

# National minorities and minority languages

## A summary of the Government's minority policy



REGERINGSKANSLIET

Government Offices  
of Sweden

FACT SHEET

Ministry for Integration  
and Gender Equality

July 2007

**The objective of Sweden's minority policy is to protect the national minorities, strengthen their power to influence and support the historical minority languages to keep alive. Sweden's national minorities are the Jews, the Roma, the Sami, the Swedish Finns and the Tornedalers. The minority languages are Yiddish, Romany Chib, Sami, Finnish and Meänkieli**

### **An integrated Swedish minority policy**

Following a decision by the Riksdag in 1999 to approve ratification of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (the Framework Convention) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (the Minority Languages Charter) the minority policy was established as a separate policy area in 2000. The basis of minority policy is set out in the Government Bill National Minorities in Sweden (1998/99:143, Committee Report 1999/2000: KU6, Parliamentary Communication 1999/2000:69) and in the Framework Convention and the Minority Languages Charter.

The protection of the rights of national minorities and the right to use minority languages in private and public contexts are an integral part of the international protection for the human rights. The recognition of the minority languages also acknowledges that these languages are part of the Swedish cultural heritage.

To realise the objective of the minority policy, the needs and interests of all national minorities, in all the regions of this country and at all levels of society, must be taken into account. This applies to central government agencies as well as to municipalities and county councils. Sweden has a long tradition of strong local self-government. Because of this, implementation of the minority policy must take place in a dialogue between central and local government.

### **National minorities**

At the ratification of the Framework Convention, the groups that are national minorities in Sweden were explicitly named. Common to the national minorities in Sweden is that they have all existed in Sweden for a very long time. Their languages and cultures are therefore part of the Swedish national heritage. In addition, persons belonging to each group enjoy an express affinity and a common religious, linguistic, traditional or cultural affiliation and in various ways manifest a

will and desire to retain their own identity. Since the Sami are an indigenous people in Sweden, there is also a specific Sami policy

### **Minority languages**

One important element of the minority policy is providing support to the historical minority languages with a view to keeping them alive. The languages recognised as minority languages in Sweden are Yiddish, Romany Chib (all varieties), Sami (all varieties) Finnish and Meänkieli. These languages are also covered by Sweden's ratification of the Minority Languages Charter. Three of the national minority languages, Sami, Finnish and Meänkieli, are territorially linked languages; in other words, they are historically associated with certain geographical areas of the country. This is why these languages are more strongly protected under the Minority Languages Charter than Yiddish or Romany Chib

### *Minority language legislation*

Specific minority language legislation applies to certain geographical areas, where Sami, Finnish and Meänkieli have a long tradition. This legislation applies to certain municipalities in Norrbotten, called administrative areas, and entitles individuals to use Sami, Finnish and Meänkieli in their dealings with administrative agencies and courts. The legislation also gives the right to pre-school and elderly care partly or completely in the minority language. Norrbotten County Administrative Board has been assigned the task of distributing government grants to the municipalities in the administrative areas to cover the costs arising as a result of these laws. It is also responsible for following up and evaluating the municipalities' implementation of the legislation.

### **Minority policy – a cross-sectoral policy**

Many core parts of the minority policy, such as educational, cultural and anti-discrimination measures, are implemented within other policy areas. Thus, to achieve the aim of the minority policy, co-ordination between this and other policy areas is necessary. There is, for this reason, a special working group at the Government Offices made up of representatives from the relevant ministries. It is also important that the gender equality perspective be integrated into the minority policy.

### *Education*

It is vital that all children in Sweden learn about the history of the country's national minorities, and about their culture, language and religion. For this reason school curricula include instruction on national minorities and minority languages. Mother-tongue instruction and bilingual instruction have an important role to play in supporting and strengthening minority languages. As part of its supervisory responsibilities, the National Agency for Education is required to monitor the development of mothertongue and bilingual instruction for national minorities.

### *Culture*

The national minorities have rich cultures of their own, which often find expression in a variety of artistic activities. These not only contribute to the preservation and development of minority cultures in Sweden, but also enrich Swedish cultural life as a whole.

Since 2000, government support for literary and cultural publications has received funds each year so that special consideration can be given to the national minorities in the allocation process. Furthermore, since 2002 the National Council for Cultural Affairs allocates funds for initiatives to promote national minority languages and culture.

### *Language cultivation*

The national language policy states that everyone is entitled to a language, and emphasises the right to use and develop one's own minority language. The Institute for Language and Folklore is the government agency responsible for language cultivation as regards Yiddish, Romany Chib, Finnish and Meänkieli. The Sameting (Sami Parliament) is in charge of language cultivation for Sami.

### *Non-discrimination*

Sweden has special legislation that makes discrimination on grounds such as ethnic origin or religion unlawful.

The Office of the Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination is responsible for combating and preventing discrimination on grounds of ethnic origin, religion or other belief. The Office also deals with reported cases of discrimination. Since Roma are

often the victims of discrimination, the Office has been instructed to make special efforts to prevent and combat discrimination of Roma.

### **Greater influence for national minorities**

Giving national minorities the opportunity to influence decisions affecting the community at large is an important part of Sweden's minority policy. Various measures have accordingly been taken, aimed at strengthening minorities influence in public decision-making. These include consultative meetings attended by representatives of the Government and minority organisations. Organisations representing national minorities also receive financial support each year to help them carry out their activities. The funds are allocated in accordance with the Ordinance on Government Support for National Minorities (2005:765).

### **International cooperation**

Sweden reports to the Council of Europe every five years on its efforts regarding the implementation of the Framework Convention and every three years on the Minority Languages Charter. The Council of Europe examines Sweden's reports and also visits Sweden for meetings with the relevant agencies and organisations. Its conclusions and recommendations are then included in its report on Sweden. This monitoring mechanism is important in the follow-up and development of minority policy.

In addition to the reports to the Council of Europe, Sweden collaborates with the Council by participating in two expert groups. Sweden also works with the Nordic countries in several working groups on minority policy issues.

### **To find out more...**

The Government Bill National Minorities in Sweden (1998/99:143) is available on the Government website: [www.regeringen.se](http://www.regeringen.se). It can also be purchased from the Riksdag Printing Office, tel. +46 8 786 58 10. For more information on the Government's work on national minority issues, visit [www.regeringen.se](http://www.regeringen.se), [www.manskligarattigheter.se](http://www.manskligarattigheter.se) or contact the Division for Democratic Issues, Human Rights, National Minorities and Non-Governmental Organisations: +46 8 405 10 00. Information on the Council on Europe is available at [www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int).



REGERINGSKANSLIET

**Ministry for Integration  
and Gender Equality  
Sweden**

SE-10333 Stockholm, Sweden

Phone switchboard +46 8 405 10 00

All inquiries about content should be directed to Bilge Tekin Befrits, tel +46 8 405 10 00. Additional copies of the fact sheet can be ordered from the Ministry for Integration and Gender Equality, tel +46 8 405 10 00 or at The Government's website: <http://www.sweden.gov.se/>

Fact sheet produced by the Ministry for Integration and Gender Equality. Printed by XGS Grafisk Service, Stockholm, Sweden, July 2007. Article no. IJ 07.07e