

An increase in monitoring, a decrease in momentum –

The state of Sweden's Minority policies in 2022

A report on Sweden's implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities

and

the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages

by

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Introduction

As noted by the former Minister for Culture and Democracy, with responsibility for national minorities, Amanda Lind, Sweden's commitment to minority politics and the protection of its national minorities celebrated 20 years in 2020. It is therefore with a sense of lost potential that the Sweden Finnish minority has followed the development of minority rights over the last few years. Worrying trends as far as the preservation of the Finnish language in Sweden is concerned have been observed in many official reports, while the recommendations for action in the same official reports are largely ignored.

1. The state of the Swedish Minority Act

The Swedish Act on National Minorities and National Minority Languages (SFS 2009:74) (the “Minority Act”) was on the 1st of January 2019 amended with new provisions. This was part of an increase in ambition for the Swedish government when it comes to minority rights. Alas, as has been previously noted by minority representatives, the implementation or non-implementation of said rights remains largely left up to the discretion of regional- and local authorities. This has left individuals without recourse when their rights are violated.

There is currently no supervising authority for the legislation in question, but the County administrative board of Stockholm together with the Sámi Parliament of Sweden reports to the government on the goals of minority policies. In their last report it is noted that great differences remain in how far different municipalities have gone when it comes to implementing minority rights.¹ When the situation varies widely based on which municipality you belong to, effective legal remedies become even more important.

A case has recently been noted where parents from one municipality wished for their children to attend a Finnish-speaking class in a neighboring municipality. They were initially declined but as they petitioned for review by the Board of Appeal for Education the board reversed the decision and resolved the case in the families favor. The municipality did not honor the decision and the children were not admitted to the class. The family then decided to sue both the municipalities at the district court. Sadly, they were not successful, which led them to be liable to pay for the municipality’s legal fees. As the type of case is generally not covered by insurance in Sweden, the cost to the family is in the tens of thousands of Euros.²

It should be noted that the family in part argued that they were the subject of discrimination based on language. If language would have been included in the Discrimination Act of Sweden, each party would have had to carry their own legal fees as long as the plaintiff had a justified reason for filing the complaint. This is a mechanism that exists in order that individuals that believe themselves to be subject to discrimination will not be deterred by incurring potentially disastrous legal fees. For the Finnish speaking minority in Sweden, this is sadly not the case.

¹ *Nationella minoriteter och minoritetsspråk – Minoritetspolitikens utveckling år 2021*, p. 9.

² <https://suijures.online/oppet-brev-till-skolpolitiker-i-vasteras-och-hallstahammar-om-att-krossa-en-finsk-familj/>

2. Language as a ground of discrimination

The committee of experts of the European charter for regional or minority languages recommended in their seventh evaluation report on Sweden that the Discrimination Act should extend its grounds of discrimination so as to cover explicitly discrimination based on language. It was with great enthusiasm we received the news that the Swedish government would be reviewing the question.³ But it was also with equal disappointment that we noted in the latest report from Sweden that it was stated that there are currently no plans to further investigate the question.

The government's position is that ethnicity as a ground of discrimination would be enough to satisfy the needs of our community. Not only is language and ethnicity not intrinsically connected in the way that is implied in the report, that this is not enough to protect the national minorities has also been made abundantly clear in the cases reviewed by the Equality Ombudsman (DO).⁴ For the protection of minority- and language rights it is therefore necessary that Sweden complies with its international obligations and that the question of language as a ground of discrimination is reviewed.

Examples of the need for language as a ground of discrimination that have previously been reported, and reviewed by DO, are those of school children forbidden from speaking Finnish during recess and during handicraft class room group activities with other Finnish speakers. We would now wish to bring to the attention of the Committee of Experts more recent examples, where nurses at Finnish-language elderly ward were forbidden from speaking Finnish to one another during their lunch break. The reason given was that the lunch room was shared with staff from other wards and that in shared areas Swedish should always be spoken. When questioned by national media, the municipality in question has stated that this is part of their culture- and language policy.⁵ As language is not recognized as a ground of discrimination, the nurses in question are left with no effective legal remedy within the national court system.

³ Åsa Lindhagen, Minister for Financial Markets and previously Minister for Gender Equality, in an interview published on the 18th of December 2020 with Radio Sweden.

⁴ <https://www.do.se/lag-och-ratt/stallningstaganden/att-anvanda-modersmal-i-skolan/>

⁵ <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/uutiset/kunta-vastaa-tyopaikoilla-puhutaan-kielta-jota-kaikki-ymmartavat-ja-huddingessa-se-on-ruotsi>

3. Minority languages and teaching about national minorities in the educational system

In 2021 the Swedish National Agency for Education was given a governmental assignment to increase the availability and quality of education for national minority languages. This includes support for teaching, such as teaching materials.

The teaching of their mother tongue for speakers of national minority languages continues to in part be provided by ambulating teachers that travel between their students outside of their ordinary schedule or by unlicensed teachers. The situation is improved somewhat by new training that has been provided for these teachers.

The report “In the margin” (2012:2) by the Swedish National Agency for Education, a quality assessment of the teaching of mother tongue and bilingual teaching of minority languages, provides a clear image of the structural difficulties facing our minority language. Local municipalities fail to comply with the requirement to inform parents of their rights to education of minority languages. This is due to both a lack of incentives to do so and due to a lack of information when it comes to minority rights.

It is also common to refer to the difficulty of finding teachers. This is often due to a lack of interest, as an inventory on local language resources has rarely, if ever, been made. But it is also a problem that stems from the lack of an uninterrupted chain of education from primary- to higher education. We simply do not have enough trained teachers able to teach Finnish. As of today, no upper secondary school (gymnasium) in Sweden offers the option to learn Finnish as a modern language.

In September of 2020 the Swedish Institute of Language and Folklore (ISOF) was given the task of reviewing the state of the national minority languages. The inquiry concluded that the future of the minority languages was worrying and that the main focus should be on education in minority languages. They also provided an action plan consisting of 81 items. In an additional request, the Swedish government then asked ISOF to shorten the list and select the 6 most important items, and to exclude suggestions regarding education as these would be looked at separately. Not only is this lack of ambition worrying, it is our belief that there is considerable risk in these questions being separated. A holistic approach is required in order to guarantee the preservation of the national minority language as the current situation is dire.

We are also troubled by the development in the view on charter schools. The current model, where Finnish schools are being run as charter schools is due to the lack of interest from the government in providing schools or classes for Finnish speaking children. It is our opinion that in order to preserve and strengthen Sweden’s minority languages this option should also be provided in public schools.

Governmental financing and national coordination are both required in order to guarantee access to education for Finnish-speaking children throughout Sweden. ISOF also provided a suggestion that designated funding should be provided to municipal and charter schools in order to provide incentives for bilingual teaching. The ministry of education and research replied that this would be difficult to provide this as supporting certain charter schools before others would be impossible.⁶

4. Elderly care

The state of elderly care for the minority in many ways reflects the state of the education system. Municipalities often fail to ask if the caretaker would wish for care in Finnish, therefore a need is not established. If a need is established, a lack of qualified staff is instead cited as an issue. This due to a lack of inventory of language resources. Finnish-speakers are not identified and therefore cannot be put to use.

During the ongoing pandemic, Finnish born residents of Sweden was the migrant group most at risk to die due to Covid-19. This was in part due to high average age of these migrants, again highlighting the urgent need for care of the elderly that our group requires. It has been previously noted how due to increased age, previously known Swedish can often be forgotten. This also makes the need for staff well versed in Finnish a necessity for proper care.

5. Cultural sustainability

The government has given ISOF the task of establishing a language center for Finnish, Jiddisch, Meänkieli and Romani chib during 2020–2024. This has been very positively received by our minority, although more than one language center would be of great use as our minority is widely spread throughout Sweden.

We have been noting a negative trend when it comes to public service, especially when it comes to the national public television broadcaster SVT. Although the provisions for funding require that the amount of programming in minority language increases, this has not always been the case. For many, especially elderly, Finnish speaking residents of Sweden, the daily

⁶ Ministry of education and research, U2020/05237.

Uutiset is the primary news source. The time allotted for news in Finnish has been lessened. When asked for an explanation, representatives from SVT have noted that on-demand streaming content has increased. For our minority, especially considering our aging population, this is not a positive development.

6. Conclusion and summary

As a minority we have been positively surprised by the recent increase in funding and the new action plan provided for sustaining and promoting minority languages. But it is with a sense of increasing exasperation we note that while it is becoming increasingly clear where our issues lie, very little is done to actually address them.

We believe that in order for our minority to thrive and for our language to survive in Sweden not only do we need monitoring and reports, we need concrete action. We as a minority need to know that when a municipality fails to live up to its obligations, that the situation can be changed. When discrimination occurs, that this can be rectified within a court of law. And we need to know that our children will have the chance to grow up being proud of their heritage and with a chance to learn their mother tongue. No amount of monitoring can provide this.

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