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Prime Minister,
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Culture and
Education

Still No Effective Measures for Implementation of Minority Rights in Sweden

As representatives of national minorities we wish to inform the Committees of the development of minority rights in Sweden. We are very concerned and disappointed over the fact that the measures taken by the Swedish Government are still insufficient to secure minority rights in Sweden.

During the summer of 2017, Sweden received the most recent recommendations from the Council of Europe.¹ In spite of recent initiatives by the Swedish Government, such as Government Proposal No. 2017/18:199 that was presented in March of 2018, ***we are forced to conclude that none of the most recent recommendations from the Council of Europe have yet been met by the Swedish Government. The Swedish Government is still not fulfilling its obligations under the Council of Europe minority rights conventions. We are especially concerned about the fact that there is still no effective remedy in place in case of non-appliance with the Minority Act.***

Development Since Last Monitoring Round

Sweden submitted its most recent reports regarding the Council of Europe minority rights conventions in June 2016. The Sweden Finnish Delegation and the National Association of Sweden Tornedalians submitted an alternative report to the Expert Committees in September 2016, called *Lost Momentum – Minority Voices on the Implementation of Minority Rights in Sweden 2016*.² What has happened since then, and especially during the current political term?

A number of different political statements have been made by the current Swedish Government during the political term, which have given the national minorities reason to hope for actual significant improvements in implementation of minority rights. We note that the Prime Minister, Mr. Stefan Löfven, stated in the Statement of Government Policy, on 3 October 2014, that Sweden must secure

¹ Recommendation CM/RecChL(2017)1 of the Committee of Ministers on the application of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages by Sweden, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 11 May 2017; Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Fourth Opinion on Sweden – adopted on 22 June 2017, Published on 16 October 2017

² http://sverigefinne.se/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Lost-Momentum_Minority-Voices-on-the-Implementation-of-Minority-Rights-in-Sweden-2016_161003-3.pdf

the rights of national minorities.³ The minister in charge of minority issues, the Minister for Culture and Democracy, Ms. Alice Bah Kuhnke, has on numerous occasions in speeches and interviews referred to her own and the Government's high ambitions in improving the implementation of minority rights. In an interview five months after taking office, she stated that the situation of the national minorities is her most important issue to deal with as a minister.⁴ In a speech commemorating the 15th anniversary of the Parliament's decision to recognize the national minorities, on 2 December 2014, Ms. Alice Bah Kuhnke stated that she was aware of shortcomings in the Minority Act and that she was considering an overview in order to improve the equal implementation in the municipalities. She also noted that measures in the field of education are important.⁵ In several interviews she has emphasized the need to reform the minority rights policy and the Minority Act in order to improve the implementations, stating that this is an area of priority for the Government and that it is necessary to have a government inquiry on the matter.⁶ She has also stated that her party will stand by the previous promise of an additional 40 million SEK for strengthening minority rights.⁷

The Government eventually did appoint two separate government inquiries – on the general implementation of minority rights and on educational issues – that submitted their findings in June and November of 2017.⁸ So far the Government has processed only one of these reports – No. 2017:60 – into a legal proposal, *Strengthened Minority Rights Policy*, that was submitted to Parliament in March 2018.⁹ Parliament is expected to approve the proposal on 14 June 2018. The Government proposal only contains approximately half of the proposals made by the inquiry in that report. No information has been provided on when or how the Government will deal with the rest of the proposals made by the inquiries. The political term is now reaching its end and general elections are coming up on 9 September 2018. Very little time remains for additional measures.

We must therefore conclude that very little has come out of the high ambitions and statements made by the representatives of the Government. We can only relate to the actual results and improvements. No 40 million SEK extra have been provided for minority rights reforms, as promised by the Minister for Culture and Democracy. The total increase of funding during the political term is 26 million SEK.

The Government's Recent Proposal is Weak

Part of the assignment for the implementation inquiry was to find ways to strengthen the minority rights legislation, to improve the implementation in general and to strengthen language revitalization. The inquiry was **not even allowed** to propose regulations on supervision of the Minority Act. And this is where the problems start. The inquiry did propose some legislative changes, and some of these have been picked up by the Government. But the inquiry's proposal of a new government agency in charge

³ <http://www.government.se/information-material/2014/10/statement-of-government-policy-3-october-2014/>

⁴ <http://minoritet.se/nationella-minoriteter-na-ar-min-viktigaste-frag-a>

⁵ <http://www.regeringen.se/tal/2014/12/tal-m.a.a.-15-arsjubileum-av-riksdagens-erkannande-av-de-fem-minoriteter-na/>

⁶ SR Sjuradio, 3 Oct. 2014, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=185&artikel=5982349>; SR Sjuradio, 17 Mar. 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=185&artikel=6118975>; SR Sjuradio and Sameradion, 9 June 2016,

<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=185&artikel=6450182>,
<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2327&artikel=6449656>

⁷ SR Sjuradio, 10 Nov. 2014, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=185&artikel=6014032>

⁸ Government Inquiries No. 2017:60, 2017:88, 2017:91.

⁹ Government Proposal No. 2017/18: 199,

<https://www.regeringen.se/496171/contentassets/0bd30dc1baee4470b317ae7db82a56f7/en-starkt-minoritetspolitik-prop.-201718199.pdf>

of follow-up has been completely ignored by the Government! No proposals have been made on whether implementation and follow-up is to be improved through e.g. clearer mandate for the government agencies in charge. A very significant part of the minority reform of 2010 was to establish a government follow-up function that was to aid and support municipalities in their task, “a motor in the system” to coordinate efforts and to closely monitor how the implementation is followed through. For the Sweden Finnish and Tornedalian minorities this task is to be fulfilled by the County Administrative Board of Stockholm. As was pointed out at length in the most recent alternative report, this has not been the actual result. For instance, the municipalities have not been provided sufficient training, support and aid, which affects the implementation negatively. The insufficient support provided also affects how efficiently the state funding for municipalities can be used. Since 2010, the County Administrative Board has not even been able to secure language and cultural skills for its own staff in Finnish or Meänkieli! It is exceedingly difficult for the follow-up agency to even follow minority language media discussing the situation of the minorities if it does not have the necessary language skills!

The Sweden Finnish and Tornedalian national minority organizations’ criticism against the current follow-up agency for Finnish and Meänkieli have been ignored by the Government. We must conclude that no actual improvements are proposed when it comes to the government follow up and the support provided for the municipalities. Sweden still has no effective remedies for national minorities when minority rights are not being respected.

Recently, an additional difficulty has arisen regarding follow-up. For municipalities that choose to join an additional administrative area, this may affect which government agency is in charge of follow-up. Since the municipalities of Stockholm and Luleå now have announced that they wish to join the Sami administrative area as well, the follow-up responsibility will shift from the County Administrative Board in Stockholm to the Sami Parliament, as far as we understand it. During the last few years, the Sami Parliament have made a number of statements proclaiming that they see themselves as indigenous people only and not as a national minority. As a result they have chosen not to participate in dialogue meetings with representatives of national minorities, most recently on 22 May 2018 at the Ministry of Culture. We respect the Sami’s decisions. However, it is a substantial problem if the rights of the Sweden Finns and Tornedalians are under the follow-up responsibility of the Sami Parliament (as a government agency) in certain municipalities, if the Sami will not even participate in exchange of ideas that relate to national minority rights.

The Sweden Finns and the Tornedalians cannot accept that issues that relate to them and their minority rights, or the funding to municipalities relating to their rights, are dealt with by another group, whether it is an indigenous people or another national minority.

Lack of Initiatives Regarding Revitalization of Finnish and Meänkieli

In its recent proposal, the Government writes about the strengthening of revitalization efforts and about securing the learning of minority languages for children and youth. Yet no proposal has been made regarding the establishment of a language center for Finnish and Meänkieli, even though a Sami language center – established in 2010 as part of the minority rights policy – is seen as an important instrument for developing revitalization tools and methods. The Sweden Finns and Tornedalians have argued for such a language center for a number of years! A concrete proposal on the establishment of such a language center was submitted to the Minister for Culture and Democracy in November 2015, and was reiterated by the government inquiry in 2017. Yet the Sami received additional funding for developing the Sami language center and tools for language revitalization as recently as in spring 2018.

We must conclude that the language of the Government on improvements in the field of revitalization has no actual content! No actual improvements are being made for the Sweden Finns or the Tornedalians. The Government's international obligations regarding the promotion of minority languages are the same for all the languages that are protected under Part III of the Language Charter: Finnish, Meänkieli and Sami.

Lack of Initiatives Regarding Influence for National Minorities

In its proposal the Government writes about the importance of empowerment of the national minorities and the need to improve their influence in different issues. The number of meetings and the need to comment on different Government inquiry proposals etc. has increased a great deal since the previous minority rights reform in 2010. Yet, the amount of total funding for national minority organizations has not been increased since 2010. In fact, since the number of minority organizations has increased, the total amount of funding per organization has decreased in some minority groups. The only group that has received increased funding is the Sami Parliament as representatives of indigenous people.

We must conclude that the language of the Government on improvements in the field of empowerment has no actual content!

Lack of Initiatives Securing Children's Language Rights

During this political term no initiatives have been made by the Government on improving the educational situation of national minority children, with the exception of some proposals regarding preschools. It has been difficult for the national minorities to establish a dialogue with the Ministry of Education. The problems in the field of education described in previous alternative reports *Lost Momentum* and *Marginalized and Ignored – National Minority Children's Struggle for Language Rights in Sweden 2013*¹⁰ remain. There is still no comprehensive and structured educational approach based on the needs of the speakers and according to the situation of each of the minority languages.

The future of the proposals suggested by the inquiry of 2017 is uncertain. No information has been given on whether the Minister for Education is even in favor of the inquiry's proposals (Inquiry report No. 2017:91). No meeting has taken place between the Minister for Education and the Sweden Finns or Tornedalians since November 2015.

We must conclude that the national minority children's right to education in and on their minority language is as uncertain as before. No improvements have been made and this is devastating for the survival of the national minority languages in Sweden. It is unacceptable that Sweden has been unable to secure the language rights of national minority children for the past 18 years since the ratification of the conventions, in spite of the numerous recommendations made by the Council of Europe. This is also in breach of the provisions in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a convention that the Swedish Government is currently pushing strongly to implement through national legislation. A whole generation of national minority children have missed out on the chance to acquire mature literacy in their minority language!

Concluding remarks

We are very concerned about the minority rights situation in Sweden. Families are frustrated, some of them give up. Minority language care of the elderly is still not a reality in many municipalities, in spite

¹⁰ <http://sverigefinne.se/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Marginalized-and-ignored-1.pdf>

of the legal rights to such care. In spite of claimed high ambitions, the Government is unable to deliver sufficient initiatives.

We ask the monitoring bodies of the Council of Europe to take note of the current situation, and to urge Sweden to fulfil its commitments under the Framework Convention and the European Language Charter will be fulfilled. We are done waiting for sufficient and appropriate initiatives!

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Mr. Voitto Visuri, Chairperson, The National Association of Finns in Sweden

Ms. Ella Turta, Chairperson, Sweden Finnish Youth Organization

Mr. Martti Paananen, Chairperson, Sweden Finnish Delegation

Ms. Josephine Ylipää, Chairperson, Met Nuoret - National Youth Association of Swedish Tornedalians and Meänkieli-people

Ms. Pirkko Sinkkonen, Chairperson, The Central Association of Finnish Pensioners in Sweden