

# DO YOU SPEAK CORONA?

## SURVEY RESULTS ON THE USE OF MINORITY LANGUAGES UNDER THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

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# CONTEXT

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**DURING EMERGENCY,  
QUICK PROCEDURES  
COMMUNICATION IN  
MOTHER TONGUE IS  
VITAL TO UNDERSTAND  
OFFICIAL  
COMMUNICATION FROM  
THE NATIONAL,  
REGIONAL OR LOCAL  
AUTHORITIES.**

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A novel coronavirus, the COVID-19, appeared in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and began to spread relatively quickly - first in China and then around the world. By mid-March 2020 most of European countries declared state of emergency and enforced mass closures to flatten the coronavirus curve: only shops selling food and pharmaceutical products could remain open; schools closed, events were cancelled and people were recommended to stay home.

Suddenly, from one day to another the lives of all European citizens changed. By the end of June, over 10 million people are infected worldwide and 500 thousand people have deceased. As the most difficult emergency period is being phased out, we believe it is important to analyse the answer of our authorities from the mother tongue's use point of view.

# ABOUT THE STUDY

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## TIMEFRAME AND FOCUS

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An online survey, with the scope of analyzing to what extent communication in mother tongue is assured by different stakeholders in the Member States of the European Union, as well as among the members of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), was conducted between March 31 and June 30, 2020.

The online questionnaire focused on:

- the **availability of information related to the coronavirus outbreak**, in general;
- on the **availability of healthcare information** related to the outbreak;
- **existence of an emergency hotline** operated in minority language;
- the **availability of online education in mother tongue**.

FUEN also conducted case-studies in the reference period in several EU countries.

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## WHO COMPLETED IT?

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The survey was based on data provided by the Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages of the European Parliament as well as member organizations of the Federal Union of European Nationalities.

The questionnaire was available in two languages: English and German.

## Countries Participating in the Survey and Case-Studies

- Surveyed Non-EU Countries
- Surveyed EU Countries
- Countries Participating only in the Case-Studies



The survey was completed for 44 minority communities and language groups in 25 European countries.

- Albania: Macedonian
- Austria: Croat, Slovene
- Azerbaijan: Turkish
- Bulgaria: Arman
- Croatia: Czech, Hungarian, Serbian
- Czech Republic: Polish
- Denmark: German
- Estonia: German, Russian
- Finland: Swedish
- France: Alsatian, Basque, Breton
- Germany: Danish, Frisian
- Greece: Pomakis, Turkish
- Hungary: Slovak
- Italy: Croat, German, Ladin, Slovene
- Latvia: Russian
- Poland: German, Kashubian
- Romania: Arman, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak (together)
- Russia: Lezghin
- Slovakia: German, Hungarian

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## COUNTRIES AS WELL AS MINORITY COMMUNITIES AND LANGUAGE GROUPS PARTICIPATING IN THE SURVEY

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- Slovenia: Hungarian
- Spain: Basque, Catalan
- Sweden: Finnish, Meänkieli, Scanian
- The Netherlands: Frisian
- Ukraine: Greek/Rumeian and Urumian, Hungarian
- United Kingdom: Welsh.

FUEN also conducted case studies in several EU countries. Of these we present in the current study the ones from Albania (Macedonian), Belgium (German), Estonia (German), Germany (Danish, Sinti and Roma), Italy (Ladin), and Switzerland (Romansh).

# THE DATA

In presenting the results of the survey we often refer to the term 'by case'. As seen above, there are 44 minority communities and language groups from 25 countries participating in the survey. However, the same groups live in multiple countries, such as Hungarians or Slovaks who live both in Romania and Ukraine, or Germans who live in Estonia, Denmark and Slovakia. In such cases, these minorities participate twice, or three times, simply because they represent a minority or language group in more countries. Thus, under the term 'by case' we refer to those 43 minority communities or linguistic groups for whom the questionnaire has been completed for.

## **Why not presenting detailed data by country?**

In many countries there are more minority groups for which the survey has been completed for. In case of Italy, for example, three different minority communities are present in the survey: Croats, Ladins and Slovenes. Yet Italy, just as other countries, has a different communication approach towards its different minority groups.

In case of the Ladin ethnic group, COVID-19 related information is available through various channels: both regional and local governments communicate in mother tongue and, at the same time, the minority organization is also active. In Slovenian partial information is available, provided by the regional government, meanwhile no information is channeled in Croat. As a result, presenting the data by country would be misleading, due to the different approaches towards the minority communities living on the territory of the same country, dependent on legislation and recognition of minorities/language groups. In each case, however, we present descriptive examples from each surveyed country.

The results are not representative for COVID-19 related communication in mother tongue of minorities/language groups, but still serves a good outline on how communication in mother tongue is assured in times of crisis in 25 states. The survey was conducted in two phases: one phase in March-April, the second in May-June. The same questionnaire and methodology was used in both phases.



# HOW DO YOU SAY FLATTENING THE CURVE IN YOUR MOTHER TONGUE?

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## RESULTS

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Is general information available in mother tongue? Is health related information available about the coronavirus outbreak? Is there an emergency hotline that can be used in mother tongue of the minority communities and linguistic groups? Is online education in mother tongue available? Who are the stakeholders who provide these information and services?

The availability of information in mother tongue is crucial if we expect people to follow certain rules and behave in a way to reduce the spread of the virus. Certain terminology, such as flattening the curve, can be difficult to understand in another

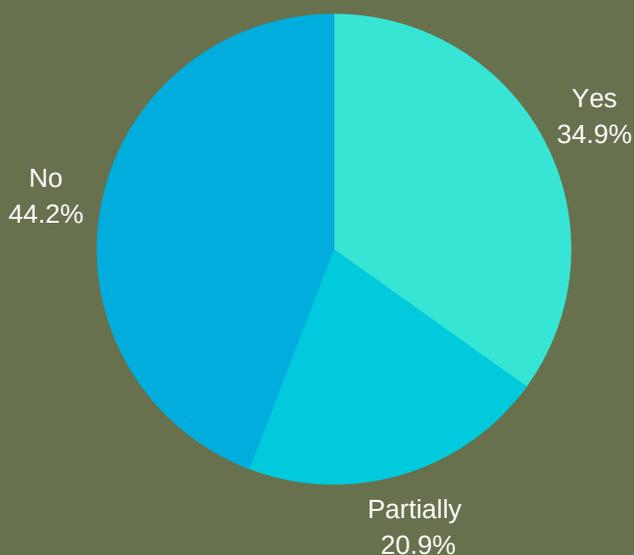
Even if they are fluent in the dominant language, they still have the right to clear and accurate communication in order to be able to make informed decisions. Nevertheless, communication on mother tongue by the authorities who are imposing certain restrictive measures, raises the trust in the authorities themselves and increases the likelihood to follow those measures.

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### IS COVID-19 RELATED INFORMATION AVAILABLE IN MOTHER TONGUE?

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By looking at the pie chart, we can conclude that key general information on the coronavirus outbreak is available in mother tongue of minority communities and language groups in slightly more than one third - 34.9% - of the cases. 20.9% receive partial information, meanwhile 44.2% lack all communication on mother tongue.



language and can ultimately alter the goal we have all set: to reduce the pressure on our health care system meanwhile fighting the outbreak. This is especially true for those marginalized communities that lack access to communication tools, are not literate or simply don't speak the language of the majority where they live.

Countries providing at least partial information in mother tongue of the minorities are Austria, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine and the United Kingdom. Some of the countries provide information in one language and don't provide in others. Romanian authorities, for example, do not provide any information in Czech and Slovak or Arman, but do provide information in Hungarian due to the fact that the Hungarian ethnic political organization - the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania - is present in the leadership of several county governments.

We have already seen that only one third of the participating minorities/language groups have access to key information on the outbreak in their mother tongue.

Where such information exists, at least partially, we can notice that although state and regional governments appear more often as the ones providing the information. However, minority organizations and minority press are equally important in assuring that the coronavirus outbreak-related information reaches minority communities and language groups. As presented in the figure, in 11 cases state governments and in 9 cases regional governments assure this type of communication, meanwhile in 8 cases both minority organizations and minority press are active.

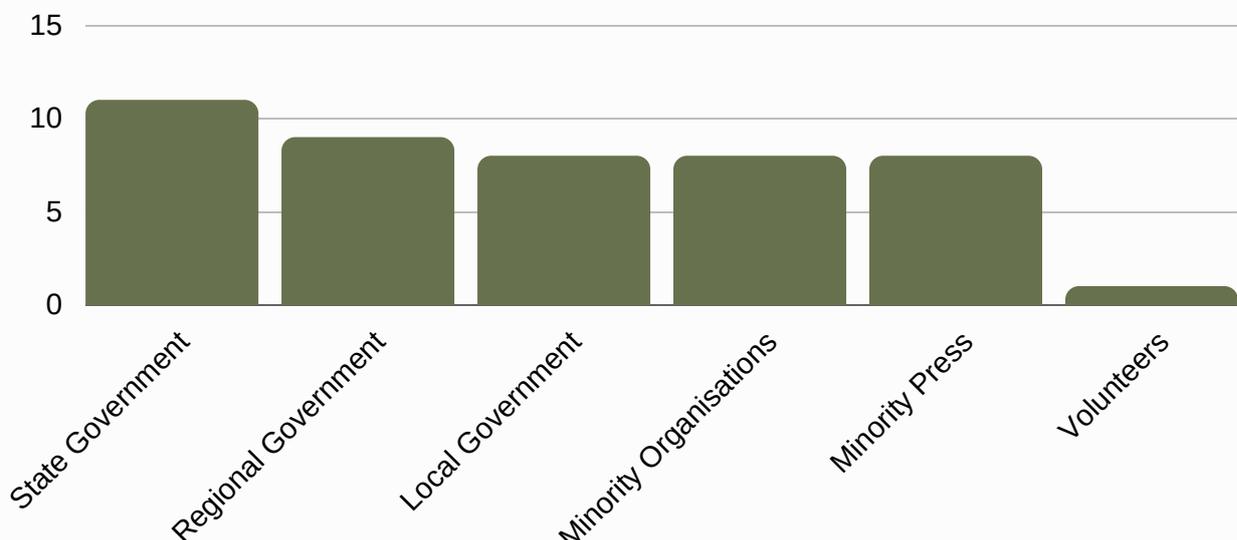
Minority organizations, along with minority press are the sole providers of key information in Croatia (Hungarian minority), Hungary (Slovak minority) and Ukraine (Hungarian minority), The minority press is solely fulfilling this role for Alsacian lan-

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## WHO ARE THE KEY STAKEHOLDERS PROVIDING INFORMATION ON MOTHER TONGUE?

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guage in France. No key-information is available for: Macedonians in Albania, Slovenes in Austria, Armans in Bulgaria and Romania, Poles in the Czech Republic, Germans in Estonia or Poland, Bretons and Basques in France, Frisians in the Netherlands, Pomakis and Turks in Greece, Croats in Italy, Kashubians in Poland, Czechs and Slovaks in Romania, Greek/Rumeian and Urumian in Ukraine. In all other cases government was providing the key COVID-19 related information in mother tongue.



# PARTICULAR ISSUES

## Border closure

The closures of the national borders in the course of the Corona measures have hit the minorities hard. The Danish minority in Germany is particularly concerned about contact with kin-state Denmark.

“For years we have enjoyed open borders, which facilitate cultural and linguistic exchange. In the German-Danish border region, the border has not been an obstacle for years. Members of the Danish minority work in Denmark, but they are also an active part of cultural life in Denmark. That is why the closure of the border hit us as a national minority particularly hard” – said Jens A. Christiansen, Secretary General of the Sydslesvig Forening (SSF), the organization of the Danish minority in Germany.

The SSF, together with the Southern Schleswig Voters' Association (SSW) and representatives of the German minority in Denmark, have worked to ensure that the border region plays a special role in the gradual opening of the borders. They mainly talked with members

of parliament in Denmark. With great success, because in her speech on 29 May, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen explicitly mentioned the Danish minority and the border region. It was her wish that normality would soon return to the border area, said the head of state. Although Denmark will continue to open its borders only partially, a special arrangement for those in the borderland is in the works. “As a Danish minority, we are pleased that politicians in the Danish parliament have listened. We are also pleased that the special arrangement will also apply to the majority population in the border area. This shows that we can achieve positive results together and through objective and good dialogue” – says the SSF Secretary General.

“The specific problem is the border closure. Our situation is special in that our region is located on the German-Belgian and Luxembourg-Belgian borders. The closures of the borders are severely restricting our daily life” – said Mr Fabrice Maassen, a representative of ProDG, the Party of the German Speaking Community in Belgium.

# PARTICULAR ISSUES

## **Role of Minority Organizations/Organizations of Language Groups and Media**

"A lot of information was provided in Ladin by the editorial staff of the newspaper La Usc di Ladins. The editorial office has made it its daily task to translate and publish posters and information signs in Ladin – and this in most Ladin idioms and also in the standard language. In social media the information signs could (and still can) be downloaded free of charge" - mentioned Mr Iaco Rigo from the organization Union Generala di Ladins dla Dolomites, Italy. "Not so eager were the Ladin municipalities (all over Ladinia), which did not all provide sufficient information for the people and if they did, then only in sparse cases in Ladin, which is actually the most spoken language of the citizens in these areas", continued Mr Rigo.

"The only specific problem is that there is no information in Frisian in the national newspapers, everything is in Dutch. We receive information from national newspapers and television." - said

Pier Bergsma, the Chairman of Ried fan den Fryske Movement in the Netherlands. "Our Frisian station Omrop Fryslân also provides regular information." Language loss is a clear and present danger in the Frisian community, and the Chairman offered two examples from the current situation. "A Frisian expert came last week to explain things. She started in Frisian, but after a short time changed to Dutch. Another example is the case of a Frisian medical staff person interviewed on the Frisian television, Omrop Fryslân, who spoke Dutch."

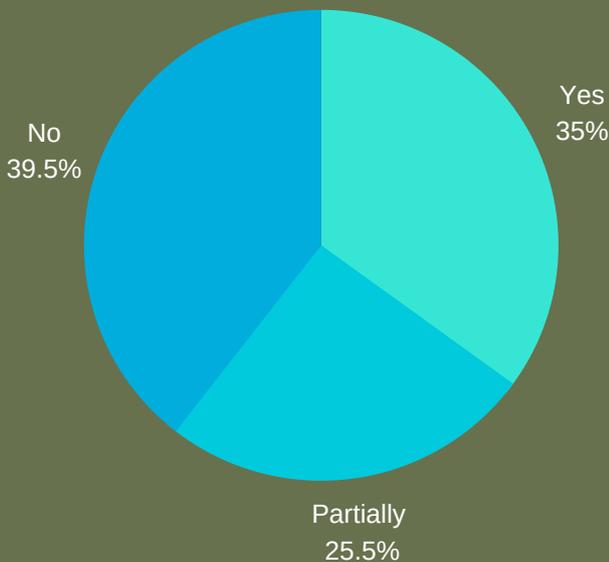
"One of the problems is that hardly any information material on the disease and personal protection were translated to Macedonian by national authorities." - mentioned Mr Nikola Gjurgjaj, the president of the Macedonian Association "Ilinden" in Albania. "The Ilinden keeps Macedonians in Albania constantly informed about the situation with the virus in Albania and in kin-state Macedonia. The Council of Europe's representation in Tirana has also produced a brochure on the virus in the minority languages" - concluded.

Providing information in mother tongue about the measures taken to reduce the spread of the outbreak, about the adopted legislation or the phases and deadlines until some of these measures are in force, are vital information in shaping the behavior of the citizens and in raising their sense of belonging.

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### IS COVID-19 RELATED HEALTH INFORMATION AVAILABLE IN MOTHER TONGUE?

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Availability of health-related information is also of key importance in reducing the feeling of exclusion of minority groups and language groups ensuring that people seek medical attention if in need.

Our next question looked into the availability of health-related information about the outbreak and the channels used to ensure these information reach minority groups and linguistic communities.

By looking at the pie chart, we can conclude that key health information on the coronavirus outbreak is available in mother tongue of minority communities and language groups, similar to key information, in slightly more than one third - 35%. Partial information is available in 25.5% of the cases, meanwhile 39.5% have no access in their mother tongue to the health related information of the aspects of the coronavirus outbreak.

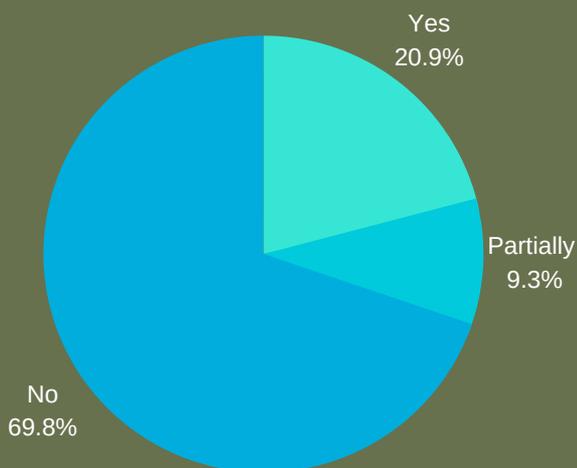
The channels used to communicate in mother tongue are also similar to that seen in case of ensuring general information about the outbreak. Public authorities, and specifically those representing local and regional governments are the ones proving to be more operative when they disseminate health-related information. Local governments in 14 cases disseminate health related information. Regional governments in 12 cases, state governments in 11 cases. Meanwhile minority organizations in 10 cases, minority press in 9 cases and volunteers in 4 cases. When looking at the raw data, this still means that only roughly one third of the minority groups or linguistic minorities have access to crucial health-related information in their mother tongue about the pandemic.

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## AVAILABILITY OF EMERGENCY HOTLINES

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Emergency hotlines started receiving an increased volume of calls as early as the first cases of COVID-19 began to appear in the countries.[1] To mitigate the high risk of overburdening the emergency hotlines, the governments have set up dedicated hotlines or increased the capacity of the existing call centers to face the rise in the volume of calls related to the coronavirus outbreak. We were interested to analyze whether emergency hotlines were also available in the languages of the minority communities or linguistic groups.



Unhindered access to emergency information is a basic human right. Yet, as observed from the chart, the availability of the emergency hotlines in minority languages are limited, as 69.8% of the cases have no access to them. We can observe that in only 20.9% of the cases have hotlines been set up and in 9.3% of the cases minority communities or linguistic groups have partial access to mother tongue emergency facilities, should a COVID-19 related emergency arise. The countries where such hotlines are available are: Austria in Croat, Azerbaijan in Turkish, Croatia in Serbian, Estonia in German and Russian, Finland in Swedish, Germany in Frisian, Italy in Ladin, Latvia in Russian, Romania in Hungarian, Spain in Basque and Catalan and United Kingdom in Welsh.

### Who provides the emergency hotlines?

Where hotlines exist in mother tongue of the minority groups, it is mainly the authorities who are providing for the service. In rare cases, however minority organizations are active in this regard. Azerbaijan is such a case, the Turkish organization ensuring an emergency hotline for those whose mother tongue is Turkish.



# PARTICULAR ISSUES

## **Economic Downturn and Racism**

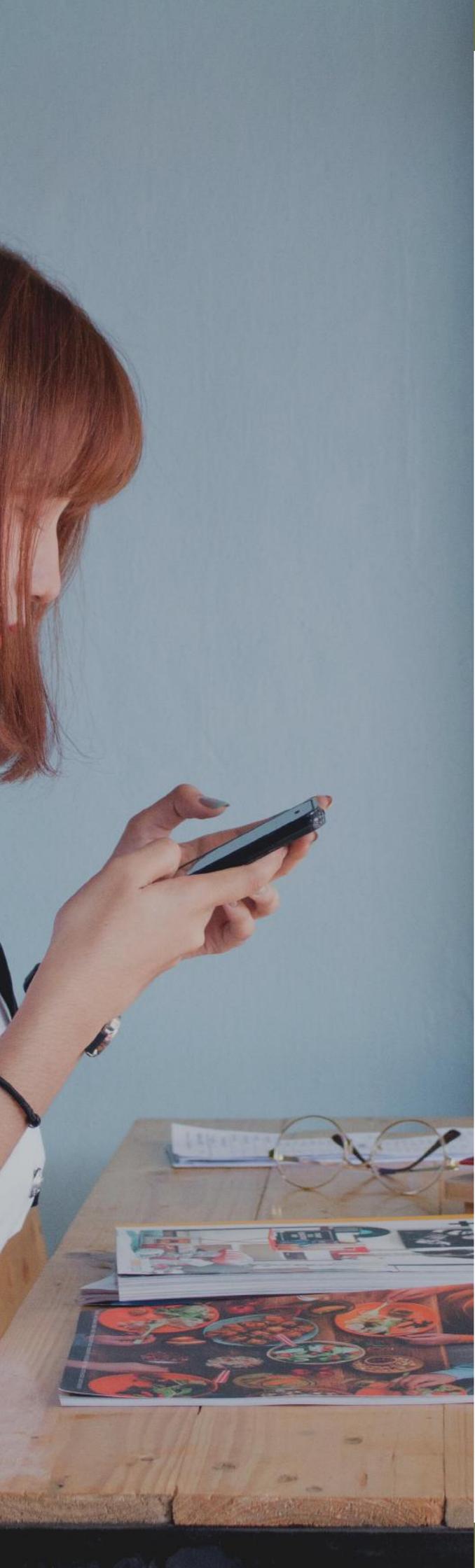
"The economic downturn caused by the containment measures is a bigger problem" - explained Mr Nikola Gjurgjaj, the president of the Macedonian Association "Ilinden" - Tirana in Albania. "Even before the current crisis, Golo Brdo, Mala Prespa and Gora, some of the regions where Macedonians live were among the poorest regions in Albania. Because of this they are now the hardest hit by unemployment, doubled by a shortage in food and medical supply. Our biggest problem right now is the food supply, as there is not much help offered."

The Central Council of German Sinti and Roma in an overview on the situation of Sinti and Roma in Germany pointed out that there are many Sinti and Roma who are active in self-employment, e.g. as artists or craftsmen. They were of course particularly affected by the restrictions in the economic sector, as were members of the majority society.

Many mainstream newspapers and television channels in Germany

reported about the specific vulnerability of Roma communities in the context of Covid-19 due to the existing structural inequalities and the increase of racism.

"Unfortunately, it is becoming apparent that antigypsyism is becoming virulent in the Corona crisis and that the minority in some countries is acting as a scapegoat. Hate speech is spreading online on social media, as well as in particular in the commentary sections of mainstream and online media outlets. There is a lack of awareness or even ignorance and denial concerning antigypsyism by media, and social media platforms that leads to the situation that there is little monitoring, intervention and sanction against antigypsyism online" - explained the representatives of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma. They have documented a number of stigmatizing and racist media articles, as well as fake news about Sinti and Roma in connection with Covid-19. The numbers have risen so much, that they do not have the capacity to address them all or initiate complaints.



# ENTERING DIGITAL

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## IS ONLINE EDUCATION AVAILABLE FOR MINORITIES/ LANGUAGE GROUPS?

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Access to education is a basic human right and all children should benefit from it. Whether online education in mother tongue could be organized or not was another important aspect of our survey.

In 22 occasions, representing 51.2% of all cases analyzed, online education was organized in mother tongue during the coronavirus outbreak. In another 8 cases, representing 18.6%, online education in mother tongue was at least partially available, meanwhile in 10 cases, representing 23.3%, no access to online education was assured. In 3 cases, representing 6.9%, mother tongue education was not available before the coronavirus outbreak either.

The countries in which online mother tongue education was set up at least partially are: Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden The Netherlands, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.



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## **WHO PROVIDES FOR ONLINE EDUCATION?**

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In 6 cases state governments are the ones ensuring online mother tongue education. These state governments are: Croatia for Czech language, Italy for Slovenian language, Sweden for Finnish and Meänkeli and Slovenia and Ukraine for Hungarian language education. Two of the regional governments: for the Lezghin minority in Russia and for Croats in Austria, provide for mother tongue online education. Three local governments - in Estonia for Russian, In Finland for Swedish and in Slovakia for Hungarians - organized online education.

In the rest of the cases, where online mother tongue education has been set up, it is exclusively the teachers and the schools who are responsible for ensuring that pupils have access to education during the pandemic.

# PARTICULAR ISSUES

## Digital advantages and disadvantages

"Some immigrant Roma families are unable to support their children in homeschooling because there is a lack of space, technology and knowledge on the part of the parents. This also affects other marginalized groups and migrants in Germany. If German is not spoken and written at home, this can lead to educational disadvantages for children" - pointed out the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma.

Online was not the best option for Germans in Estonia either. Ms Erika Weber, the chairwoman of The Union of Germans in Estonia pointed out that "many members of the community have an advanced age, and they do not possess a computer or do not know how to use it. For this reason, online activities in the broadest sense cannot be carried out, and many members are still informed by mail."

A positive example is that of the organization of Lia Rumantscha in

Switzerland, an umbrella organisation for all persons and organisations of the Romansh language, which supports, promotes and coordinates the work of regional Romansh associations, supraregional associations and Romansh organisations outside Grisons (Graubünden).

It took them only a week, following the beginning of the confinement to convert 20 language courses with a total of around 90 participants from face-to-face lessons to online training. The offer was well received and could influence the future offer in that a combination of face-to-face and online classes is now offered for certain courses. But painful decisions have also been taken as several summer language courses in Romansh had to be canceled.

Radiotelevisiun Svizra Rumantscha, the licensed radio and television that offers programs in Romansh in Switzerland has also produced over 20 online cultural offerings under the title "Culturadigitala". The other language chains of the Swiss Radio and Television Company also provide similar programs.

# RECOMMENDATIONS



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## THE STRUGGLES OF COMMUNITIES TO BRING GREATER ATTENTION TO LINGUISTIC ISSUES SHOULD BE PART OF THE LANGUAGE RIGHTS AGENDA

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Only in half of the surveyed cases do stakeholders provide at least partial information in the mother tongue of the minority communities. States should engage to provide these information to reach minority groups with accurate language use and appropriate channels.

Being able to ask for help in a life-threatening emergency in mother tongue could save lives. We recommend setting up these emergency hotlines with operators who speak the language of minorities in every country,

Online education is available for only 30 of the surveyed minorities, out of the 40 who benefited of mother tongue education before the outbreak as well. More emphasis should be placed on digitalisation of education overall, but minority communities need to be included in this process.

## Endnotes:

[1] Italy reported 5,086 calls made to the 112 Centre in Milan on February 16, 2020 (<http://www.vita.it/it/article/2020/02/24/coronavirus-numeri-di-emergenza-presi-dassalto/154125/>). In Spain, Catalonia, emergency calls have tripled by March 18, 2020 (<https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20200318/474240479361/coronavirus-telefono-112-emergencias-saturado-dudas-virus-catalunya.html>) In Croatia 6000 calls were received daily, although previously 4000 calls were the average (<https://dugopolje.org/113-telefonska-linija-za-sve-informacije-okoronavirusa/>).

A study prepared for the Intergroup of Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages based on data provided by minority groups and organisations with the support of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) under the coordination of Loránt Vincze, MEP

