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Falling off the Radar? Reaching Out to the Finnish Roma Community during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: In this paper, we ask how the Finnish Roma community handled the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the information reached Roma communities. The previous studies indicate existing health inequalities between Finnish Roma and the general population. The point of departure for the article is crisis communication between Finnish Roma and national authorities. The themes of racialization, mistrust and Roma relying on peers as a source of information and support became apparent. From this setting, this article sheds light on the way of speaking, usage of language, (Finnish) as a social construction of ethnic identity and expression of (non)belonging. At the same time, the usage of language and codeswitching reveals social stratifications among the Finnish Roma population. Findings indicate that subtle forms of exclusion of Roma prevail in Finland and are materialized as a “left alone mentality”. Consequently, Roma persons working as civil servants or NGO workers would potentially constitute a crucial link between health authorities and the Roma population. This link, however, should be constantly maintained. The study is a qualitative study and based on thematic interviews among Roma actors.

Keywords: Finnish Roma; COVID-19; crisis communication; collaboration



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1. Introduction

This paper is framed with questions of communication between Finnish Roma and authorities including how information during the crisis, including COVID-19 pandemic, is made accessible and sufficient for Roma; what are the requirements for accessibility; and what underlying themes are embedded in intercultural communication. This article takes steps toward placing Roma community outreach and communication to the theoretical and pragmatic approach of sociolinguistics and intercultural communications in the field of linguistic anthropology. Furthermore, this paper examines the experiences of Roma professionals in crisis communications and outreach work during COVID-19 and hence displays and problematizes the existing categorization of Roma in the field of political and bureaucratic spheres. The aim is to provide insights for designing crisis communication plans that recognize the needs of the Roma population and encourage authorities to community outreach for collaboration through which efficient collaboration between Roma and authorities is possible to attain.

The Finnish Kale Roma are native Finnish speakers and have resided in Finland for over 500 years, thus constituting a traditional, national ethnic minority group. The Finnish Roma speak the Kale Romani dialect but, during recent decades, the number of speakers of the language has decreased rapidly. Therefore, a seven-year plan (2023–2030) to revitalize the Finnish Romani language was published in 2022 ([Finnish National Agency for Education 2022](#)). It is estimated that less than 40% of the Roma population can speak Kale Romani at the basic level ([Hedman 2017](#)). This means that the Finnish language is widely used as an everyday language. The size of the Finnish Roma population living in Finland is estimated to be around 10,000–12,000 persons, with an additional approximate 4000 Finnish Roma-origin persons living in Sweden ([Granqvist 2021](#)). The segregation

law in the Finnish Population Information System does not allow registration based on ethnicity (Finlex 2019) and, therefore, exact information on the size of the Finnish Roma population is almost impossible to attain.

Language comprises not only words and sentences but also reflects the existing power relations in society (e.g., Singh et al. 2005), and hence the way of speaking, the speech act, presents a window to discrimination and racism. The concept of anti-gypsyism has been included in the anti-racism discourse just during the last few years in Finland, despite centuries-old discrimination and exclusion of Roma. Based on the long fieldwork among Finnish Roma, (author MS) reveals that there are conflicting ideas about how to deal with racism in Finnish society, whether it is better to be silent or openly discuss it. This reflects the uncertainty and fears among Roma and consequently has resulted in relatively few academic writings related directly to racism. Nordberg (2007) writes about the challenges of social and cultural citizenship despite the legal citizenship of Roma. Helakorpi et al. (2019) elaborate on how Roma mediators at schools find their way of tackling prejudices and racism. Historical trajectories of Roma people's struggles in Finland are covered by Friman-Korpela (2014) and by some authors in the edited book by Pulma (2012). For the Roma, who have been the target of racism for centuries, talking about racism and confronting unjust positionality is not always easy. Confrontation brings up the conflicting discourses of agency and victimhood (cf. Maheshwari 2019), where emphasizing agency as a part of Finnish society is more acceptable.

The long history of Roma in Finland is also associated with whether Roma are recognized in political and bureaucratic measures; for instance, regarding health, education or employment. While the impact of COVID-19 on people's health and well-being and access to information on migrant origin populations during COVID-19 has been reported in Finland (Skogberg et al. 2020, 2021; Finell et al. 2021), to our best knowledge, no previous studies have examined the impact of COVID-19 on the Finnish Roma population. We argue that the Finnish Roma often fall in-between legal categories of indigeneity and minority-ness, as Reetta Toivanen (2020) writes. Roma have lived in Finland for centuries and are native Finnish speakers, and difficulties emerge in placing them into any particular category among other cultural, linguistic and ethnic/racial minority groups. This categorization frames the target groups and subsequent measures taken both at the national level and European level, hence creating isolated Roma measures instead of mainstreaming Roma issues to other respective national development programs. In this sense, it is relevant to refer to Mary Douglas' famous theory of something being out of place, anomalous or ambiguous (Douglas 2001, pp. 38–39). The Roma people fall in-between categories, they "do not fit any given sets or series" (ibid.). Roma challenge these given sets or series of categorization and classification. However, do people need to fit into categories or should categories reflect social realities? For Douglas, these categories are a means to impose the system and make sense of the world (ibid. p. 4). In the case of the Roma, these categorizations and classifications do not serve this purpose.

Crisis communications amid the COVID-19 pandemic impose the failure of categorization due to misrecognizing the cultural settings in the realms of inter-group communication. Hence, Roma communities in Finland remained mostly unnoticed. This said, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), which acted as the health authority during the COVID-19 pandemic, also published key information in the Romani language, thus acknowledging the importance of the Roma language within the Finnish Roma community. Furthermore, a variety of outreach measures involving the Finnish Roma population were implemented within THL's "Building the Future" project funded by the European Social Fund, and implemented in collaboration with the Finnish Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (THL 2023).

1.1. Placing Finnish Roma and the Impacts of COVID-19 within the European Context

It was recognized at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic that Roma communities across Europe lack equal protection and care (Council of Europe 2020). In the statement, the commissioner for human rights stated that “Roma people living in substandard housing and in segregated settlements across Europe are among the groups most vulnerable to the current COVID-19 pandemic”. Not only were Roma vulnerable in the perspective of health during the various stages of the novel virus but they also faced scapegoating for spreading the virus and were targets of related violent hate crimes (Matache et al. 2021; Berescu et al. 2021). Finland has not reported scapegoating or increased hate crimes toward Roma during the pandemic. This difference in behavior is a result of Finnish Roma being able to isolate themselves during the lockdowns and throughout the pandemic span. Furthermore, this difference compared, for instance, to Romania, illuminates the “left alone mentality” in Finland, as we have argued in this paper.

As stated earlier, the number of Finnish Roma is relatively small. This, combined with the somewhat peripheric Nordic location, sets certain challenges for a comparative study between Finnish Roma and Roma populations in Eastern, Central and Southern Europe. In this section, the positionality of Finnish Roma is elaborated on in the wider European context with the amplifications of differences and similarities based on the rapidly emerged literature on COVID-19 and Roma in Europe.

Finnish Roma are often considered well-integrated into Finnish society (Friman-Korpela 2014; Stenroos 2020). This viewpoint is partly based on the decades-long history of collaboration between the Roma population and the Finnish government. The current situation of Roma inclusion and participation precedes several hundreds of years of exclusion and forced assimilation by the Finnish nation and governments. It was not until the 1970s that Roma persons were allowed to participate in decision-making regarding Romani issues in Finland. More recent developments in improving the position of the Roma population in Finnish society include the design and implementation of the Finnish national inclusion strategies (since 2009). However, despite these efforts, historical patterns of inequality and societal exclusion of the Roma population remain (Granqvist 2021; Stenroos 2019, 2020; Pulma 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and further exacerbated the pre-existing vulnerability of the Roma population in many parts of Europe in terms of health, education and economic struggles (see, e.g., Macias León 2022). This has brought more attention to the above-mentioned themes of Roma health, housing, economic situation, education level and (digital and social) isolation of the Roma communities in Europe (see also Velicu et al. 2022).

Let us begin with the education. It is important to point out from the beginning that there are diverse educational profiles among Roma and, as the level of education increases (despite structural discriminative barriers), social mobility through education has been recognized (cf. Durst and Bereményi 2021). Nevertheless, persons with a lower level of education have had fewer opportunities to work remotely during the pandemic. The vaccination hesitance and misinformation is commonly linked with the lower level of education, thus placing the responsibility on individuals without adequate consideration of wider frames of discrimination and exclusion (cf. Storer and Sarafian 2022, p. 65). Although a lower level of education is linked also to media literacy (Zezulkova and Neag 2019; Kellner and Share 2007), Storer and Sarafian (2022) emphasize that limiting and reasoning the sharing of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories solely to the low education level further stigmatize and marginalize Roma. In Finland, while the proportion of the Roma population who have completed compulsory education rose significantly since the 2000s, a considerable gap still remains concerning higher education when compared with the majority population (Rajala and Blomerus 2015; Granqvist 2021). The reasons for disparities in education are multiple, historical and linked to structural discrimination as several authors have shown across Europe (Linos et al. 2022; Magano and Mendes 2021; Helakorpi 2020; Mendes et al. 2021). Finland does not have segregated schools for Roma children (cf. Stenroos and Helakorpi 2021). Yet, a newly published report on the well-being of Roma children and the realization of their rights (Weckström et al. 2023) points out

the harmful bullying and discrimination of Roma children in schools. The experience of being an outsider is established in early childhood. Roma education levels increase, gradually creating generation gaps. This generation gap impacted the learning processes during remote homeschooling amid lockdowns. Concerning misinformation, age has to be recognized in an intersecting manner, avoiding grouping all Roma as one coherent entity.

During the pandemic, inequalities in housing conditions of the Roma population across Europe attracted worrying attention. The fear of Roma spreading the virus added to the scapegoating and discrimination. In Finland, housing is another area in which the Finnish [Non-Discrimination Ombudsman \(2023\)](#) received the most appeals from Roma. Although there has been significant improvement in Roma housing during the previous decades, the current challenges in housing derive from the prejudices and perceived discrimination in the housing markets both in state-subsidized city rental housing and in the private market. When housing is obtained, the living standards are similar to the rest of the population ([Törmä and Huotari 2018](#); [Lämsä et al. 2020](#)). There are no shantytowns or “Roma ghettos” in Finland, and Roma live across the country, although living is concentrated around bigger cities. Local living conditions do not prevent social isolation like among Roma communities living in Italy (cf. [Storer and Sarafian 2022](#)) or like among Romanian migrant workers in Spain (cf. [Macias León 2022](#)). Everyone has access to running water and, hence, maintaining a high level of hygiene is possible.

The lockdowns in Finland did not prevent Roma from exercising their professional activities with the consequent loss of income in a way as in the case of informal work in other European countries (cf. [Magano and Mendes 2021](#), p. 2). However, structural discrimination takes different forms in labor markets as the level of unemployment of Finnish Roma is higher than the general population. The employment rate does not directly respond to the increased level of education, and different measures to promote Roma employment and to tackle discrimination in the labor market has been taken in recent years ([Jauhola et al. 2019](#); [Mäenpää et al. 2018](#); [Mannila et al. 2021](#)). However, the Finnish Roma do not work in conditions (begging, selling items in the streets) where the risk of contracting COVID-19 is unavoidable. Furthermore, in Finland, the social security system guarantees economic security in all life situations. The social security system consists of services and cash benefits that provide economic security at the basic level ([Social Insurance Institution of Finland 2023](#)).

The areas of life discussed here (education, employment and housing conditions) are sectoral measures in the current EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation ([European Commission 2020](#)). Roma politics and policymaking have intensified since the beginning of the 2000s when the EU took a remarkable role in developing European Roma politics ([Law and Kovats 2018](#); [McGarry and Agarín 2014](#)). However, the EU is not the only organization developing and generating Roma politics and subsequent measures. Separate sets of measures are published by the Council of Europe, the European Union and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (cf. [Stenroos et al. 2021](#)). Unfortunately, the current COVID-19 pandemic reveals that the measures taken in many EU member states are insufficient. [Rostas \(2019\)](#) points out that the greatest failure of EU Roma policies derives from the misrecognition of anti-gypsyism, a specific form of racism Roma people face across Europe. The new EU strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion and participation (2020–2030) aims to take corrective steps in Roma policymaking by combating anti-gypsyism as the cross-cutting principle of the framework. It remains to be seen how effectively EU member states will adopt this approach. Health is the fourth sectoral measure in the current Roma framework, scrutinized in this paper as a separate section.

1.2. Health Services in Finland and the Roma

Finland, as a Nordic welfare state, provides free or low-cost primary healthcare services for all residents. The healthcare system is considered to provide high-quality services ([Finell et al. 2021](#)). However, despite the high-quality standards, the health inequalities in

Finland have remained, or even increased, to varying degrees between groups. Disparities between persons and groups with lower education levels, migrant backgrounds and minority groups continue to exist (Majlander et al. 2021; Finell et al. 2021). Many of the Finnish Roma are considered to belong to the category of increased vulnerability among whom disparities exist (Lämsä et al. 2020; Weiste-Paakkanen et al. 2018).

Currently, Finland is undergoing fundamental reform in the healthcare sector. The reform of healthcare, social welfare and rescue services, beginning in 2023, will transfer the responsibility for organizing services from municipalities (approx. 300) to well-being services counties (21). The reform aims to improve the availability and quality of basic public health services throughout Finland. The well-being services counties can buy services from the private sector. In addition, employers have a responsibility to organize preventive and first-contact care for employees. The occupational healthcare system varies depending on the employer, often organized in collaboration with the private sector. Hence, there are three channels for first-contact care: public healthcare, private healthcare and occupational healthcare (Lämsä et al. 2020; Keskimäki et al. 2019). Occupational healthcare for Roma is limited due to the low employment rate and structural discrimination (Jauhola et al. 2019).

The Roma, among other residents of Finland, are covered by the National Health Insurance (NHI). A recent study argues that bidirectional guidance between the Roma and service providers should be improved, and the Roma communities should be involved in service development (Lämsä et al. 2020). Authors are therefore calling for improved collaboration between Roma communities and authorities. When unemployment rates are high, the Roma fall behind in the occupational healthcare services provided by the employer. In Finland, employers pay for preventive healthcare for their employees.

1.3. Overview of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Finland

The COVID-19 epidemic started at the end of 2019, and it became a global health threat at the beginning of 2020. The first cases of COVID-19 in Finland were observed at the end of February. In mid-March 2020, the Finnish government declared a state of national emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was relatively late as the disease was observed, for instance, in Italy and Spain earlier that year and Finnish media outlets had informed citizens about the coronavirus well before it arrived in Finland. The images from the hospitals from other European countries were alarming, and when the state of emergency was declared, people already knew what to expect. By the end of March 2020, the capital region of Uusimaa county was in lockdown, and traffic from the other parts of Finland was restricted by the police. The outbreak of COVID-19 was severe in Uusimaa county, and the rest of the country was to be protected by restricting movement across counties.

The first announcement of the state of emergency lasted three months, and it included a set of highly restrictive measures. After the first wave of COVID-19, the Finnish government adopted a hybrid strategy that focused on testing, tracing, isolating and treating people, and some of the most restrictive measures were dismissed (Skogberg et al. 2020). As of the beginning of 2023, Finland has faced several waves of COVID-19, and the strategy is more focused on the health of those people at the highest risk of severe COVID-19 infection. There have been several periods of more restrictive measures activated during the last three years, but no more lockdowns or other as highly restrictive measures as were experienced at the beginning of the epidemic.

The first COVID-19 vaccinations were offered in December 2020 for health workers. Currently, vaccine recommendations includes basic vaccination series (two doses) and at least one booster vaccination for the adult population. In January 2023, almost 90 % of the Finnish population over the age of 18 have had their first vaccine, and over 65% of the population have had all recommended three vaccines (THL 2023).

As of the beginning of 2023, COVID-19 infection variants are still spreading in Finland, but the restrictions related to the COVID-19 epidemic have been lifted. Current strategies advise the Finnish population to take recommended vaccines and stay home until they

are healthy if they are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms. Otherwise, there are no current restrictions for the general population ([Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2023](#)).

The impacts of the coronavirus varied, and the perceptions of the situation among the Roma also changed as the epidemic evolved, bringing up the challenges of sufficient crisis communication during the steps in the crisis timeline.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is based on 14 (nine females, five males) interviews with Roma professionals working as civil servants or at non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who were involved in community outreach work during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, a healthcare professional involved in national-level crisis communications was interviewed, making the total number of interviews 15. The Roma persons interviewed for this study had a visible position in the Roma community, and they can be defined as the “Roma elite” coined by [Roman \(2014\)](#). According to the definition, Roma elite consists of “publicly visible members of the Finnish Roma community and those who have been active (politically, socially, culturally, artistically, and religiously) in promoting the Finnish Roma culture on national and international levels” ([Roman 2014](#), p. 794). A reason for interviewing a Roma who works within the Roma community stems from the need to portray the wider picture of the relationship between Finnish authorities and Roma, instead of individual narratives and experiences of the COVID-19 surge.

The interviews were semi-structured questionnaires consisting of ten (10) questions with a few sub-questions. The interview was framed similarly to that utilized in a study focusing on experiences of crisis communications among linguistic minorities in Finland. The questionnaire served as a basis to structure the interviews, enabling a focus on communications and hence following the objectives of “Building the future -project”. The interviews were conducted from October to November 2022, and each lasted approximately 20 to 30 min. This study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL/1275/6.02.01/2022). All participants provided written informed consent. The researchers have also collaborated with the interviewees previously and met most of the interviewees in person. Previous collaboration supports the trust-building between researchers and participants and mitigates the potential risks of confidentiality and participants’ privacy (see, e.g., [Khalil et al. 2021](#)).

Interviewees were first contacted by e-mail introducing the project. Interviewees lived in several cities and different parts of Finland. Due to the long distances, interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams, and a separate voice recorder was used. The gender distribution of the interview participants corresponded to that of persons working in Roma-related work.

Interviews were transcribed using a service provider, and data were stored in a secured folder at the THL. Transcriptions were thematically analyzed, but most of all, the transcriptions were analyzed as a cultural practice—the way that is often lacking in interpretations of transcriptions ([Duranti 2006](#), p. 301). This means that the study utilized a sociolinguistic approach, especially ethnography of speaking and intercultural communications ([Hymes 2009, 2001](#); [Duranti 2005a](#)) as an analytical tool and methodology. This approach emphasizes that the competence of language goes beyond vocabulary and sentence structures and recognizes the characteristics of the social and cultural context of language and communication (see, e.g., [Kiesling and Paulston 2005](#)). Furthermore, the study is guided by the Critical Romani Studies approach (CRS). In this context, CRS (interdisciplinary subject) refers to a recognition of Roma actors and agencies in the research setting (cf. [Ryder 2015](#)). The agency in communication refers especially to capacities to influence and impact people around, the audience ([Duranti 2005b](#), pp. 451–73).

The author (MS) is a Roma person and has years of experience with Roma-related work. Roma background and familiarity with Finnish Roma issues encouraged the analysis and interpretation of interview materials. The limits of this study concern the lack of viewpoints from migrant Roma in Finland and that the study covers only Finnish Roma.

Interviewees were selected based on their work within the Roma community, and this might narrow down the diversity of voices present in the study.

3. Results

Analyses of the interviews produced four broad themes. The first theme deals with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Roma community work, and how Roma civil servants and NGO workers were enacted as a link between health authorities and the Finnish Roma population. The second theme covers the issues of historically rooted mistrust for the non-Roma authoritative social order in association with health issues. The third theme concerns Roma positionality as a minority group from the viewpoint of language and culture. The final theme sheds light on the need for continual collaboration between Roma actors and Finnish officials in general, particularly in health-related issues.

3.1. *The Role of Roma Community Workers Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Roma workers were an essential link between health authorities responsible for crisis communications and Roma communities across Finland. The Roma workers (in some European countries also called Roma mediators or bridgebuilders) quickly realized they had to rearrange their working methods from meeting in person to online settings. This shift in working methods was perceived both negatively and positively by the Roma workers: adapting to the new working mode varied between organizations and depended on the resources and abilities of the Roma workers' affiliations to adjust to a novel situation.

Extract 1: When COVID-19 hit, we had to figure out how to do Roma youth work digitally. We youth workers also went to meet Roma youth on the streets, shopping malls and stations, but we could not find Roma there; they were also so scared, mainly for their parents and other elderly members. We started Facebook live sessions, and it became a success. We reached Roma youth and also families across Finland and Sweden and we were surprised by the number of people that found us on Facebook. I really enjoyed the new way of doing youth work and we benefit from those methods even now after restrictions are over. Although it was a harsh and scary time, and young people felt lonely, there were also positive aspects of this novel crisis.

Extract 2: In 2020, we had to shut down everything; it was really difficult. Our office is so small, and we could not meet people at all. We established online Corona-info and then we published some videos about the situation. In the beginning, there was a lot of communication through those channels, but it gradually slowed down.

Extract 3: Here in Eastern Finland, we reached out to our active members through the WhatsApp group and there we discussed the situation and how to deal with it. Basically, it was about restrictions and how to protect oneself from getting infected.

The interviews revealed that Roma workers tried to find mitigation strategies during the pandemic and that in-group communication was important for information sharing. The crisis communication among Roma via social media platforms and messaging applications increased solidarity as the fear, stress and uncertainty were widely shared among the Finnish Roma.

The community resilience was strengthened through social media, but the situation also enabled widespread disinformation and placed intermediaries in an uncomfortable situation. Related to disinformation, there was a space for negative social pressure among peers when facing a novel and unknown pandemic. The Roma workers were in the crossfire of conspiracy theories, and the information shared by the Finnish authorities and health experts. The situation was complicated, and many of the workers followed strategically their organizations' approach. In many cases, this meant the workers did not express their own opinions or did not take a standpoint on the matter but shared the information they received from official sources.

Extract 4. Our working team decided we do not share our own opinions. It was important just to meet people, listen to their fears and views on the matter and not depreciate or ignore their views. Just to listen and talk about the official information, but not to argue

about it. The discussions were easier in person-to-person, but if we had more people in the meeting, the social pressure was stronger [anti-vaccination]. On the other hand, when somebody took the vaccination without side effects and shared it in the group, it was easier for others to believe the fellow Roma.

Extract 5. We asked them to rely on official information concerning, for instance, vaccinations, but some people just wanted to believe different theories. Some were able to filter out the wrong information, but some were not. We had to work really hard on this issue.

Extract 6. Well, yes. There were terrible stories and different conspiracy theories in our women's group. We asked medical experts to join our group discussions and share their views with our group. With the experts, we wanted to meet the needs of the Roma people, to give them space to talk. When one shared a positive experience, it was easier for others to believe.

The intermediaries were aware that they are not experts on health issues, and it was not their responsibility that their work-related target group followed the instructions and restrictions.

Extract 7. We work as service advisers and our work is to guide our clients for the right services, also regarding health, but we acknowledged that it is not our responsibility that this issue is handled properly. Of course, we discussed the issue a lot and tried to support them when needed.

The interviewees emphasized that person-to-person discussions were the best way to share information about the crisis situation. It was important to listen and not invalidate peoples' opinions. Many of the interviewees told that they "translated" information to be accessible and at the same time gave space for discussions. Anti-vaccination sentiments and disbelief of official information at the beginning of the pandemic were strong and one of the interviewees told a story about a person who secretly took the vaccination to avoid confrontation with fellow Roma.

3.2. Mistrust as the Manifestation of Historically Rooted Racism, Exclusion and Assimilation Practices

The interviewees also scrutinized how society, the nation-state, is dealing with the minority issues from the perspective of realized fundamental and human rights, specifically in terms of access to the healthcare. According to one interviewee, Roma people may also misinterpret the challenges of healthcare access as a racial issue, although the case might be that the Roma person is not aware how the healthcare system works. It is about an interaction between the majority and minority where both parties have an active agency and hence interaction is a social and cultural activity that people may shun away. Involvement in intercultural communications requires trust.

Extract 8. For some Roma, trust in "the system" can be extremely weak. They can be suspicious and question the motives in a new situation and hence there is no trust in the system. I do not want to sound victimized, but there are these historical experiences that weaken trust. A person who provides them information must be somebody they know and feel trustworthy.

Extract 9. If you are just living in your community and do not have much interaction with Finnish society, for instance through work, then you do not understand how the system works. You might feel that you do not get the services you need just because you do not know how services operate. Some Roma do not feel any need to reach out beyond their own community and they are fine with it. Society might see them as "outcasts", but in their world, they do not feel like that.

To bring up victimization in the interview is interpreted here as a process to avoid the label of victim, or the topic of victimhood in general, instead to emphasize one's own agency. To talk about historically rooted exclusion and oppression places an individual in an uneasy position where victimhood is emphasized instead of active agency.

3.3. *The Intertwinement of Language and Culture in Crisis Communications*

Almost all the interviewees talked about “translating” the information about the COVID-19 pandemic to the people they work with. A person-to-person conversation was considered much more effective than hearing the information about the pandemic from the news. People were also sometimes confused when the information changed as the authorities gained new information about the novel virus.

Extract 10. Because of the pandemic, I received more phone calls from Roma people as they were worried. I had to translate to them what these restrictions and instructions really mean. They wanted to know my opinion about the issue.

Extract 11: When they (Roma people) asked me what this means, maybe the easiest way would have been to say that it means what it reads. They just wanted to hear it from somebody.

Extract 12: You cannot use too fancy words. It is not respected that you speak like Gadge (majority Finns). For instance, when I speak to Roma, they say I speak as Roma speaks, it is familiar to them, and they do not think I try to be something different.

3.4. *Accessible and Sufficient (Crisis) Communications through Collaboration*

The insufficiency of crisis communications was recognized among Roma workers as the need to “translate” indicates. Various organizations created their own approach to crisis communications among the Roma communities. This complex position of intermediaries implicates the need for more constant collaboration between Roma actors and officials. In this way, crisis communication becomes accessible and sufficient. There is a need for up-to-date, understandable, reliable and sufficient information (cf. [Skogberg et al. 2021](#)).

Extract 13. I think authorities and media could have contacted Roma NGOs and asked if crisis communication is accessible and sufficient for Roma. This could have strengthened the collaboration between different actors.

The role of Roma actors as communication intermediaries is significant. The Roma NGOs can reach out to the Roma communities, in general, but particularly if it comes to certain sections of the Roma population, for instance, youth, elderly Roma, or unemployed and/or less educated Roma.

4. Discussion

COVID-19 made inequities experienced by persons facing ethnicity-based and racial discrimination more visible ([Linos et al. 2022](#), p. 3). Several studies across Europe show that preventive work for combating the pandemic should not focus merely on health, particularly in the case of so-called vulnerable communities, but instead recognize the overlapping importance of housing, education and employment (see, e.g., [Storer and Sarafian 2022](#); [Berescu et al. 2021](#); [Magano and Mendes 2021](#)). Health, housing, education and employment have been the focus of EU-level Roma policymaking, and yet the situations Roma faced during the pandemic displayed the prior and persistent challenges in those fields. [Powell and Lever \(2017\)](#) argue that “while existing research focused on policy and outcomes is useful in understanding the negative contemporary experiences of Roma populations, they need to be understood in the context of wider social processes and historical continuities in seeking to elucidate how these processes shape policies and contribute to social and spatial marginalization”. The new EU strategic framework provides guidelines to tackle anti-gypsyism in the EU member states and, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, it is recommended that those guidelines are implemented in each EU member state.

In Finland, while examining and focusing on crisis communications during the pandemic, Roma NGOs and civil servants had an important intermediary role between the health authorities and the Roma community. Participants in the interviews stressed that communications must be accessible and culturally tailored in order to effectively reach the Roma population. The respondents also highlighted the need for strengthening collaboration between authorities and the Roma community during crisis situations.

The work of Roma intermediaries reveals the complex positionality during the vaccine campaigns. The mis- and disinformation widely shared among Roma in social media forced Roma workers to create their own strategies and approaches addressing health-related issues and especially vaccination. Within this complex positionality, some of the NGO workers invited healthcare professionals to discuss it with Roma. The healthcare professional elaborated that Roma expressed their hesitations, for example, for vaccinations explicitly, unlike some migrant groups that were more implicit in expressing their suspicions and fears. Some religion-related hesitations were expressed during the discussions. The vaccine hesitation or the level of vaccine uptake cannot be fully understood without recognition of previous inequalities and discrimination (Storer and Sarafian 2022, p. 46).

The role of Roma workers as mediators or bridgebuilders is strongly criticized for further creating division between Roma and others (Petraiki 2020; Belak et al. 2017). However, recognizing the problematic assumption of otherness embedded in the role of Roma workers, we argue that within the area of crisis communication and health, Roma workers are a way to reach out to Roma communities. The “left-alone” mentality can be recognized also in this context: unlike in some other European countries, there is no training program for Roma workers to act as “health mediators”. Petraiki (2020) writes about problematic narratives regarding Roma in the scientific medical journals. She argues that Roma health mediator programs can be used as “a neocolonial tool for the reinforcement of epistemic violence against Roma” (ibid., p. 73). It is worth considering whether the lack of training is negative or if the neutral territory as a non-expert is a better position to stand one’s ground.

The grassroots-level Roma community work was challenging despite the mitigating actions. Nevertheless, solidarity among the Roma was strengthened as a result of transitioning from in-person meetings to online groups and instant messaging applications. Therefore, it cannot be argued that the pandemic only weakened social ties but also strengthened the sense of collectivity.

Vaccine hesitation is a symptom of what Powell and Lever (2017) call a positionality of Roma as Europe’s perennial ‘outsiders’, thus referring to the long history and processes of exclusion. The Finnish Roma wellbeing study was conducted during 2017–2018. At the time, this study worried Roma, as they were anxious about the creation of Roma registers (Stenroos 2020, pp. 165–68). This fear stems not only from history but also from the contemporary incidents of ethnic profiling in Finland and Sweden (see, e.g., Keskinen et al. 2018). The mistrust toward authorities was also highlighted in the interviews and was manifested through the spread of disinformation and misinformation within the Roma community.

The mistrust is a consequence of historical discrimination, exclusion and forced assimilation that can be described as a phenomenon of anti-gypsyism. In the EU’s strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion and participation, anti-gypsyism is defined as “a historically rooted structural phenomenon that appears at institutional, social and interpersonal levels. It has its origins in how the majority views and treats those considered as ‘gypsies’. It is rooted in a process of ‘othering’ that builds on negative as well as positive, exoticizing stereotypes” (European Commission 2020). The historical exclusion that continues in a subtle form in contemporary Finland is manifested in a “left alone” mentality. As mentioned in the introduction, the Roma falling in-between legal categories of minority-ness (due to their long history of living in Finland, language and cultural diversity) further contributes to the left-alone mentality and misrecognition (cf. Toivanen 2020). However, historically rooted mistrust is not a challenge only among the Finnish Roma. Similar perceptions toward healthcare professionals and authorities have been reported in other European countries as well (Storer et al. 2022; Lee et al. 2022). The question of mistrust returns to the asymmetrical power relations that have been processed in the long term, making the exclusion (and left-alone mentality) of Roma and the racism they face an accepted norm (Powell and Lever 2017; Magano and Mendes 2021).

The respondents did not indicate signs of Roma scapegoating and increased hatred toward Roma in Finland, unlike in some other European countries (cf. Matache et al.

2021). The challenges Finnish Roma faced during the pandemic were mostly structural and institutional. The fact that a fellow Roma is more trusted during severe crisis situations than healthcare experts illustrates the challenges of inclusion and participation. [Storer and Sarafian \(2022, p. 53\)](#) found in their study that “the sites of greatest trust rested within the family and communal relationships, where family consisted of relatives living in close proximity or sharing accommodation”. The same applies to Finnish Roma.

The COVID-19 pandemic also revealed that language and communication are much more than words. Therefore, in crisis communication, we should recognize different minority groups not just based on the country of origin or the native language. The intertwining of language and culture is a critical element of intergroup crisis communications. From the minority group’s point of view, this means that the way of speaking is a way of constructing ethnic and cultural boundaries.

Constructing ethnic, cultural and racial boundaries through language use (Finnish) is a representation of failed categorization and classification of minority-ness in the bureaucratic sphere. The case of Roma crisis communication is an example of this wrong categorization. As [Samy H. Alim](#) argues, when elaborating on racialized intercultural communication, we have to take into account racial tensions (cf. [Alim 2005, p. 180](#); [Alim and Smitherman 2012](#)), and in the case of Roma, the historical context must be recognized. The non-Roma healthcare workers are often unfamiliar with the history of Roma, and for them, it can be difficult to comprehend why the issues of health are so sensitive. “I speak as Roma speak” is a language strategy. Thus, the way of speaking is also a vital instrument to express and maintain cultural habits, and customs and in the creation of a sense of belonging ([Keating and Egbert 2005, p. 169](#)). Furthermore, as pointed out in the studies of intercultural communications and encounters, people from different cultures seldom meet as equals, and much of this inequality is not personal, but due to power differences in the cultures they come from ([Singh et al. 2005](#)).

The fact that information and messages, in some cases, need to be “translated” indicate that Roma workers know how to speak to Roma and how to speak to non-Roma—the process called codeswitching in sociolinguistic studies. In the case of Roma crisis communication, codeswitching is framed with history, culture, inequality and unequal power relations, as pointed out earlier in the text. For Roma workers, codeswitching is a means to get the job done both among Roma and non-Roma. Linguistic anthropologists note that codeswitching is systematic, skilled and socially meaningful in communication ([Woolard 2005, p. 73](#); [Alim 2005](#)). To conclude, codeswitching is a representation of the superior and inferior setting of language and communication.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have shown the situation of Finnish Roma during the COVID-19 pandemic and elaborate on the similarities and differences compared to other EU member states. By focusing on crisis communication, we add to the existing knowledge in Romani studies by bringing to the front the sociolinguistic aspect of communication among Roma, and between Roma and non-Roma. Already during the 1960s and 1970s, [Gumperz and Hymes \(1972\)](#) paid attention to intercultural communications and argued that any analysis of communications must recognize the interplay between a wide range of factors, including the participants, the event they are engaged in enacting, the actions present and the cultural context in which those events and actions obtain meaning. In this context, we suggest academics pay attention not only to group stigmatization but also to the impacts of stigma on a personal level. Face-to-face interactions can be burdensome for individuals (stigma) and contribute to the logic of separation ([Crețan et al. 2022](#)),

The second issue we want to highlight in crisis communication is how Roma fall off the radar and fall in-between existing bureaucratic and legal categories and classifications, creating a social space for a left-alone mentality.

We recommend authorities establish and maintain continual collaboration between Roma NGOs and Finnish authorities while planning anticipatory preventions and commu-

nications for future crises. The role of Roma workers and their ability to reach different sections of Roma population should be recognized as an asset. The Roma population in Finland is diverse with varying needs, and recognizing this enables more targeted communications.

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