**INFORMATION BY THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA**

**Contribution to the letter and a questionnaire addressed by several mandate holders of the Special Procedures on Protecting human rights during and after the COVID-19**

**Impact on human rights**

Bulgaria as many other countries has been hit by the coronavirus pandemic with all negative and frightening consequences, it brings to the people. In order to fight the spread of the pandemic the Bulgarian National Assembly declared a State of Emergency on March 13, 2020, which limited free movement and introduced many other temporary restrictions to all citizens. Once the State of Emergency has been lifted (as of May 13, 2020), a “Sanitary Emergency” has been declared in order to ensure the gradual transition to normality, easing the restrictive measures imposed earlier in the process. A National Operational Headquarters for Combatting the Coronavirus Infection was formed with two main tasks – to advise the Government and the Ministry of Health on further actions, and to inform the public about the latest developments on the national health situation.

All measures and activities taken to contain the spread of COVID-19 are regulated by the Measures and Activities during the Emergency Act and the Health Act.

The Orders of the Minister of Health (published on the official website of the Ministry of Health) are mandatory for all Bulgarian citizens. The Orders to undertake additional measures, based on specific data about the spread of the infection, are issued by the Regional Health Inspections or the mayors. The Ministry of Interior monitors the execution of these Orders.

In particular, the preventive measures were introduced by Order of the Minister of Health as of 20 March 2020 and included: a ban on public parks visits as well as indoor and outdoor sports and playgrounds; checkpoints at the entrances of all 28 district towns; a ban on visits to grocery stores and pharmacies for all persons under the age of 60 between the time-frame 8:30–10:30 (only elderly persons were allowed such during this interval). Classes in all schools were suspended, same as children visits to kindergartens and nurseries. Distance learning has been installed.

Additionally, to prevent the expected increase in traffic to and from the capital for the Easter holidays, temporary traffic restrictions have been introduced. The measure was imposed on April 17, 2020 and repealed on April 21, 2020.

The ban on access to all outdoor sports and playgrounds was partially lifted on April 26, 2020, when permission was granted to visit parks and gardens for children under the age of 12 (between 9:30–18:30) and owners of dogs (before 09:30 and after 18:30). Children were to be accompanied by their parents or family members (no more than two adults at a time).

In regard with taking measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among persons with high degree of health vulnerability, the Ministry of Health, through the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regional Health Inspectorates (RHI) and the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues recommended health mediators (HM) to be included in municipal crisis headquarters.

**Given the ever-changing pace of the pandemic, we consider the measures taken in order to curb the spread of the virus to date to be proportionate and effective. Bearing in mind that the situation is very much still ongoing and highly uncertain, we reckon it is not feasible at this point to provide detailed assessment on the impact of COVID-19 on human rights.**

**Socio-economic aspect:**

On March 30, 2020, the Council of Ministers adopted Decree No. 55 defining the conditions and order of paying compensations to employers in order to secure the employment of workers and employees in the economic sectors affected as a result of the State of Emergency. The amount of the compensation is 60% of the insurable income for the month of January 2020 and of the social contributions payable by the employers for each worker or employee who has an imposed suspension of work regime or a part-time work regime, regardless of their ethnic, racial and religious origin,. During the period of suspension of work or part-time work, employers must provide the remaining 40% of the remuneration and the due insurance contributions, in order to ensure that the workers or employees concerned receive their gross salary amount in full. The measure adopted is available to employers who have a 20% drop in the turnover, regardless of the number of employees hired, therefore it is also available for small entrepreneurs.

It should be noted that in accordance with the Measures and Activities during the Emergency Act, all actions of banks, fast loans and collection companies to collect unpaid instalments and debts were frozen. It was prohibited to accrue interest for delay of instalments and penalties on loans, as well as on leases. The seizure of property of the debtors was also prohibited. Banks and other financial institutions did not have the right to terminate contracts and seize citizens' property for the period of the emergency. The ban applied to cases where receivables have been acquired by other banks or financial institutions.

There was no shortage of food during and after the State of Emergency. However, regarding sanitary products for disinfection (gels and alcohol) such was observed back in March, shortly after the emergency has been announced. Consequently, local businesses have been engaged to assist with the supply for the pharmaceutical network. At present, the demand for similar is fully met.

**Cultural aspect:**

The pandemic has affected the cultural life in the country, given that social isolation was key to counteract the virus. Respectively all activities concerning museums and galleries, cinemas, public libraries, community centres and other public places used for various cultural and social gatherings were suspended. For the period of the sanitary emergency, all cultural institutions were re-opened, but not operating in full capacity (in May the bar was set at 30%, in June it was increased to 50%).

Thus, museums presented online exhibitions, information about their own collections and upcoming new projects. Spectacles, concerts and operas reached the widest possible range of users through online platforms. For greater accessibility and expansion of audience coverage, the information submitted by cultural institutes and cultural organisations was updated on a daily basis and was reflected on the website of the Ministry of Culture and other social media.

Film festivals (Sofia Film Fest) were also supported in various forms, videos and short films were produced. Special measures have been developed and introduced in film-making, including individual and general hygiene and prevention measures.

The shutdown of cultural institutions affected state, municipal, private, non-governmental organisations as well as freelance artists.

At governmental level, by decree, it was decided that a subsidy would be granted on gross wages and on the charging of social security contributions to each state cultural institute. The grant will be valid until the month in which the level of revenue for the same period of the previous year is reached, but for no more than 6 months.

Within the framework of the National Action Plan for Employment, the Melpomene Programme continues to provide BGN 2 million for 230 jobs in state and municipal theatres, music and production companies. The programme is implemented jointly with the Ministry of Culture and the Union of Bulgarian Artists and will operate until the end of this year.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy's 60:40 programme to safeguard jobs in enterprises, including those engaged in artistic and creative activities, also provides good opportunities for project applications.

Furthermore, an amendment to the Value Added Tax Act was adopted specifically to reduce the tax rate of books from 20% to 9%, as a measure to support the book publishing business and for the benefit of consumers.

To support independent artists, upon a proposal from the Ministry of Culture, in good cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the government has allocated funds to the national budget to provide three minimum wages and accrued social securities for two months, from the time of the state of emergency until one month after its end.

**Statistical Information**

Hereby, we wish to provide general epidemiological data on COVID-19 as of June 20, 2020 gathered by the Ministry of Health. The information is as follows:

* Total number of infections: 3 984 persons (1 606 of them are economically active persons);
* Total number of recovered persons: 2 171;
* Total number of deceased persons: 207;

The majority of the deceased are due to comorbidities.

Disaggregated data by region, gender and age is still being summarized by the National Statistical Institute. The data is being collected regardless of racial, ethnical, religious and other background.

According to the data provided by the Employment Agency (EA) between February 3, 2020–June 21, 2020 the total number of unemployed persons is 199 525 as the number of the newly employed for the respective period is 99 523.

In consequence of the restrictive measures put in place in response to the COVID-19 crisis, the number of the newly employed unemployed persons, incl. persons of Roma origin, during March 13 – May 31, 2020 decreases in comparison to the same period in 2019. Employed through intermediary services of the labour offices for the mentioned period were initially 2 826 unemployed persons, who self-defined to be of Roma origin. During the same period in 2019, their number was 6 261.

**Protection of various groups at risk and indigenous people**

Elderly persons and persons with disabilities in care homes were identified as particularly vulnerable group by the Bulgarian authorities in the course of the State of the Emergency. Therefore, extra efforts were given with respect to older people, persons with disabilities and Roma communities, such as health counselling on prevention and symptoms of the illness, health care for persons without health insurance, distribution of sanitary products, food and water.

Community social services, in compliance with the State of Emergency measures, have transferred to remote mode of operation. No visitors were allowed in the buildings; mobile work was suspended; the specialists developed simplified plans to work with users; the users were consulted by telephone or other means; the users were contacted periodically so as information to be obtained on their health and that of their families, their need for food and medicines etc. In the specialised institutions and the social services of resident type for adults, the managers have not changed the normal working regime during the emergency, the staff works in shifts as scheduled. The services continue to provide 24-hour care.

During the State of Emergency to date, all types of support for people with disabilities, including personal assistance, were and are still provided, as the terms of the agreements concluded were officially extended, namely the employment contracts for assisted care.

The measures imposed regarding the elderly included setting of exclusive time-frame (from 8:30 to 10:30) for grocery shopping and visits to pharmacies. In accordance with the established provisions, the local authorities carried out home deliveries, including of warm food as well as medicines and other essential goods to older people and persons with disabilities.

In the same vein, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy together with some municipal authorities provided Roma families with food packages and water on a regular basis. The Ministry of Education ensured Internet free of charge to areas where there was no such so as to enable students to take part in online classes. Some schools launched donation campaigns for used devices in order to involve all students in the distance learning process. In order to make education available to all, reaching the disadvantaged pupils in small and remote areas, asynchronous learning has also been adopted as a form of instruction and training.

The National Roma Contact Point (NRCP) is in constant contact with many NGOs, Roma activists, health and educational mediators, ethnic experts on the ground, directors of Health Regional Inspectorates, directors of Regional Education Offices, experts from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

Health mediators of the Roma community are invaluable aides in this process, providing constant information on the situation, assistance and even mental support to Roma people. The Ministry of Health, in cooperation with the National Network of Health Mediators has developed instructions with guidelines for the work of the said mediators in order to limit the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Information materials on the topic are provided. The National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria and Health Mediators have distributed them throughout the country. The link to the guidelines on the work of the mediators to limit the spread of the pandemic of COVID-19 and safety at work is available at the following website: <http://www.zdravenmediator.net/pic/news/files/Nasoki%20za%20zdravni%20mediatori%20-%20Koronavirus.pdf>

In the context of the country's declared emergency, cooperation with non-governmental organisations with proven experience in working with victims of violence is also important. The Alliance for Protection against Gender-Based Violence is an association of specialized organizations that operates at national level and provides psychological, legal and social support to victims of domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence in the city of Sofia and eleven other cities in the country. All those in need of support can call the national 24-hour specialised phone line for professional support – 0800 11 977, as well as get information from the Alliance's Facebook page. In comparison to the previous year, the National Legal Aid Bureau reports an increase in the number of cases referred to it by Crisis Centers where the victims of domestic violence were accommodated and provided primary legal assistance.

Another state actor, who is actively involved in the efforts to curb the spread of the epidemic, is the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP). The materials developed by the SACP serve as good basis for policies elaboration in regard of children in crises.

The SACP also coordinates the team for crisis intervention. This team, composed by specialists in the field (psychologists and psychiatrists) aims to support children, their families, professionals working with children in times of crisis; to provide adequate and urgent intervention and assistance to children, their relatives and eyewitnesses, in order to overcome stress and post-traumatic stress disorders.

The existing National Children's Hotline 116 111 is available to all children and their families 24/7. Psychologists provide assistance and advice on all issues that concern callers. At the same time, if there is any risk for a child, the authorities for child protection are immediately contacted to research and undertake measures and actions for protection, as the Agency monitors the undertaken measures until the risk for the child disappears.

To conclude, during the State of Emergency and after that no disruption of services, especially health care services, has been observed.

**Participation and Consultation**

The National Operational Headquarters (NOH) gave public briefings twice a day at 8:00 a.m. and 5 p.m. local time for the period of the State of Emergency. These briefings included information about the number of cases of infected persons, the level of preparedness of the healthcare system and the anti-epidemic measures. They were broadcasted live by the major national radio and TV stations. All national public televisions had added simultaneous sign language interpretation to the live broadcasts and to their regular news reports.

The ensured communication between the authorities, mainly via the NRCP and the Roma minority represented via NGOs, activists and others are evidence for the active involvement of the Roma in the decision-making processes, as well as preconditions for prevention of discrimination against the Roma minority. More than 15 Roma NGOs have joined the newly established by the NRCP coordination mechanism – an online group for coordination and support of vulnerable Roma communities, which actively participates in the implementation of the government's measures to control the coronavirus epidemic. They also provide assistance on the spot.

Within Joint Programme of the Council of Europe ROMACT, Integro Assosiation organized their Community Action Groups (CAGs) in 46 municipalities to identify and list the most vulnerable Roma families together with local activists who needed assistance at this stage. Integro Assosiation highlighted that the National Operational Headquarters for Combatting the Coronavirus Infection sent directions to the municipal staffs to assist these persons and families in need.

**Awareness raising and technology**

The Ministry of Health (MH) created a separate section on its website providing up-to-date information on COVID-19 for citizens and healthcare professionals (available only in Bulgarian) and opened a 24/7 hotline. Regularly updated information in Bulgarian and English about the measures and restrictions in Europe and the worldwide is available on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

The Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) opened a section on COVID-19 on its website with the latest updates on the spread of COVID-19 in Bulgaria and the measures taken to combat the coronavirus infection. The information is provided in nine different languages besides Bulgarian.

In addition, a video with prevention tips in regard of COVID-19 has been produced by the Roma Standing Conference in Romanes and in Bulgarian. Integro Assosiation, translated the video as well as some additional materials in Turkish, due to the fact that many of the Roma communities in Bulgaria speak Turkish. Several organizations shared the cost and printed over 15,000 brochures, which were distributed across the country, while the video has been shared on the social networks.

In May 2020, the SACP prepared a Guidebook with rules and useful tips for children on safe surfing on the Internet. The guide contains basic tips for the child's health, as well as a glossary with useful information and additional tips – on uploading and sharing photos; how to recognize fake news; information on what online and cyberbullying are.

**Internet**

Since the beginning of the crisis, the number of alerts for online fraud has increased significantly. Many of them are related to the pandemic - speculation on the prices of drugs against COVID-19 and medical products (tests, protective gloves, masks, etc.). There is also an increase in the alerts in terms of websites, disseminating fake news, causing disturbance and fear among the population and causing disinformation in the society; there is an increase in the publications with fake news and profiles.

In response to the new challenges, General Directorate Combating Organised Crime with the Ministry of Interior (GDCOC) introduced a 24/7 working mode, with the officers monitoring daily the internet space and the open sources. Together with Europol and Interpol, measures have been taken to raise public awareness through advice and information published on the GDCOC's website on the new risks and threats, in order to prevent fraud and spam attacks.

Cooperation is carried out on a daily basis with the main internet providers and hosting companies in the country to provide data of site administrators, as well as to remove illegal content from the Bulgarian internet space. For websites and social networks that are not in the address space of Bulgaria, inquiries are prepared to identify their administrators. Fake news related to the topic of coronavirus are reported to hosting companies for removal.

Written orders have been issued to the administrators of the trading platforms for filtering all ads related to speculations with the prices of medical products and means of protection and after April 13, 2020 such have not been identified.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Bulgarian hosting companies, the sending of SPAM emails on behalf of the Press Center of the Ministry of Health has been suspended.

**Accountability and Justice**

Inevitably, the restrictive measures introduced affected to some extent the work of the courts and prosecutor's offices in the country, related to the need to ensure physical distancing of citizens in order to prevent infection. However, the Act, adopted in March, explicitly stipulates that the periods in criminal cases, including pre-trial ones, be not suspended. Work on them continued in accordance with the requirements of the Code of Criminal Procedure. Videoconferencing was also used in some of the lawsuits.

The National Legal Aid Bureau used alternative forms of legal aid to ensure access to justice for citizens in need of primary legal aid, in the form of consultation and preparation of documents to investigative bodies and courts via: the national telephone for legal aid where lawyers from the Sofia Bar Association are on duty every weekday from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm to provide consultations by phone; the regional counseling centers provide consultations to citizens; electronic access to the sample application for legal aid, as well as to the conditions for providing legal aid on the official website of the National Legal Aid Bureau; the System for Secure Electronic Service provides an opportunity for citizens to submit applications for legal aid electronically, provided that the sender has an electronic signature.

**The Sanitary Emergency in Bulgaria has been extended until June 30, 2020.**