directly affects minority communities. Without proper and relevant information, it is difficult to know and understand the scope of the situation in Kosovo when it comes to COVID-19.

Vaccination

Kosovo is one of the last countries in the Western Balkans to be supplied with vaccines against COVID-19 even though the National Parliament of Kosovo has budgeted over 40 million euros to start the process of immunization. This has affected the citizens trust build in the government and also in the idea of coexisting with the COVID-19 without any protection. Thus, this among other issues, has led to general skepticism in Kosovo about the COVID-19 vaccine. In the absence of vaccines, about 500 Kosovo health workers were vaccinated in Albania. Only, on 28 of March 2021 a small contingent of 24,000 doses of AstraZeneca - Oxford COVID-19 vaccine, arrived at Prishtina International Airport "Adem Jashari" as a donation provided by UNICEF through the COVAX mechanism. This contingent is part of the 100,800 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine that Kosovo will receive for free from the COVAX program of the World Health Organization. With this contingent of vaccines against COVID-19 that had arrived in Kosovo, initially the workers of the Infectious Diseases Clinic of the Infectious Diseases Clinic of the University Clinical Center. To continue with the medical staff everywhere in Kosovo, the very elderly and people with serious comorbidities.

Even before the first doses of vaccines arrived in Kosovo, the Government of Kosovo under the administration of the Prime Minister Mr. Avdullah Hoti, in February through the competent health institutions in Kosovo drafted the National Vaccination Plan against COVID -19.[33] This plan was divided in three phases. Phase I: Vaccination of the highest risk groups that includes health workers, citizens and health workers in nursing homes, the age group over 80 years and a part of the population with chronic diseases. Second phase: this phase includes the age group 65-79, the

[33] https://msh.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Plani-Shteteror-i-Vaksinimit-kunder-Covid-19.pdf

rest of the population with chronic diseases, teachers and security forces involved in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic - a total of 306,000 individuals or 17 percent of the total population. While in the last phase, the plan envisages vaccination of 50 percent of the population in order to reach 900 thousand people or coverage of 70 percent of the total population with vaccines administered against COVID-19.

This plan for vaccination was not in line with the number of doses of vaccines that were available in Kosovo. This has caused many problems to emerge during the implementation of this plan.

Further, on May 12, 2021 Kosovo received the second contingent from the COVAX alliance and vaccination continued in accordance with the National Vaccination Plan against COVID-19.

On May 28, 2021, 100,620 vaccines were delivered to Kosovo thanks to the COVAX Gavi Alliance. Vaccination teams across the country have vaccinated priority groups and citizens with chronic diseases as defined in the State Vaccination Plan. 34

On June 10, 2021, the Ambassador of the Republic of Croatia to Kosovo, Danijela Barišić, handed over 10 thousand vaccines as a donation from the state of Croatia.35 Upon arrival this symbolic donation from Croatia, the Minister of Health Mr. Arben Vitia announced that mass vaccination of the citizens of the Republic of Kosovo will begin soon.

On June 15, we started the implementation of the new mass vaccination plan, which expands the categories for vaccination with citizens with chronic diseases regardless of age, teachers, law enforcement and members of the KSF, directly involved in pandemic management. Further, on June 28, 2021, the first contingent of vaccines against COVID-19 of Pfizer / BioNTech arrived, from the contract signed between the Ministry of Health of Kosovo and Pfizer.36

Since the arrival of the vaccines from the contract of the Ministry of Health with Pfizer, the process of mass vaccination has gone without any significant problems.

The National Vaccination Plan, there are no special strategy for minority communities in Kosovo to be vaccinated. Based on an article from Radio Evropa e lire – Free Europe Radio "Dezinformatat i largojnë komunitetet nga vaksinimi – Misinformation keeps communities from getting vaccinated"[37] shows that the conspiracy theories circulating around the world regarding COVID-19 vaccines are being considered among the main reasons for expressed reluctance to immunize among the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Kosovo.

However, on May 2021 the government issues another plan for "Action Plan for vaccination of citizens with the vaccine against COVID-19"[38]. According to this action plan, the government has

[34] https://msh.rks-gov.net/sq/arrijne-edhe-100-620-vaksina-permes-covax/
[35] https://msh.rks-gov.net/sq/kosova-pranon-10-mije-vaksina-kunder-covid-19-donacion-nga-kroaci/
[36] https://msh.rks-gov.net/sq/arrin-kontigjenti-i-pare-i-vaksinave-kunder-covid-19-nga-kontrata-e-msh-me-pfizer/
[37] https://www.evropaelire.org/a/dezinformatat-komunitetet-vaksinimi-covid19-/31401419.html
[38] https://msh.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Plani-i-veprimit-per-vaksinimin-e-qytetareve-ne-mase-me-vaksinen-kunder-COVID-19.pdf

allocated 10,000 EUR to engage influencers to impact vaccination for marginalized groups and the COVID-19 vaccine reluctance community.

According to Radio Free Europe[39] with an interview with Ministry of Health they have been told that the online vaccination application process does not provide for declaration of ethnicity, so there is no separate data on vaccination of majority or non-majority communities in Kosovo. However, according to this ministry, the reluctance to vaccinate among the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities "is quite expressed and as a community, they do not show a high response even in the context of regular vaccination of children in what is known as the Extended Vaccination Program in Kosovo".

On July 8, 2021, it was announced by the Minister of Health Mr. Arben Vitia, who stressed in front of the media that all citizens will be able to apply for the coronavirus vaccine with special emphasis on the non-majority Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities through the engagement of several teams for mobile vaccination of citizens.

The Ministry of Health, on 2 Spetember, 2021 through a post in Official Social Media page on Facebook[40] stated that the Ministry has continued mobile vaccination in the municipalities of the Republic of Kosovo for the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. As follows, the mobile teams have so far vaccinated citizens in Prizren, Fushë Kosovë/Kosovo Polje and Gjakovë/Đakovica, thus reaching the number of vaccinated in the field close to 900 citizens. It was emphasized that the vaccination will continue in the municipalities of Pejë/Peć, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica and Gjakovë/ Đakovica in rural areas with a combined schedule of health care workers.

Even though the mobile teams have facilitated the vaccination process a lot for non-majority communities in Kosovo, the vaccination still remains an issue that needs to be improved and to be emphasized by the Ministry of Health and Ministry for Communities and returns.

[39] IBID

[40] https://www.facebook.com/Ministria.Shendetesise.RKS/posts/2078103852347191

Recommendations

- ECMI Kosovo recommends that Kosovo Institutions react promptly and provide need-based food, hygienic and financial packages to members of minority communities due to evident lack of financial income deriving from Government decisions that caused lockdowns.
- ECMI Kosovo recommends that Kosovo Institutions react promptly to identify the gaps created by COVID-19 in regards to distance learning for students that are members of minority communities. Relevant Institutions need to identify the exact number of students that have not been able to attend online distance learning throughout the pandemic; identify the reasons why these students have not been able to attend; provide extra classes to compensate for the lost period of studies; provide relevant equipment to students such as: internet connections, and relevant equipment needed to participate in online distance learning.
- ECMI Kosovo recommends that Kosovo Institutions actively update their official information in all official languages in order to ensure access to all Kosovo citizens to relevant information regarding COVID-19
- ECMI Kosovo recommends that Public Health Institutions provide free testing and check-up related to COVID-19 and its effects on health.