



Civil society monitoring report
on implementation of the national Roma
integration strategy
in Finland

*Identifying blind spots
in Roma inclusion policy*

Prepared by:
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ECRI	European Commission against Racism and Intolerance
MAARO	Regional Guide for Policy Implementation
RCM	Roma Civil Monitor pilot project
ROMPO	National Roma Policy 2010-2017
ROMPO2	National Roma Policy 2018-2021
RONK	Advisory Board of Roma Affairs in Finland
ROOSA	Health and Wellbeing Study on Finnish Roma
THL	Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare
VANUPO	Strategy on Youth Policy and Youth Work

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This third RCM report on Finland focuses on the sensitive issues of the unequal treatment of Roma prisoners and drug-related deaths in the Roma community. These issues are sensitive because addressing them could cause even more severe stigmatisation of the Roma population in Finland than already exists. Authors critically tackle these issues, which are currently seen as big challenges among the Roma themselves. The authors also emphasise the consequences of marginalisation, of (structural) discrimination, and of the narrowed hopes for the prospects of Roma youth related to these phenomena. Based on the knowledge produced by the Roma community, the authors suggest the Finnish policy on Roma should be more targeted and that the measures suggested by policy should be more evidence-based, giving the example of the need to update Romani language revitalisation measures to meet community needs.

Unequal treatment of Roma prisoners

The unequal treatment of Roma prisoners in the Finnish prisons has been a known fact for several years (for example, they are segregated by ethnicity), but no measures by the Finnish authorities have managed to tackle this problem. Furthermore, the way the National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) tackles this problem is imprecise and more attention should be paid to the rehabilitation and readjustment of Roma prisoners into society in order to prevent recidivism.

Drug abuse and drug related deaths

The report highlights the knowledge produced by the Roma community in relation to drug abuse and the drug-related deaths of Roma youth. Several Roma associations note the issue and the root causes are considered by them to be the marginalisation and exclusion of Roma youth. When combating racism and exclusion, we should shed light on their consequences for individuals, including consequences that can be fatal. However, because there is a fear of strengthening the stigmatisation of the Roma, their drug-related problems are being ignored by policy designers. A good first step would be to acknowledge the problem.

Romani language

The report deals with the challenges of revitalising the Romani language. The problem of this endangered language has been on the agenda for years, if not decades, but there has been no improvement. The number of Romani speakers keeps decreasing, and it is high time to involve the broader Roma community in discussing the situation of the language. As these results and revitalising measures indicate, Romani language revitalisation needs to be redefined and measures for it should be adjusted to respond to the needs of the Roma population. The small-scale survey the authors have carried out about this issue indicates that the places the Romani language is being taught today and the methods employed are not serving the purpose of revitalisation.

INTRODUCTION

The EU Framework and the National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) have affected the re-shaping of Finnish Roma policy in various ways, some of which are considered beneficial by some parts of Roma civil society and some of which are currently considered less so. In terms of its harmonisation with the EU Framework, in some aspects Finland has exceeded what the EU Framework proposes in reflecting on Roma diversity, by concentrating on the issues of Roma who are not citizens, on Roma women and on Roma youth, as well as on local-level implementation of integration policy. This report would also like to raise some issues that have been neglected and argue that these unaddressed issues should become as much of a priority as the issues Finland has chosen to align with in the EU Framework.

Civil society agrees that harmonised Roma policies among the Member States at European level are understandable and of a certain benefit (for example, guaranteeing that the Roma minority should enjoy equal rights no matter which EU Member State they reside in). This approach is understandable with respect to the ability to compare different Roma situations across the EU Member States and the need for measures that can be observed in equal terms and are synchronized across the Member States.

In Finland, however, a downside to the way Finland's previous strategy (ROMPO 2009-2017) was implemented was that the government was unable to respond to *ad hoc* issues coming from the Roma community due to the time lag between the first steps of developing the NRIS and its implementation phase. The other downside of the horizontal, synchronized approach is that focusing on issues that are relatively well-arranged in Finland (e.g., access to health care,¹) takes time and effort away from issues that require more effort to address, that are more acute and relevant in the Finnish context, and that some in Roma civil society believes should be more of a priority even though they fall outside the EU Framework.

The standardised approach currently being taken is less than ideal given the dispersion and the size of the Roma community in Finland. Because the Roma community is dispersed and small, it would be practically impossible to establish a segregated housing system or segregated education for Roma in Finland, issues that are of concern in other EU Member States. However, this does not mean Roma in Finland do not face challenges in accessing education or housing.² Roma housing problems are connected with Roma poverty, and Roma poverty is connected with their low level of education. The RCM Synthesis Report from the second cycle has even found that in those countries with smaller Roma populations, the employment gap between Roma and non-Roma is wider than in countries with larger Roma populations.³ Together with a low level of education among Roma, this high Roma unemployment rate is intertwined with multiple social problems (poverty, structural discrimination) and therefore should receive more attention. However, in its response to this issue (which is also an EU Framework priority), Finnish policy on Roma specifically emphasises the role of individual Roma in the improvement of their own economic and social development, and that the Finnish labour market does not yet tackle

¹ As explained in Roma Civil Monitor (2019). *Civil society monitoring report on implementation of the national Roma integration strategy in Finland: Assessing the progress in four key policy areas of the strategy*, (EC, DG Justice and Consumers), available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3034/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-2-finland-2018-eprint-fin.pdf>

² *Ibid.*

³ Roma Civil Monitor (2020). *A synthesis of civil society's reports on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies in the European Union Assessing the progress in four key policy areas* (EC, DG Justice and Consumers), available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3172/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-synthesis27-2019-eprint.pdf>

the issue of discrimination against Roma in recruitment. In national Roma policy, therefore, the responsibility to change Roma unemployment is currently placed just on the Roma, even though they do not possess the positionality in Finnish society to achieve that change (see, e.g., Helakorpi, 2018).

We believe the government should develop more flexible, *ad hoc* implementation methods in addition to the methods developed for delivering on EU-harmonised policy, new methods that would address issues of acute, immediate local concern to Finnish Roma and that would take less time than the current processes to deploy. As this report will demonstrate, there is a specific challenge when it comes to accessing mainstream service provision from within the Roma community, namely, that mainstream services target individuals. Work with Roma is best delivered, in our experience, when services target the level of a family as a whole or even an entire community (kin group).

Last but not least, the setting of the Finnish NRIS agenda is not just shaped by harmonising with the EU Framework but is also shaped by the fact that Roma participation at the national level in Finland is not as representative, and therefore not as effective, as it could be. Issues that some in Roma civil society believes should be prioritized are being avoided because of the concerns of those speaking for the community at the national level, concerns that are not necessarily shared by the entire Roma community.

The government's follow-up report on implementation of national Roma policy (ROMPO) states that at the executive level (ministries, other national agencies) the policy has been recognised and mainstreamed because ministries were named as the responsible authorities for its actions. This success of mainstreaming Roma policy at the governmental level was indeed at least partly due to the EU recommendations and systems for monitoring the Member States.

However, the challenge of implementation rests at the local level, with the municipalities, and consequently implementation is still not reaching local Roma. This lack of local implementation has already been recognised by the authorities and by the National Advisory Board on Roma Affairs (RONK), and the new policy (ROMPO2)⁴ tries to tackle this challenge through regional and district-specific programmes (MAARO).⁵

As the first RCM report on Finland described,

"the problem with Roma politics in Finland is not that Roma representatives constitute a small elite group, but the absence of a political field outside the elite. This implies that also the definition of procedures, agendas, actors and space [lies] within the hands of a rather small group of people, and, what is more, subjected to a governmental institution."^{6,7}

There is an unofficial prioritising system at the national level with regard to which issues get attention and which issues do not. This "gatekeeping" is performed by activists in civil society who are elite members of the Roma community, as described above. Even important issues tend to disappear from the government agenda if they are considered "sensitive". Partly this is because of negative media attention toward the Roma and the desire to avoid perpetuating it, and partly this is due to in-group stigmatisation. As a

⁴ ROMPO assigned these responsibilities mostly at the governmental level and the ministries. ROMPO2 includes more Roma associations in the implementation and generally takes issues more to the municipal level.

⁵ Huttu & Vauhkonen (2019). *Regional Guide for Policy Implementation*.

⁶ Roma Civil Monitor (2019). *Civil society monitoring report on implementation of the national Roma integration strategy in Finland: Focusing on structural and horizontal preconditions for successful implementation of the strategy* (EC, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers), p 10, available at <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3034/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-1-finland-2017-eprint-fin.pdf>

⁷ Cf. (Nordberg, 2007)

consequence, Finnish Roma policy is reflecting the fears of some Roma about ethnic profiling in the media and negative public opinion in such a way that not all issues end up on the official agenda – including ones in need of urgent attention.

The statutes of the Advisory Board of Romani Affairs in Finland (RONK) require half of the members to be Roma, and they come from elite NGOs of long standing that are powerful in that the authorities listen to them carefully and are perhaps even overly sensitive to cultural issues and the need to avoid potentially stigmatising members of this minority. Roma representatives bring their pre-selected issues to the table and the officials then translate those issues into bureaucratic jargon. To date the Roma involved in this process have just presented what is positive about Roma culture to political representatives, in order to avoid stigmatisation. Some changes have been seen in this tendency recently.

One example of such a blind spot is the lack of policy recognition of the issues of male prisoners from the Roma community and the unequal treatment they receive in the prisons. One of the themes of this report, therefore, will be the disparities experienced by male prisoners of Roma origin in Finnish correctional services, because this is an underreported matter.

The second blind spot that needs attention is drug and alcohol abuse in the Roma community and the deaths of Roma youth related to those abuses. The public services for drug abusers are inaccessible by the Roma because they are designed for delivery on an individual basis; to reach the Roma community, a family-oriented approach is required and has been taken, for example, by the NGO *Romano Missio* in order to reach incarcerated Roma women. Several Roma associations in Finland have expressed their worries in this regard and are calling for shared responsibility and efforts to tackle a problem that is endangering too many Roma lives. Incarcerated Roma have problems accessing addiction counselling and rehabilitation services generally in prison, which is why some modified services have been designed to serve incarcerated Romani women (only).

The third issue that needs attention is revitalisation of the Romani language. Approximately one-third of the Roma population can speak the language fluently. (Hedman 2017) The language knowledge of the rest of the Roma varies, from use as a home language to a mix of Romani dialects. Consequently, there are only a few professionally trained teachers of this language. The fact that Finland is a geographically vast country has a positive effect in that there are no segregated schools or classes for the Roma, but the downside of the small number of Roma is that after effective measures for equal housing were implemented during the 1970s and 1980s, the Roma ended up living scattered around the country, which means arranging language training for them in person is practically impossible. This situation means that revitalisation of the Romani language is not receiving much financial support (for instruction or materials) from the Culture and Education Ministry, as due to a lack of active demand for language revitalisation from the Roma, there is a lack of funding from the Culture and Education Ministry for the creation of materials that would suit this purpose. The situation of the Romani language has been the same for decades and keeps spinning around in the same track without making any remarkable change. There is little money allocated to revitalise the language, and when money is allocated, it is directed to language research (done by non-Roma researchers) in university settings; these institutions attract most of the little funding that is available and direct the linguistic research that is done.

ETHNIC INEQUALITY IN FINNISH PRISONS

Definition of the problem

The authors interviewed nine male Roma prisoners for the purpose of this report in autumn 2019. They informed that they have experienced differences between different prisons and even between different prison workers. However, in many prisons Roma prisoners are housed together with foreign-born prisoners to keep them separate from ethnic Finnish inmates. In some prisons it exists an ethnicity-based hierarchy among the prisoners; this fact, combined with Roma prisoners following their own contact avoidance system, which exists to prevent conflict between Roma families, creates a situation whereby Roma prisoners, in the interests of their own safety, avoid opportunities for contact with other prisoners in order to avoid breaking both their own rules and rules established by the ethnicity hierarchy in the prison; as a consequence, male Roma prisoners do not receive the services to which they are entitled.⁸

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has repeatedly paid attention to and made recommendations about the treatment of Roma prisoners.⁹ According to the Roma prisoners whom the authors of this report interviewed no remarkable improvements have been implemented to address this.

The inequality happens at two levels: access to services and enjoyment of cultural rights.¹⁰ What is alarming in these reports (Lindsted, 2010 and ECRI, 2007) about inequality in the prisons, is that racism in the prisons is difficult to tackle; prison workers are not always willing to tackle the problems and racism is seen as an integral part of the hierarchy among the prison population. Even more alarming is that the Roma are not always able or willing to benefit from the rehabilitation services, and some prison workers suggest Roma are more likely to return to prison than non-Roma.¹¹ The standard regulations and racism in the prison also mean that Roma prisoners cannot follow their cultural customs (regarding age hierarchy within their community, feuding between families, and purity rules) and the Roma culture itself is thereby demeaned.¹² Housing arrangements in the prisons have been especially challenging for Roma prisoners, as Roma have culturally-specific norms for how different age groups associate with each other (which are related to purity rules) and furthermore, challenges are created for the Roma avoidance system (avoiding contact with a conflicting Roma kin group) by prison housing arrangements that segregate all Roma together.¹³

It is noteworthy that the Law on Imprisonment (Article 1, §5)¹⁴ specifically states that the prisoners should be treated equally regardless of their ethnicity, race, language, religion or other characteristics. Information received from the Office of the Parliamentary Ombudsman indicates that the office has not received any complaints of mistreatment in recent years. In 2015, the Ombudsman's office conducted an inspection of Helsinki Prison (on 20 January 2015) about the treatment and living conditions of Finnish Roma prisoners; the report from this inspection indicates that Roma prisoners were indeed being

⁸ Lindsted (2010, p 140)

⁹ ECRI (2007)23

¹⁰ The Constitution § 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² Knuuti & Avonius (2016). Rikosseuraamuslaitoksen monisteita 3/2016 (RISE)

¹³ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴ Ministry of Justice (2006). Law on Imprisonment, <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/2005/20050767>

segregated away from ethnic Finnish prisoners. This issue has been raised more than once, but so far there has been no radical improvement.

The same document,¹⁵ in regard to the inspection of another prison (Sukeva) during the same year (2015), indicates the inequalities experienced by Roma prisoners more clearly and states that it is unacceptable that the ethnicity of Roma affects how and where they are housed in the prison. In practice, this means the living conditions of Roma prisoners are worse than those of other prisoners.

Clearly, Roma are subjected to unequal treatment in prisons due to their ethnicity, and thus the institutions are violating the law in this regard. However, what is probably most worrying is their lack of access to and non-use of rehabilitation services. This, consequently, increases their risk of recidivism, as Roma volunteers from NGOs who visit the prison population related to the authors of this report. Those same informants told that Roma prisoners are often marginalised not just in Finnish society, but also by the Roma community itself.

Background and cause of the problem

In a group meeting with the Roma prisoners, they told the authors of this report that the unequal treatment in the prisons is often explained and justified to them by prison officials as necessary to the security of Roma prisoners, who allegedly must be segregated away from the general population for their own security and therefore cannot participate in all the activities arranged by the prison (also allegedly due to restrictions on the number of prison staff available and space limitations). One description of the prison was that the immigrant and Roma prisoners are placed in the cellar (without daylight), segregated away from the ethnic Finns, and how the inmates were placed on different floors was said to be a reflection of a hierarchy in the prison that is unofficial and determined by expectations of inter-group behaviour in the prison population.

There is no study directly correlating Roma structural discrimination and marginalisation with the numbers of Roma prisoners in Finland.¹⁶ However, the government-run Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) is preparing a study on these correlations.¹⁷ Furthermore, the fact that Roma are considered the most likely recidivists by the informants we interviewed indicates that Roma are not effectively accessing services to prevent recidivism during their time inside. The Roma Health and Wellbeing Study (ROOSA) provides some general background information relevant to Roma incarceration. For example, the education level of Roma is still lower than the average in Finland, although there has been some progress. Of those Roma who participated in ROOSA, less

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Dnro 4337/3/15

¹⁶ Statistics from the Criminal Sanctions Agency (2010), p 3. Available at: https://rikosseuraamus.fi/material/attachments/rise/julkaisut-monisteetjaraportit/6C2w2qxxu/3_2010_Selvitys_etnisesta_yhdenvertaisuudesta.pdf

The registry system does not provide accurate info about Roma prisoners because such information is considered proscribed for collection under the Equality Act and the relevant law on privacy protection, and therefore these numbers are always estimates. The Agency collects data yearly, as does the Institute of Criminology (<https://www.helsinki.fi/en/institute-of-criminology-and-legal-policy>). See also Lindsted (2017).

Through RONK, the Interior Ministry and Finnish Police have also provided information about Roma prisoner numbers for the purposes of designing ROMPO2. The Institute of Criminology study for 2018 was only about the numbers of homicides perpetrated in Finland; the ethnic data was estimated, and the number of homicides was reported as per 100,000 people. So, by that estimate, ethnic Finns were said to be responsible for 1.5 per cent of homicides, while Finnish Roma were said to be responsible for 24 per cent of homicides. In real numbers, Roma perpetrators were convicted of committing two homicides in 2018. See https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/233586/Katsauskia_28_Lehti_2018.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

¹⁷ <https://thl.fi/en/web/thlfi-en>

than half had any training or education after basic elementary school,¹⁸ while just approximately 30 per cent of the respondents had held a regular paid job within the last 12 months.¹⁹ Among male Roma, 15 per cent of respondents had lived with a family member other than their mother or father as a child. Among the older generation, the challenges in their childhoods consisted of poverty and irregular incomes. Younger generations of Roma mentioned the divorce of their parents as a challenge. Furthermore, 68 per cent of the Roma said they have experienced discrimination and marginalisation.²⁰

The estimated number of Roma in the Finnish prisons is alarming, and the fact that Roma prisoners do not often receive equal treatment (e.g., access to rehabilitation services) increases the risk of Roma recidivism. The overrepresentation of Roma in prisons indicates there are serious structural distortions and push-effects in Finnish society in the form of discrimination against Roma and unequal opportunities for them. Framing this issue as one of equal treatment in the prisons would enable the tackling of issues that, on the one hand, could increasingly prevent Roma recidivism while, on the other hand, supporting Roma reintegration into life after prison.

Policy answer to the problem

Currently, the policy response to the problems experienced by Roma prisoners is inadequate – neither mainstream policy nor the ROMPOs have addressed prisoner problems in detail, and neither prescribe practical measures, just general guidelines.²¹ More attention should especially be paid to male Roma youth and to prevention work, as has already been paid by NGO *Romano Missio* with respect to Romani women prisoners and their children.²² Roma NGO workers, most of whom offer Romani language courses for prisoners and some of whom have been involved in prevention work, have proven effective²³ in many ways; for instance, Roma NGO workers have acted as mediators between Roma prisoners and non-Roma prison workers (with respect to language and culture). Unlike the services available to female prisoners upon release, there is no support system or program for released (male) prisoners, but one could be developed in collaboration with professionals, the authorities and Roma associations to provide a more substantial contribution in the form of their cultural knowledge and experience (expert-by-experience workers). *Romano Missio's* projects for female prisoners of Roma origin have developed good practices, but they have not been applied to male prisoners of Roma origin; however, the Criminal Sanctions Agency has taken them on board, so it might be possible that in future, male prisoners from the Roma community could also benefit from these good practices.

¹⁸ Weiste-Paakkanen et. al. (2018, 30-31).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁰ Weiste-Paakkanen et. al. (2018, 57) ROOSA

²¹ ROMPO (2018, p 45)

²² <https://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/4.12.-Roma-evidence-based-tool-with-recommendations.pdf>

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

DRUG ABUSE AND DRUG-RELATED DEATHS

Definition of the problem

Drug and alcohol abuse are a problem among male Roma youth in particular, but substance abuse is a problem that is not sufficiently addressed by or considered within the framework of Roma policy.²⁴ There are programmes addressing substance abuse that are offered generally and systematically, including multiple services for drug users at both the local and national levels. Different NGOs include programmes on anger management, drug use, educational services, psychiatric services and social worker services among their offerings, but these are designed according to an approach that works for individuals and one-on-one interactions. This means the programmes do not suit Roma, who come from cultures that are collective and live collectively, and therefore these programmes do not reach Roma individuals. Last but not least, there are not enough of these services to meet the general demand, to say nothing of targeting ethnic groups or others in need of a special approach.

The number of deaths due to substance overuse and overdose among Roma is alarming (see below). While the NRIS mentions Roma youth, its approach and suggested measures lag behind and/or do not match the social reality of too many young Roma; they show little awareness of the human rights work that has been done by some associations and other stakeholders. This means the impact of these measures will only ever be partial (e.g., the measures to combat antigypsyism) and they need to be taken to the next level, to move from just raising awareness to promoting action.

The issue of drug abuse further sheds light on the challenges of knowledge production by the Roma community. Cultural knowledge (expert-by-experience) is not enough in this case and more substantial knowledge of drug abuse/addiction services is needed. Policymakers, officials and other government authorities also often disregard local knowledge and instead seek statistics and valid data disaggregated by ethnicity (which, again, it is difficult to lawfully gather in Finland). These stakeholders use standard programmes and the information they generate and therefore do not take into consideration the actual needs of Roma or other ethnic or specific groups who have not achieved enough education (such as Roma who are illiterate). Culturally sensitive services are not being offered (such as taking an approach that addresses a group collectively, or family by family, or by kin-group). Consequently, the authors of this report are suggesting broader methods be used for the evidence-based design of policy measures.

Background and cause of the problem

According to the European Drug Report 2019, fatal drug abuse is increasing in Finland.²⁵ There is no available data that would be valid and verified as to the number of drug-related deaths among *Kaale* Roma so that the drug-related deaths could be disaggregated by ethnicity. Official restrictions on collecting statistics based on ethnicity are positive in the sense that they make it impossible to create ethnic "registers" of people. However, there is also a downside to this restriction, namely, that the only way to acquire specific data that covers Roma is through community surveys and inquiries.

Surveying the Roma community is commonly practiced by different Roma associations, by different projects, and by some government institutions such as the Finnish National Agency for Education (Roma Education Unit). Collecting data through surveys and the "snowball" method works in Finland because the Roma population is relatively small (approximately 10,000-12,000). The problem is that each new actor involved in these

²⁴ ROMPO (2018, 44).

²⁵ European Drug Report 2019.

surveys has to complete the same questionnaires to map the field, but no general data about Roma is eventually generated. There is no easily accessible money for conducting these surveys available to NGOs; the money is available at the level of foundations or universities and is intended to finance professional researchers.

Several Roma associations have expressed their worries about drug abuse and drug-related deaths among Roma, estimating that during the last two years, 40 Roma persons have died from drug-related causes. This number reflects known cases of drug-related death and is not a definitive description of the full situation; even so, this number means that of all known drug-related deaths in Finland (in 2018, 188 cases, and during the last two years, a total of 355 persons)²⁶ 11-12 per cent involved Roma.

The Roma associations have no tools – no professional Roma to work with Roma drug users and not enough education – to deal with these issues. The public media reports on drug-related death numbers without accurately elaborating the background information to these cases, and thus it would be more stigmatising to the Roma community for the media to report on this phenomenon on their own than it would be if Roma associations were to come forward with this matter and elaborate the causes behind these numbers; the “gatekeeping” system described above, however, means this kind of proactive approach is not being taken for fear of perpetuating stigma.

The death rate among Roma youth in Finland is alarming, especially when one considers estimated suicide rates, an extremely sensitive issue; some estimates indicate as many as one-third of youth suicide in Finland could involve the Roma community. Roma activists suggest that the root causes can be found in broken families (divorce rates and child custody battles), dropping out of school, being bullied at school, and generally in the marginalisation of young Roma. This includes structural discrimination, as even educated Roma face tremendous challenges finding jobs and earning regular incomes. Another theme that arises in this respect (based on Facebook/social media discussions with Roma activists) is that of the difficulties of LGBTQ Roma youth and their dual exclusion from mainstream society and the Roma community.

Policy answer to the problem

An encouraging example of mainstreaming Roma policy in regard to Roma youth is the preparation of a national youth policy and the youth work organised by the Ministry of Education and Culture²⁷ where Roma youth are separately mentioned as a target group in need of increased awareness of their human rights. However, this seems to be a continuation of existing efforts; different projects (by the Human Rights League, the Red Cross, Diaconia University of Applied Sciences) have for several years worked on raising Roma youth awareness of human rights. This national youth policy measure was directly adapted from the NRIS into the mainstream strategy, which of course is a good thing; however, the measures the NRIS suggests are inadequate and do not match the social reality. Roma youth do acknowledge their rights at a certain level, but lack knowledge of how to realise their rights in Finnish society, about how to move from just being aware of their rights to understanding what action to take to enjoy them.

The NRIS currently consists of approximately 100 different recommendations; it would be more efficient to either focus implementation on the most relevant ones or to choose an annual emphasis on a specific thematic issue. The problem with all existing mainstream services is that they are designed to serve individuals, but work with Roma should take a community approach as the entry point. This means taking an approach at the level of the family and recognizing the Roma community aspect. Mental health-related problems and drug problems are not discussed by mainstream studies, but different means for

²⁶ <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11041398>

²⁷ VANUPO 2019.

identifying these problems in the Roma community are needed (see, e.g., Pavee Point, Young Pavees Mental Health, Ireland 2016).

ROMANI LANGUAGE

Definition of the problem

Finland is often discussed internationally as an example of good minority language rights policy. For two decades the revitalisation of the Romani language, however, has not moved in the direction of improvement and the challenges to it remain the same. There is no discussion among Roma about the need for or interest in revitalising the Romani language. If revitalisation is being done, then how, for whom, and by whom? For many of these measures, national policy on Roma (ROMPO) is based on assumptions or information attained through small-scale hearing events arranged for the community, where usually the same active Roma are present. The measures suggested in the NRIS should be more evidence-based than this. The Regional Advisory Boards on Roma Issues collect data from these hearings, and then the National Advisory Board on Roma Issues makes decisions based on that material. As discussed above, mostly the same activists from the elite have been involved at every level of decision-making and informal “gatekeeping” in this knowledge production.

The problem with the Romani language is how its revitalisation should be done, if at all, and how national policy on Roma could promote language revitalisation more efficiently, in such a way that the potential Roma speakers of the Romani language would be reached nationwide. In other words, work on the Romani language is currently in the hands of a small number of language experts, while the involvement of the rest of the Roma is lagging behind. These experts basically “own” the language and are protective of this territory, which raises ethical issues.

Background and cause of the problem

The current national policy on Roma notes the need for language revitalisation. Its recommendations are, in a way, impressive, including strengthening the skills of Romani language teachers (professional and non-professional) and the teaching of the Romani language at the University of Helsinki. However, there are challenges to motivating Roma to attend language courses at the university (see, e.g., Soininen, 2014, p. 42), specifically: most Roma never attain a high enough level of education to become college students; the university as a social environment is unfamiliar to most Roma; the level at which the Romani language is taught is too demanding, as the teaching is designed for philologists and linguists. This is then reflected in the education of the Romani-language teachers and the development of the study material.

The recommendations also include expanding the scale and depth of Romani Studies,²⁸ and there are other recommendations that actually sound good on paper – for example, developing distance studies delivered online – but the implementation in those terms has not been successful. There are no qualified Roma teachers of the Romani language, most Roma never acquire the skills to study at the requisite level, there are no materials about the language designed for any other level than university – nothing designed for children and nothing designed for adult education at less than the university level. There is a radical difference between the approach to the language taken by linguistics as a science and the teaching of a language for use in a social setting, and that difference has yet to be overcome.

Paying attention to the Romani language is definitely important, as the number of its native speakers is continually shrinking in the Roma community. A field survey about Romani status, Romani-language proficiency, and language attitudes in Finland indicates that just

²⁸ ROMPO2

one-third of the Roma population are skilled speakers of the language.²⁹ The number of Roma in Finland is estimated at approximately 12,000 and according to Hedman (2017) just 30-40% of Roma speak Romani at some level (between 4,000 and 4,800 persons).

The authors of this report conducted an online survey in regard to the Romani language; since there were just 40 respondents, no far-reaching conclusions can be drawn from the survey. However, most respondents elaborated that they had learned Romani at home, mostly from their parents. Since the younger generation has not attained the language skills required to pass that knowledge on to their children, new methods for revitalisation are needed. The survey also indicated that Roma would be most eager to learn the language in situations where more Roma gather, such as summer camps or weekly get-togethers at the regional level. Previously, there was government funding for such language clubs which met once a week, but that ended in 2017. There is still one summer school that offers Romani language, but given the dispersed nature of the Roma communities in Finland, this is not as accessible as it could be.

The survey findings suggest that the Roma population is either not eager to study in university settings or has no opportunity to study in such a setting. This further indicates that just a limited number of Roma perceive academia as a preferable environment for revitalising Romani, whereas some regard school or university as alien for this purpose.

Policy answer to the problem

The Romani language is considered important from the Roma identity perspective. However, the number of speakers keeps decreasing. We argue that in the current national policy on Roma the approach is methodologically misdirected and should therefore be revised, paying careful attention to the needs of local Roma, for instance, by having the Culture and Education Ministry conduct a more systematic survey among Finnish Roma about the level of their proficiency and use of the Romani language, including a module on attitudes towards learning and using the Romani language.

Most Roma in Finland (3,000) live in the capital region, but it would be best to disperse revitalisation among smaller groups in different locations; Roma live in small towns and villages outside the capital, at a density of anywhere between one and ten families. There are currently not enough Roma facilitators to undertake a nationwide revitalisation effort, and those who might be interested also are not proficient enough users of Romani to do this, to say nothing of the absence of materials that would meet this need. Roma culture is an oral one, with different habits than a written culture, and the cultivation of written Romani has not progressed in Finland. Roma youth would reportedly like to read Romani language material, but it does not yet exist. Revitalisation of the Romani language would benefit from weekly gatherings during which Romani would be spoken, from the development and distribution audio-visual material in Romani, from Romani language immersion in pre-schools and schools, and from informal learning.

²⁹ Hedman, 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ethnic inequality in Finnish prisons

1. The government should add specific measures to monitor and improve the situation of the equal treatment of incarcerated Roma in the prisons to its national Roma policy.
2. One such measure should be the involvement of Roma community members in prevention work and readjustment work after imprisonment.
3. Established mainstream professional structures for working with incarcerated persons should increase their collaborations with Roma NGOs.

Drug abuse and drug related deaths

4. The government should promote social work with Roma youth and new families to help them defend themselves against the antigypsyism that is leading to despair, drug abuse and suicide, including through the open dialogue method of involving the entire kin group in the community in this social work.

Romani language

5. The government should redesign its policy measures on revitalising spoken Romani as a living language so that they are more evidence-based and more targeted toward involving Roma community members, including those not otherwise involved with higher education.

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