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Bulgarian Roma at the Dawn of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: With the establishment of the state of emergency in Bulgaria on 8 March 2020 due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, several restrictive measures aimed at social distancing were being introduced, to which the public had a contractionary reaction. The so-called “COVID-19 nests” led to the quarantine of a number of settlements. The ski-resort town of Bansko and the village of Panicherevo were the first isolated settlements targeted by our study. We focused on the reactions of the local Roma population, which were largely determined by their perceptions and understandings of infectious disease. The research methodology included ethnographic field research carried out in 2021. The data from the semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions presented local responses to the pandemic, which to a large extent also represented the diversity of attitudes not only in the Roma community but also in Bulgarian society. The main questions we focused on were the great extent to which Roma are creating ethno-cultural strategies to cope/overcome the pandemic and how they are responding to the emergency measures and subsequent vaccination at the national and local levels.

Keywords: Roma; Bulgaria; COVID-19; quarantine; disaster; overcoming strategies



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1. Introduction

The spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus on a global scale did not pass Bulgaria by. As in other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic had a multifaceted impact on various political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of the life of Bulgarian society. It became a test not only for the health system of the country but also for the economic and social preparedness of government institutions for crisis response. Managing and overcoming the consequences required the construction of various strategies and important decisions.

The analysis of the impact of the pandemic in Bulgaria shows a clear trend of its heavy impact on a number of groups and communities. Among the worst affected are vulnerable disadvantaged individuals and minority groups due to their unequal access to resources (Asenov 2022; Grekova et al. 2021; Krumova and Kolev 2021; Raycheva 2021; USA Report 2021).

Therefore, Roma communities living in urban and rural settlements, which were quarantined for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, were selected as the object of the study. Their response to this pandemic disaster was analyzed more recently at the local level rather than the community level because of the scope of the measures applied. Analyzing their vulnerability involves using traditional indicators that include demographic, socioeconomic, and housing characteristics such as income, poverty, job and livelihood security, age and gender, race/ethnicity, housing and homelessness, and social and political networks and institutions (IFRC 2016). This vulnerability also affects quality of life, which has long-lasting consequences that are difficult to overcome.

2. Research Target

The Roma in Bulgaria are the subject of many interdisciplinary scientific studies in various spheres and sectors of their history, culture, and life. As part of Bulgarian society,

the Roma community is also an issue to ongoing political, economic, and social policies and processes both at the national and local levels. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is presented as a target of research primarily in the framework of policies to overcome the consequences of the disease and social restrictions, rather than in the specifics of the local level. The situation of the Roma community during the pandemic in the country has been analyzed in a number of reports by state and non-governmental organizations. They primarily lead to two directions—restriction of rights and discrimination, and attitudes towards vaccination.

In order to enrich the scholarly issues, our research set a goal of describing, presenting, and discussing the attitudes and reactions of the Roma residents in the city of Bansko, Southeastern Bulgaria, and the village of Panicherevo, South Central Bulgaria. However, the study is not comparative, as it explores different types of settlements and different communities. In the selected settlements, as well as in many others in the country, there is a mixed Bulgarian and Roma population, which in the research perspective creates conditions for different types of exploration. It was important for us to trace the reactions of the local community to an unprecedented situation to which they adapted different strategies. The study aims to present and analyze the specific Roma mechanisms for dealing with the pandemic within the larger Bulgarian communities closely related to the local specifics. It should be noted that the selected settlements were the first ones quarantined in Bulgaria, where the entry and exit of their residents were banned for two weeks in the spring of 2020. Their specific situation was determined by the fact that, in addition to national ones, further emergency measures were introduced that were equally mandatory for the local population regardless of their origin.

The subject of the study was related to several research tasks. First of all, the research presents the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria and the local specifics of the selected places as a necessary context. In the next part, we focus on clarifying the Roma population's understanding of the COVID-19 virus and pandemic, and its global and local reflections and consequences. The text follows the positions of the Roma within the settlements during the closure and their reactions to the emergency measures in comparison to the surrounding population. We also try to find out whether local Roma were developing their own strategies to cope with/overcome the pandemic and the measures introduced or not. Last but not least, we pay attention to the subsequent vaccination and the attitude towards it.

3. Methodology

The research approach at work relied primarily on an ethnographic qualitative method that allows researchers to “see through the eyes of the subjects” (Bryman 2012) so as to describe and analyze the memory of what happened and the causes, effects, and consequences of the tragedy. The qualitative method was also used in the design of the case study, as the cases are useful for exploring why, how, and what questions are typical of such studies (Jin 2009).

Implemented within the framework of the project ‘COVID-19: The Challenge 2020. Community Attitudes, Strategies and Responses’ (КП-06-ДК2/1-30.03.2021, financed by BNSF), the study is based on different types of sources. Ethnographic field studies in the city of Bansko, Southwestern Bulgaria, and the village of Panicherevo, South Central Bulgaria, were conducted in 2021 (10 days in each settlement). Classical ethnographic methods such as in-depth and semi-structured interviews with 20 representatives of the local communities were used in their implementation. In Bansko and in Panicherevo, the choice of respondents was made using the snowball-sampling method or a chain-sampling method, in which an interviewee connects the researchers with their kin, friends or other acquaintances as community members. This method is also suitable for the study of small, vulnerable, or hidden communities that are difficult to access, especially during and after disaster conditions (Stallings 2007, pp. 55–82). Interviews followed pre-formulated problem points related to the understanding of the pandemic, attitudes,

emotions, reactions, ways to deal with the crisis situation, and short-term and long-term results. The interlocutors often connected their answers with biographical stories and the larger national and global contexts. The collected interviews were deciphered and analyzed with a qualitative typological method of research on the relevant problem points mentioned above. In addition, in order to create a clear context for the study, meetings and conversations were held with the surrounding Bulgarian population and representatives of local authorities, various institutions and organizations, and local businesses (cf. [Boyce and Neale 2006](#)). One focus-group discussion was organized in both settlements ([Krueger and Casey 2000](#)). Finally, as additional information, various local and national media and social networks were used, which shared information about the situation during the closure of the settlements and in the subsequent period.

In the context of the emergency situation in Bulgaria and the still-existing measures and restrictions aimed at social distancing, we also carried out surveillance on public places, social relationships, and, in general, on the everyday life of the average person.

It should be noted that, chronologically, our research as a field study and analysis was conducted in two stages—during and after an emergency situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made us rethink some of our initial conclusions. It was a challenge for us as researchers to interview representatives of communities that had recently been quarantined, according to the majority of them, incorrectly. Some of them were suspicious and apprehensive about what might follow our visit. Therefore, in order to “get closer” to the respondents, in some cases we also did not wear masks.

This section may be divided by subheadings. It should provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation, and the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

4. Research Design

The analytical frameworks in which we developed our research are part of the anthropology of disasters and catastrophes, as they focus on socio-cultural problems. Disasters manage to impress with their brutality and unpredictability and evoke extraordinary reactions not only among the affected population but also among government authorities and even among researchers, usually evoking fear, panic, and religious feelings and concerns. Social scientists and humanities, for their part, seek to study both the responses and perceptions of what is happening at the individual and collective level, and the consequences associated with destruction and death. The research assumes that disasters are products of the political, economic, and social environment due to the lifestyles of different groups; they do not exist in isolation but affect individuals and communities ([Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2020](#); see also [Oliver-Smith 1977, 1996, 2005](#)). Disaster is also studied by scholars as an aftermath, i.e., the focus is on what follows the disaster itself. According to E. Simpson, “anthropologists generally study what happened next; in doing so, they necessarily focus on acts of mourning and remembering, social organization and distributive mechanisms, as well as acts of creation and reconstruction. They might ask people to recall the moment of disaster, but such research itself is an act of reconstruction. In other words, studies of a disaster tend to rely on the moment of disaster as a point into which the past implodes and a new narrative begins. This is in part due to the epistemological structure of most disaster research, which only begins after the disaster. Studies by anthropologists of the same place before and after disasters are to my knowledge few and would clearly be of quite a different order to most of the current literature” ([Simpson 2012](#), pp. 330–31).

Disasters can be broadly defined as natural, biological, technological, or social. The COVID-19 pandemic is a type of biological disaster that has led to various demographic, social, and economic consequences ([Ritchie and Gill 2021](#)). According to [Ritchie and Gill \(2021\)](#), disasters can be explored in six different dimensions: etiology or origins, physical-damage characteristics, disaster phases or cycles, vulnerability, community impacts, and individual impacts. These dimensions and their local manifestations can be easily traced in the development of the COVID-19 pandemic globally and in the Bulgarian context

starting from the discussion of the virus origin and passing through the physical and psychological implications of the disease, reaching the different stages of its development and rationalization. One of the more important aspects of pandemic research is that COVID-19 has threatened more vulnerable individuals and communities such as elderly people, children, individuals with underlying pre-existing conditions, and racial and ethnic minorities (cf. [Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2020](#), p. 6; [Wilder 2021](#)). By “vulnerability,” social scientists mean the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that affect their ability to anticipate, cope with, withstand, and recover from the effects of a natural hazard (extreme natural event or process). Placed within the methodological framework of disaster anthropology, our research aims to explore vulnerable groups at risk, such as the Roma population ([Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2020](#); [Wisner et al. 2005](#)). Finally, the study pays attention to the impact of pandemics as a disaster phenomenon on the lives of the affected individuals and social groups and communities, as well as cultural patterns and coping strategies resulting from accumulated individual and cultural experiences. The research was conducted from the perspective and with the methodology of social anthropology, a newer field of scholarly interest for Bulgarian anthropologists and ethnologists ([Tzaneva et al. 2009, 2012, 2023](#)). In these directions and as a continuation of the research already conducted on the so-called “narratives of the crisis,” our aim is to analyze different aspects of the confrontation with the pandemic, as well as the adaptation or lack thereof to the introduced emergency measures, using the examples of Roma from two settlements. Although we are familiar with a number of ethnic studies on Roma life in Bulgaria ([Marushiakova and Popov 1993](#)), in this case, we consider it more appropriate to refrain from the historical and cultural approaches applied into them.

5. COVID-19 Pandemic in Bulgaria

The first confirmed case of the disease in Bulgaria was on 8 March 2020. As of 15 November 2022, there were 1,284,051 confirmed cases of the COVID-19 disease, and the number of deaths was 37,965. Bulgaria ranks 87th in the world for number of infected per-million inhabitants (over 187,000) and second in the world (after Peru) in the dead rate. Here, as in other countries, there was increased mortality during the pandemic, i.e., the deaths for a given period were more than the expected deaths for the same period without the pandemic. However, in many countries, the increase in mortality was even greater than the recorded cases of deaths from COVID-19 ([Todorov 2022](#)). Two doses of the vaccines were given to 2,073,773 people in Bulgaria, 34% of the population, leaving the country in the last place in the EU.

The pandemic went through five main waves: March–April 2020, November–December 2020, March–April 2021, October–November 2021, and January–March 2022.

There are several main events that should be noted regarding the development of the pandemic in Bulgaria. The first is related to the establishment of the National Operational Headquarters (NOH) on 25 February 2020, which was meant to manage the crisis situation and related decisions at the national, regional, and local levels. On 13 March 2020, the government declared a state of emergency throughout the country for a period of one month, which was extended on 3 April until 13 May 2020, and subsequently extended periodically. The beginning of the pandemic also saw the closure of cities with checkpoints. The first such case was the city of Bansko, a winter resort with a large number of foreign tourists, which was quarantined on 17 March 2020. During the Easter holidays, regional cities were also blocked, including Sofia.

Some of the Roma neighborhoods in the country were also quarantined. This happened in the period of March–June 2020 and affected the Roma communities in Plovdiv, Sliven, Kazanlak, Nova Zagora, Kyustendil, etc. In the following months, the measures introduced by the emergency government regarding the pandemic situation were extended several times (see [Ilieva and Baeva 2021](#)). On 17 November 2022, a green certificate was also introduced for restaurants, malls, accommodations, and large non-food stores, and for a number of public places and events. On 30 March 2022, the Council of Ministers came

out with a decision that from 1 April 2022, the emergency pandemic status was canceled. Thus, the mandatory wearing of a protective mask in enclosed public spaces, observance of physical distance, and restrictions on the number of people who could simultaneously visit enclosed places such as shops and educational institutions were eliminated (Maeva 2022).

The measures taken by the Bulgarian government to reduce the spread of COVID-19 were far weaker than those in other countries but involved quarantine/lockdown, travel bans, social distancing, school closures, and closure of public places. Families and communities in Bulgaria were facing health challenges due to the pandemic related to staying at home, social isolation, and distancing, as well as health-care issues, lack of medicine, and insufficient staff. They had an inevitable impact on family and community well-being and quality of life because they were associated with confinement at home, restriction of freedom of movement, economic difficulties, reduction or loss of financial means, lack of work or working in an online environment, increased levels of vulnerability, and poor mental health (loneliness, stress, depression, and anxiety) (cf. Gayatri and Irawaty 2021).

6. The Roma Population and COVID-19 in Bulgaria

This text presents an overall picture of the Roma population in Bulgaria during the pandemic of COVID-19 and then examines the specific studied cases—the city of Bansko and the village of Panicherevo and their specifics in the studied period. As we said above, after the more important events related to the pandemic and the Roma population in the country, the periodic closures of the Roma neighborhoods in cities such as Plovdiv, Sliven, Kazanlak, Nova Zagora, and Kyustendil in the period of March–June 2020 should be noted as a research object of the Roma’s rights restriction there. Regarding COVID-19 and the Roma in Bulgaria, one of the first studies focused on different Roma neighborhoods in Bulgaria was carried out for the period March–December 2020 (Grekova et al. 2021). Other studies in the same direction followed, focusing on the impact of the pandemic on the overall development of the community, with an emphasis on the economic situation (Asenov 2022; Willis 2020). Among them, the report of the Bulgarian Ombudsman assessing the impact of measures against the spread of COVID-19 on the rights of vulnerable groups of children in Bulgaria should be noted, in which special attention is paid to closed neighborhoods during the pandemic. Part of the analysis focuses on the media image of the Roma during the pandemic and the reflection of stereotypes towards them in the public space (see *Media and Online Narratives ...* 2020; Tomova and Stoychev 2022; Georgieva 2022; Stanchev 2021).

Reviewing the available analyses and studies, it should be noted that the Roma communities that we studied in the city of Bansko and the village of Panicherevo have remained out of experts’ and scholars’ view. In one of the first reports on the spread of the virus in Roma neighborhoods ‘COVID-19 in Roma Neighborhoods in Bulgaria’ (Grekova et al. 2021)—regardless of its contributions, the approach of separately studying the so-called Roma neighborhoods should not be taken uncritically. The reader is left with the impression that the extraordinary measures presented, implemented on a national and local scale, are purposeful specifics in the management of the crisis. In the end, several villages with a dominant Bulgarian population were placed under quarantine. In the same report, the Roma stand out and their vulnerability during the first wave of the pandemic is emphasized, but whether there are social stigmas associated with neighborhoods with a dominant Roma population are not confirmed. However, at the beginning and throughout 2020, when public information about the virus was mixed, the patients were not treated with sympathy but rather with a judgmental attitude. For example, Bulgarian emigrants returning from abroad, especially from countries such as Italy and Spain, were considered potential carriers of the virus.

6.1. The Case of the City of Bansko

The city of Bansko is located in Southwestern Bulgaria at the foot of the Pirin Mountains at 1200 m above sea level. It is a municipal center and includes several settlements.

Several specifics of the city should be noted. It is one of the top tourist destinations in Bulgaria. First, Bansko is a ski resort, but in the last 10 years, the city has developed as a year-round tourist destination. In the city, a round of the World Cup in alpine skiing disciplines and the start of the World Cup in snowboarding are held.

The municipality of Bansko is also in the top 10 municipalities that have attracted the most funds from European funds per capita. As a tourist center, the city is well organized. It has good infrastructure and regulated traffic, including transit and cargo, and a well-maintained street network with pedestrian areas, parking areas, and bike lanes. In the municipality of Bansko, both museum sites and architectural reserves are very well maintained. There are three churches, two schools, and three vocational high schools in the town (Bansko 2022).

Over 60% of the population of Bansko municipality is involved in tourism. The processing industry, agriculture, animal husbandry, potato production, and furniture production are well developed (Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism ... 2022). Nevertheless, residents are also active in migration processes outside of Bulgaria. They are directed primarily outside of the country—to Great Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Regarding the population of the city, the statistics show relative stability, although in the last few years, the trend has shown an increase (from 9344 people in 2020 to 9459 in 2021) ((NSI n.d.)). The increase in the population of Bansko was also confirmed by the national census in 2021, according to which it was one of the cities with a growth in residents.

According to the ethnic composition, about 97% of the people living here are Bulgarians, about 2.3% are Roma, and a minimal percentage are Turks. This means that 227 Roma live in the city (ESGRAON n.d.). The main religion practiced in Bansko is Christianity. Apart from Orthodox Christianity, Protestant denominations are also widespread. There is a large, old, evangelical congregational community in the town that was established in 1868.

The Roma in Bansko also belong to Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Protestantism. The main part of the community is the so-called *yerlii*, or locals. They define themselves as Bulgarian Gypsies or Bulgarians. According to Marushiakova and Popov (1993), in Pirin Macedonia (the former Blagoevgrad District), as well as in the former Kyustendil District, Horohane Roma (or “Turkish Gypsies”) predominate, “However, here, in most cases, they are such only by origin, but they accepted Christianity in the recent past (end of the XIX—beginning of the XX century or after the First World War) and currently one can often find their self-identification as “Turkish Gypsies-Christians”. Such groups can be found in Razlog, Bansko, Blagoevgrad, and the corresponding regions, and it is not uncommon for Roma Muslims to meet (for example in Petrich). Gypsies in Bansko celebrate both Christian and Muslim holidays” (Roma in Blagoevgrad n.d.).

The Roma population in Bansko is located in a separate neighborhood near the city center. Most of the houses are well maintained, fit the local architecture specifics, and have built infrastructure. The labor engagement of the population and its participation in mobility and migration processes do not differ from those of the surrounding Bulgarian population.

The opinion of local authorities and mediators is that the Roma community is well integrated and does not create problems for the city but rather contributes to its development: “I have been dealing with Roma integration for 27 years. And I can say that the Roma quarter in Bansko is at the highest level in Bulgaria” (m., 44 years old) (cf. Action Plan ... 2021).

6.1.1. COVID-19 Quarantine of the City

On 16 March 2020, it was announced that there was a case of a child from the UK infected with COVID-19 in the resort town of Bansko, and the virus was also found among tourists from Israel, as well as a ski instructor. The discussion of closing the city began. Even the Attorney General joined the discussion, calling for radical measures to prevent damage (Marinova 2020). On 17 March 2020, following the recommendation of the operational staff to combat the spread of COVID-19 and by order of the Minister of Health, Bansko was

placed under full quarantine for a period of 14 days ([Order of the Minister of Health 1 No RD 01-124 2020](#)). According to local authorities, the city was the first to start operating in a new time and under quarantine. At the time of implementing the closure of the city, there were about 10,000 tourists in it, a large number of them foreigners. The tourists, baffled by the closure of the city, came from Britain, Serbia, and the Russian Federation, etc., as well as from farther destinations such as Polynesia and New Zealand ([Darik Radio 2021](#)). According to the data of the hotel owners, that season the number of tourists was about 30% higher than in 2019. During the quarantine of the city, the forced and gradual removal of the tourists and their transportation to their places of origin began. Checkpoints were placed at the city's entrances, which allowed only employees of the Regional Health Inspection, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and medical specialists to enter its territory. Only food and medicine suppliers were allowed to enter. Residents of the city who at the time of the announcement of the strict measures were outside of Bansko had 25 h to return to the resort town ([Darik Radio 2021](#)). After lifting the quarantine, mass testing of the population began to investigate whether mass immunity had been built up, but it turned out that a minimal part of the population had already passed the disease ([OFFnews 2020](#)). In the coming months, the city took measures to protect the health of tourists but concerns about tightening remained. The number of cases was being monitored with concern in the city, and the tourism business union in Bansko even submitted a report to the prosecutor's office in connection with media publications related to the level of the incidence of COVID-19 in the mountain city ([Tribune 2022](#)).

6.1.2. Attitude of the Roma towards Quarantine: Coping Strategies

According to [Oliver-Smith \(2002\)](#), disaster is a complex social phenomenon and influences biological, political, economic, and social aspects of human life. Social construction of the COVID-19 pandemic as a disaster and the strategies for overcoming it were presented in the narratives of the local Roma population in Bansko. The narratives are strongly related to the experience of the affected group and represent a socially imagined reality (cf. [Oliver-Smith 2002](#), pp. 23–26).

The Roma population in the city was divided in terms of opinions about the disease and about the quarantine. One part supported the measures, whereas others expressed their concern for their livelihood and were skeptical about the disease and the pandemic. One of the interlocutors shared that during the closure of the city, "There were almost no sick people. We were closed purely as a precaution. It was preventive for the population. And it was good for the population that it happened that way. At first, some did not understand it, but then they were glad that it happened. A blessing in disguise. That's how they got ahead of the worst" (m., 44 years old). The other point of view involved a conspiracy towards the development of Bansko as a tourist destination: "We did not believe there was such a disease. We thought that they wanted to stain the city, that the hotels would not develop, and that there would be no jobs, because then there were no infected people" (f., 25 years old). These views about the pandemic continued to spread among the community well into the summer of 2021. They were also reinforced by the fake chemtrail idea of COVID-19 being sprayed by plane as the reason for the spread of the pandemic.

The representatives of the Roma community accepted the closure of the city with great concern: "It was a kind of horror for us. We were like prisoners. You could neither go in nor go out" (f., 25 years old). The people's consideration was also reinforced by the fact that the quarantine of Bansko was happening for a few hours and before the end of the tourist season. The rapid closure of the city affected the Roma population seriously, as they are a vulnerable group and especially in terms of their ability to anticipate, cope, withstand, and recover (cf. [Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2020](#), p. 6). So, they failed to react and were put in a disadvantageous position: "There were people in a very crisis situation. It was a big fear for them because it is not easy to suddenly lose your job. They are maids, washers, drivers, busy with landscaping" (f., 43 years old). According to the health mediator, a

large part of the Roma ended up unemployed with the closure of the city. Although funds were allocated to support the unemployed, the main problem was employment without a contract, which prevented some Roma from receiving compensation: “The closing of the city happened overnight, and things went wrong. They did not think that they would close the city, and that there would be difficult days. They were desperate . . . It was stressful for everyone. People were stressed about not having income” (f., 43 years old).

The description of the COVID-19 quarantine in Bansko followed a similar model in the Roma’s narratives, in which emotions played a key role. According to integrated crisis-mapping (ICM) model, people experience four dominant emotions when facing a crisis: anger, fear, anxiety, and sadness (Jin 2009; Kušen and Strembeck 2021). Regarding the disease, the interlocutors talked about the fear of the disease and the unknown, “fear that was at the beginning, what is this, what will happen if we get sick” (f., 55 years old). The interviewed representatives of the community shared that almost everyone got through it, and some of those who became sick were treated in a hospital. The exact number of people who contracted the disease is not clear because people rarely were tested. Among the Roma community, the dead were also noted: “I have an acquaintance, the boy with whom we worked together in the municipality, he died of COVID. And left me alone. There were two of us who took care of the neighborhood, now I’m alone” (m., 44 years old).

The emotional community support had a great influence on coping with the new situation. Overcoming the COVID-19 crisis happened on the basis of solidarity regardless of ethnic or religious background. Both Bulgarians and Roma looked forward to the church bell ringing during the quarantine at 7 p.m., with the authorities aiming to keep the faith and the cheerful spirit of the people: “When you hear the bell and say to yourself: ‘We are alive’” (m., 44 years old).

Another important issue that provoked negative emotions among the interlocutors was financial. Financial stress affected families directly through the individual loss of work, as well as indirectly through uncertainty about the national economy and/or local unemployment levels (Schneider et al. 2017). Scared of unemployment and illness, the first days of quarantine were stressful for everyone in Bansko. Fear and uncertainty gripped the townspeople. The interlocutors shared that they experienced great stress: “You open the phone—COVID; you turn on the TV—COVID. You are constantly stressed. Everyone fears for the parents, for the children, for us” (female, 25, secondary education). The community developed practices for dealing with the emotional consequences of the COVID-19 disaster (cf. Revet and Langumier 2015, p. 4). Dealing with the economic situation was another important issue for the Roma in the city of Bansko. The economic support provided by two main actors—institutions and the community—had a great influence on overcoming the vulnerability. The interlocutors shared that during the quarantine, part of the community received help from the authorities in the form of food products and a hot lunch as social assistance. According to the municipality, during the anti-pandemic measures, 30 people of Roma origin who were poor and unemployed received support under the “Hot lunch” project, were given personal protective equipment, and were informed about measures to prevent infection with COVID-19. In 2020, under the project “Patronage care for the elderly and persons with disabilities—component 3” under OP “HRD” 95 needy received assistance, of which 34 persons were of Roma origin (Action Plan ... 2021).

Community-based strategies to overcome disaster were also visible in Bansko, as some of the social-mobilization representatives of the Roma community supported each other in the crisis. Some of the interviewees mentioned that they had personally helped the people of the neighborhood with food and medicine: “I went to Blagoevgrad, to the big chain stores and bought food, because I have big buses that transport tools and with a document, I had the right to leave Bansko. I have shepherd friends who have animals and we have slaughtered animals so that there is food for the people. I used female chefs who cooked. And no one knew that then. I’m saying it now, but let it stay between us” (m., 44 years old). Supporting the Roma also included individual employers who provided food and medicine, thus helping their unemployed employees.

One of the family challenges they had to deal with was the online education of the children. When distance learning started, pupils faced the same problems as everyone else. The main difficulty was related to the lack of laptops and tablets for conducting classes. These were resolved relatively quickly, and all students receive the necessary devices. Parents shared their concerns about long periods of time in front of mobile devices and depressive states because of the lockdown (cf. [Maeva 2022](#)).

Hygienic and social-distancing measures did not meet resistance in the community. They were considered to be part of the community strategy to survive the pandemic and ensure safety. The opinion of the local authorities and the health mediator was that the Roma in the city were quite disciplined compared to the Roma in other parts of the country and they respected the social-distancing and hygiene requirements. This applied even to students aged 17–18: “People complied with the requirements and postponed weddings” (female, 55 years old); “We had bought a box of masks and everywhere with masks. Better take no chances” (f., 25 years old). However, it was observed that masks were not worn in churches and during religious services (Figure 1). Due to small spaces, social-distancing options were also limited.



Figure 1. A Pentecostal church in a Roma neighborhood, Bansko city, 2021. Author: Mila Maeva.

The survival strategy has had a long-term effect. It has provoked a change in daily communication that could be observed among the Roma community: “Before the pandemic, we had large gatherings with friends. That was wasted. There can hardly be such gatherings anymore. Since the pandemic, it has already become a habit to stay away” (m., 44 years old). However, in the opinion of one of the interlocutors, the reason was not the disease but the official authorities who monitored and imposed sanctions: “People were afraid of the police, not of the pandemic. The police were constantly watching. It was a pressure, a tension. People couldn’t even go to the shop to get a coffee. They kept us like prisoners. And if they see you, the act is ready” (m., 44 years old). However, family gatherings happened illegally during the lockdown: “Some were hiding and gathering. There were gatherings, but between families” (female, 55 years old).

In the long-term period, the pandemic and the lockdown took a toll on the community’s fragile economy (cf. [Revet and Langumier 2015](#)). Some of the informants shared that

during the lockdown, some families remained on the financial support of the elderly and child allowance: “It was good that we had the grandmother’s pension and the children’s allowances, so that we had the money for bread.” More and more people relied on credits and social assistance: “Bansko is designed for you to spend your money here, and we are used to limiting ourselves. We are heroes here because we survive on low incomes” (m., 44 years old). The pandemic deprived some of the interviewees of the little savings they had, and this increased the fear of its development: “If they close us again in September—it will be the end, hunger” (female, 25 years old); “There was hunger before, but now it will be even more, we will die” (f., 55 years old).

According to the interlocutors, in 2021 there were limited job opportunities. However, the data from the municipality showed a low percentage of unemployment. As of 31 May 2021, there were 27 unemployed Roma, or about 4.57% of all unemployed in the municipality. A total of 23 of them had primary education or lower. There were 14 women and 13 men. The lack of livelihood, however, explained the migration outside of the country’s borders. According to the interlocutors, in 2021 the city had been abandoned by 15 families who went to work and live abroad ([Action Plan ... 2021](#)).

Regarding vaccination against COVID-19, the prevailing opinion among the Roma community was negative. Only five to six people had been immunized in the neighborhood by the summer of 2021, regardless of the information campaigns carried out by the local and health authorities. The reasons were primarily related to mistrust and suspicion: “I have information first-hand—from my sister. She works at the largest hospital in Italy, Garibaldi. And I can say that I know all about vaccines. Now everything is a fight between companies. They showed me videos showing that by putting the vaccine on the arm and then sticking a penny there and the inside like a magnet holds it. And my sister has refused to be vaccinated. She took a leave and returned to Bulgaria. And she said, ‘If there’s a way I can’t get vaccinated, I won’t get vaccinated’. Because it’s still voluntary with them. Anyone who wants to get vaccinated. A medicine will also come out. Maybe this will help fight viruses” (m., 44 years old). The concern of the Roma was related to the reproductive capacity of the young: “Come on, the lives of adults are over, but we want to have children!” (m., 23 years old). The other reason related to vaccines was related to employment. The concern of the Roma was that vaccination would be mandatory for their engagement in the tourism sector: “Already in the hotels they want you to be vaccinated in order to return to work. I don’t know what we will do...” (f., 55 years old). Their refusal deprived them of work and predetermined difficult economic survival. The assumptions of the local authorities were that to solve this problem, some of the Roma should be vaccinated without an official announcement in order not to be ostracized by the community and to restore their work commitment. The gradual recovery of tourist activity and the need for labor gradually led to a rethinking of views. However, during the field study in Bansko, financial incentives for the vaccination of workers were not noted, as was observed in some resorts and hotels on the Black Sea coast in 2021, where workers were immunized by necessity with financial incentives of BGN 500 (EUR 250).

6.2. *The Case of the Village of Panicherevo*

Panicherevo village is located in the so-called “Rose Valley” in South Central Bulgaria. The settlement is part of the administrative–territorial structures of the Gurkovo municipality and Stara Zagora district. In 2021, its population, according to official data, was 1441 people ([NSI-2 n.d.](#)), and according to unofficial sources about 2000 people. So far, no studies have been conducted on the Roma population in the village. According to our observations, most of the residents of the village are Roma. Its population is about 2000 people, and its ethnic composition is dominated by Roma. They are representatives of the large community of the so-called “Turkish Gypsies” who have a preferred Turkish consciousness ([Popov 1992](#), pp. 86–99; [Erolova 2013](#), pp. 25–46).

During our field research in 2021, we collected general data on the living standard of Panicherevo residents. A large part of the residents of the village are pensioners, and those

of working age make a living through agricultural work in rose production, some have a private business in the food trade, but mostly work abroad is preferred. Young people, especially from the Roma community, are attracted by higher wages in Germany, England, and Spain. According to different narratives, they prefer to earn EUR 100 a day abroad in the construction sector than BGN 20 in Panicherevo as agricultural workers. Labor emigration has led to a lack of labor in the local agricultural cooperative in the village, which is the reason why agricultural workers from neighboring villages have been hired. The standard of living of the emigrants and their older relatives remaining in Panicherevo is visibly higher than that of their non-emigrant cohabitants. Regular customers are in the local grocery stores and restaurants; their houses are large, with interesting modern architectural ornaments, demonstrating luxury; and their expensive cars are another visible indicator of their wealth (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Roma house in the village of Panicherevo, 2021. Author: Yelis Erolova.

Post terminals (ATMs) are also missing. Employees and pensioners receive their wages and pensions in bank accounts, which makes it necessary to visit the neighboring town of Gurkovo every time they need to withdraw funds from an ATM.

In Panicherevo, there are unused resources for the development of rural and ecotourism. The village is located near one of the largest dams in Bulgaria—Zhrebchevo—offering not only extremely beautiful views, but also conditions for fishing and camping. There are two guest houses in the village, which are occasionally visited by Bulgarian tourists. In any case, their visits have no effect on the local economy, and we cannot yet speak of organized tourism here, nor of the village's popularity as a tourist destination.

There is a primary school in the village, after which students continue their education in the neighboring town of Gurkovo. The cultural life of the village is mainly organized by the community center, which is visited mainly by the youngest residents of the village, not so much because of its library but because of the folk-dance classes. The oldest residents of the village, mostly Bulgarian, are united in their pensioners' club, where they gather periodically. The social life of some of the Roma is led by an Evangelical church, where pastors from the same community preach.

From the interviews conducted during the field research, it can be said that there is a certain social distance between the Bulgarians and the Roma in the village, which has been

increasing in recent years due to the increased standard of living of the Roma because of their migrant savings and investments. The COVID-19 pandemic has further distanced the two communities due to Roma being considered more mobile and possibly “bringing the virus from abroad”, as well as their active communication within their community, including between emigrants and non-emigrants.

6.2.1. COVID-19 Quarantine of the Village

Panicherevo was placed under a two-week quarantine by order of the Minister of Health on 14 April 2020 ([Order of the Minister of Health 1 No RD-01-217 2020](#)). This was the second settlement in Bulgaria after the town of Bansko that was quarantined after the start of the State of Emergency. The reason for the quarantine of the village was that a local male resident, who was in the hospital in the district center of Stara Zagora and diagnosed with COVID-19, escaped from the hospital and went home to Panicherevo by taxi. He was later found in the village, detained by the police, and taken back to the hospital.

On the morning of 15 April, the village was placed on lockdown, and most residents learned about the quarantine from television news and unofficial sources. Permanent residents had the right to return to the village by 8 p.m. on 15 April or after two weeks. During the quarantine, entry and exit from the village were prohibited. Police were guarding the entrance roads to the villages. The only exceptions to the ban were employees of the regional health inspectorates, employees of the Ministry of the Interior, medical specialists from emergency medical centers or other medical organizations, and pharmacists. People working in nearby towns had certificates from their employers. According to the stories collected, the people living in the village had the right to leave their homes only in exceptional cases—to buy food products that their relatives from other settlements brought to them at the end of the village or if they need medical help. Some of the residents provided their debit cards to representatives of the local government, who assisted them with withdrawing funds from an ATM in the town of Gurkovo. The mayor of the village, who lives in Gurkovo, deeply sympathized with the quarantine of the village, and while it lasted he slept in the town-hall building. During the lockdown, according to an interview with a local government official, about 400 people were tested. Sixteen local residents were diagnosed with COVID-19; one of them was Bulgarian and the rest belonged to the Roma community. At the time of our visit, the number of cases had increased, but according to respondents, the deaths were due to improper treatment. During the fieldwork, the majority of interlocutors considered that it was unfair to close down an entire village because of one person who escaped from the hospital. Moreover, the man himself freely walked on the streets during the quarantine and had not fallen seriously ill. There were even rumors about whether his positive diagnosis was accurate: “He had trouble hearing and while he was in the hospital, he did not realize he could not leave it” (f., 51 years old).

In Panicherevo, there was a permanently assigned doctor, but at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic they were not a determining factor in shaping the understanding of this infectious disease.

6.2.2. Attitude of the Roma towards Quarantine: Coping Strategies

Considering the COVID-19 pandemic as a type of biological disaster, at first sight, the case of Panicherevo is relevant to the thesis in previous studies that ethnic communities, religious groups, and socially unequal groups are more vulnerable than the rest of the population ([Perry and Mushkatell 2006](#); [Fothergill et al. 1999](#), pp. 156–73). However, more in-depth research shows that the labor-related migration of Panicherevo residents abroad, which can also be a type of anti-poverty coping strategy, is key and was to become a relevant choice of the Roma population during the pandemic. Denial of COVID-19 dominated the attitudes of the Roma, and this seemed to be the way to overcome fear and stress in the initial spread of the virus. Certainly, the Roma in Panicherevo did not perceive themselves as “more vulnerable” than the rest of the population because of their religious beliefs, and their mortality rate, according to Bulgarian respondents, was not caused by COVID-19.

During our visit to Panicherevo in October 2021, although wearing masks was compulsory everywhere in enclosed public places in Bulgaria, the situation in Panicherevo was different. People did not wear masks in general, for example, in the mayor's office, community center, restaurants, shops, religious prayer houses, etc. Restaurants, cafes, and guesthouses were open and did not require the newly introduced so-called "Green Certificates". Thus, after the quarantine, being far away from the city, where there were officials checking compliance with emergency measures, the residents of Panicherevo simply did not comply with the new requirements. These requirements were communicated as reminders by visual and textual messages pasted on the doors and windows of public and private facilities.

Among the Roma population, hidden mechanisms were partially developed to cope with the introduced measures. For example, Roma businessmen, owners of grocery stores and eateries, did not officially stop their activities, so it cannot be said that this sector was affected, as it was in many other places in the country. Since everyone in the village knows each other, customers would contact the vendors and owners of the officially defunct shops to purchase the goods they needed. The only restaurant in the center of the village, owned by local Roma, which was pointed out to us as a place to dine during our research and in the early days of the Green Certificate being introduced, refused to serve us as customers, as we were strangers and it was not clear why we were in the village. After the purpose of our visit became clear, we were invited to dinner as guests. It was very likely that after the quarantine, the settlement was not a frequent object of inspection by the health authorities, whose attention was directed to other parts of the country.

In fact, the economic situation of the Roma in Panicherevo went through its crisis periods years before the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the way out of poverty or the coping strategy turned out to be labor emigration abroad, as mentioned above. Migrant investment proved to be a major factor in meeting basic household needs and improving the quality of life before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, despite the restrictions, the Roma population in Panicherevo continued to hold public gatherings on the occasion of weddings and other family celebrations.

In general, the respondents from Panicherevo were not afraid of COVID-19. They had no memory of any other pandemic experienced in the past. The reactions of the local Roma toward the COVID-19 pandemic population in Panicherevo were defined by their perceptions of the disease and the lack of trust in state institutions. Most residents of Panicherevo did not believe in the existence of the virus, in the necessity of the introduced measures, or in the vaccination. They preferred to be informed about the disease mainly by their relatives abroad as well as by their informal community leaders: "I have three sons who travel to Germany, to Turkey, they don't have Corona virus, they don't have anything. I've been diabetic for 28 years, I don't have a mask. They keep wanting to do tests on me. They do it for money" (f., 63 years old).

According to [Stewart and Harding \(1999, pp. 285–310\)](#), disasters can involve changes related to religious beliefs or customs. In the case of Panicherevo, it could be said that the pandemic led to an affirmation of their religious affiliation with Evangelical Christianity, with their trust in God being the strongest means by which members of the religious community protected themselves from the pandemic, regardless of their precarious state of health.

Some of the Protestant Roma in Panicherevo believed that if they wore masks they would not go to Heaven and that the vaccine is a kind of chip that the government would use to keep track of them: "Whoever believes, this thing [vaccination] does not. The chips are to control us. First, they will put chips on the bigger countries, Germany, and France, and then, the last country is us. I don't know what we will do" (f., 62 years old). During our visit to the village, we were invited to pray for health and against wearing masks: "When I speak in Turkish, I feel more at ease. In Bulgarian, I'm afraid of making a mistake:

Father, today I thank you for these sisters! Bless them and keep them . . . Jesus help my home, my children. . . . Lord blesses the sick and contagious Those who believe

in you should not wear masks. Bless their souls. Bless them! Make them understand!" (f., 62 years old).

The skepticism toward state institutions was further encouraged by the rumors being spread, such as that the coffins with the dead, which were taken directly from the hospitals to the cemeteries without being allowed to be opened, were actually filled with stones or wood. What happened to the dead bodies, no one knew.

The confrontation with the pandemic and the quarantine of the settlement was not perceived by most interlocutors as a crisis. Even to the locals who did believe that the COVID-19 pandemic existed, the virus did not cause traumatic emotions. An encounter with COVID-19 was not considered a disaster or a crisis in the rural community. As such, the case in which a few years ago a heavy truck hit a Roma child in the center of the village was mentioned. The driver was narrowly saved from lynching by the victim's relatives. According to the collected narratives, the local Roma even stopped presenting themselves as Turks because of the Turkish identity of the driver.

Few of the residents of Panicherevo acknowledged that COVID-19 exists. They included mostly Bulgarians as well as some Roma of various ages. According to their stories, at the beginning of the spread of the pandemic they were afraid of becoming infected, but after the quarantine of their village they stopped being afraid. Then, they began to fear for the consequences of vaccination. However, under the influence of their relatives, they decided to get vaccinated. They also did not approve of the lockdown of their village.

One year after the quarantine of the village, both Roma and Bulgarians believed that the measures introduced were incorrect and unfair and led to negative consequences. Some of the respondents considered that because of quarantine, their village was receiving a bad name. One of the consequences was that the traditional buyers of roses refused to buy roses produced by residents of Panicherevo, under the pretext that the roses were contagious (f., 51 years old). Another consequence was that the social gatherings of the folklore group at the community center and the pensioners' club stopped their activities. According to an employee at the community center, Roma children regularly came to ask when their folk-dance classes would be resumed (employee at the local community center in Panicherevo, 49 years old). For some elderly people, the meetings of the pensioners' club were the only form of social interaction, and without them, they felt lonely (focus-group discussion with pensioners, 2021). Some local residents of Roma origin did not comply with the imposed restrictions of the lockdown in the village, and although they were fined they continued to not comply with the imposed requirements to limit social interaction.

7. Conclusions

The present research traces the development of the COVID-19 pandemic as a biological disaster by analyzing its various dimensions, such as perceptions, chronological development, physical consequences, vulnerability, and impact on individuals and local communities in the chronological development and interconnection. The studied Roma communities from the city of Bansko and the village of Panicherevo represent two local cases of reactions to the confrontation with the COVID-19 pandemic. Both settlements were quarantined at the initial stage of the spread of the disease in March and April 2020. The collected field materials show, however, a different perception of the virus, with a lack of readiness of the local population to react to introduced restrictions because of the pandemic situation, which gradually led to the creation of different reaction mechanisms. The interlocutors interviewed were divided. The urban/rural community was thus further divided by a new factor—attitudes towards the pandemic—which supports Oliver-Smith's insight that disasters lead to changes in social organization (Oliver-Smith 1977, pp. 491–509). As Ritchie and Gill (2021) shared, "the COVID-19 has provided a very unfortunate opportunity to observe social dynamics associated with pandemics". In the considered cases, it is clearly visible that the pandemic was perceived ambiguously within the different Roma communities, as the division also occurred at the local level. Some people from the local Roma communities did not agree with the imposed measures, and

others seemingly agreed but in reality did not follow them either—which was evident by them not wearing masks, circumventing temporary bans on gatherings of people and the requirement of social distancing, and the refusal of vaccination. In the case of Bansko, the stress, fear, and uncertainty of the pandemic was noted, whereas in the case of Panicherevo, there was more anxiety after the measures were introduced. Differences in terms of social distancing were also visible. Despite the restrictive measures, the Roma in the village of Panicherevo continued to gather, interact, and practice their ethno-cultural and religious customs and rituals, as is the case in other parts of the country (cf. [Asenov 2022](#)). On the other hand, in Bansko, strict measures limited interaction even in the long term.

However, unifying reaction mechanisms were also noticeable among the two studied cases. They concerned vaccines and the spread of fake news. The skepticism in the work of state institutions and the lack of comprehensive public information led to limited awareness mainly through hearsay and personal observations. Like most Bulgarian citizens, of the studied Roma communities refused to be vaccinated. The narratives mentioned conspiracy theories directed against prosperity and health.

In both studied cases, the same mechanisms for overcoming individual aspects of the disaster were observed. They touched on the economic, social, and even emotional consequences of the pandemic. Although economic support from state and municipal structures was happening, the mobilization of communities was clearly visible, in which support for the weaker and more affected was preserved. In the studied Roma communities in Bansko and Panicherevo, emigration abroad is a long-established survival strategy, and it was one of the ways to overcome the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Church and faith provided additional important emotional support and pillars during the crisis.

Compared to the surrounding communities, it is clear that there were no patterns that distinguished the Roma. The same trends of behavior and perceptions of the disaster were clearly visible among the population regardless of their ethnic or religious origin.

Studying the long-term consequences of the pandemic, differences between communities emerged. For the residents of the city of Bansko, the active participation of the Roma community in the local economy and the contracts during the pandemic affected the economic situation. In the village of Panicherevo, life after quarantine continued as it did before the COVID-19 pandemic, with new practices created to overcome the bans and measures introduced at the local and national levels.

The two studied cases demonstrate something more important. We can conclude that the construction of strategies to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic among the communities were directly dependent on the processes of economic integration into the surrounding society. They show that the Roma's intensified inclusion in the tourism sector of the city of Bansko contributes to its higher dependence on the surrounding environment, which in times of crisis makes it less prepared and more vulnerable. The opposite example of the village of Panicherevo presents a sustainable mechanism of survival, built on the basis of the accumulated community experience. It is modeled after emerging crises and was thus more resilient in a newly emerging disaster. These conclusions are important not only for local communities but also for the construction of state and municipality policies for the integration and inclusion of the Roma population, as well as for addressing consequences in the dawn of future catastrophes.

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