

Tolerance in Swedish Political Life

Ulf Mörkenstam, Andreas Gottardis & Hans Ingvar Roth

In recent years, and across the EU, public debate and policies have tended to focus on the challenges arising from the integration of ethnic and religious immigrant groups, particularly as regards the representation and the recognition of their claims in the public sphere. However, issues of discrimination and intolerance have continued to be just as relevant in the daily life of national minorities and indigenous peoples..

One important objective for these groups has been the fulfillment of historical rectification, for instance, concerning the deprivation of land through the processes of modernization. Although the population of indigenous peoples is relatively small, from both a global and a European perspective, the implications of their political claims are highly significant. They touch upon essential issues in national and international politics such as territorial integrity, land rights, political and cultural self-determination and citizenship rights. The ways in which various states and majority populations respond to the political claims of indigenous people could thus be seen as a litmus test of the overall inclination to engage in anti-discrimination and struggles against intolerance, not at least from the perspective of a history of colonization.

Sweden is one of the few European countries that have an indigenous population, the Sámi people. The Sámi live in north-western Europe, divided in the course of history by four nation states: Finland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. The estimates of the number of Sámi differ depending on the sources used but the figures most often seen varies between 80-100,000, of which more than half reside in Norway, around 20,000 in Sweden, 8,000 in Finland and 2,000 in Russia. It is quite common to distinguish Sámi ethnicity by, for instance, attachment to language (there are three languages with several dialects), their traditional livelihoods differing according to their place of residence (foremost reindeer herding and fishing), a common historical memory of their ancestral homeland and the traditional Sámi religion ("shamanism"). The Sámi people fulfill the most common criteria of being an indigenous people: they have first nation status (in comparison to Sweden's other recognized national minorities such as Swedish Finns, Meänkielis, Romas, and Jews) and they have their own culture, language and customs which in several aspects are different from the culture(s) of the majority population.

The political problems of indigenous peoples such as the Sámi in Sweden have often been neglected in public debate or presented as "internal" to the groups themselves.

The Sámi people share several problems of discrimination and intolerance with other ethnic groups in Sweden. However, they also have a distinct history of discrimination which reveals itself in claims of historical rectification concerning property and land rights.

In addition, many members of the Sámi people express the will to cultural autonomy and self-determination. The salience of traditional livelihoods such as reindeer herding and the specific importance of territory (not at least from the perspective of the migration routes of the reindeers) also singles out the Sámi population from other groups in Sweden.

In Sweden, the status of the Sámi people has been acknowledged and recognized in several respects. The Sámi people have been recognised as a specific group in Sweden for centuries, they have been at the focus of specific public policies for more than a century, they are well integrated in the historical narrative of Sweden (although often founded on exoticism and stereotypical images) and they are recognised as an indigenous people. In effect, in 1977, the Sámi were recognized as an indigenous people by the Swedish Government, and in 2005 they were recognized as a people with rights in accordance with international law, first and foremost the right to self-determination. Sweden signed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 and when the new Instrument of Government was adopted by the Swedish Parliament in 2010, the special status of the Swedish Sámi people was recognized constitutionally for the first time. Already in 1993, however, the popularly elected Swedish Sámi Parliament (Sametinget) was established in order to grant the Sámi people cultural autonomy.

Today, this parliament is considered to be the main institution that ensures Sámi self-determination. The parliament is an administrative authority under the Swedish Government and fulfills two different functions: it acts as a government agency whose administrative tasks are regulated by law, and it serves as a popularly elected parliament representing the Sámi people. Moreover, the Sámi have also been granted special language and educational rights through Sweden's ratification of the European framework conventions concerning the rights of national minorities.

Traditionally, there has been a strong skepticism towards group rights and claims of self-determination in Swedish political life, with a clear preference for centralized and "unitary" solutions. Nonetheless, the Sámi parliament ("Sametinget") was established in order to grant the Sámi people a degree of cultural autonomy and political decision making. The Sámi Parliament constitutes the most radical form of political recognition of any minority group in Sweden.

This recognition of the Sámi people appears, however, to be challenged or undermined by different forms of discrimination and intolerance. There have, for instance, been several conflicts during the last few years on the right to use land and water for the maintenance of Sámi reindeer on private property, and there have been severe conflicts on the construction of mining sites and wind power parks in traditional reindeer grazing areas. In its observations on the extent to which Sweden fulfils the conventions of the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination, the UN regularly voices concerns over the pending issue of land and water ownership, and the Swedish Government's passivity in regards to clarifying the borders for the reindeer grazing area. Moreover, according to a report by the Swedish Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination (*Discrimination of the Sami* (2008)), the Sámi testify to being harassed in their day-to-day life on the grounds of their ethnic background. Members of the Sámi group thus face harassment, intolerance and discriminatory treatments in a vein which is similar to other groups such as ethnic/religious immigrants and national minorities.

Although there appears to be a formal acceptance on a national and constitutional level of the Sámi people and way of life, in practice intolerant and stereotypical attitudes towards the Sámi people seem to prevail within Swedish society.

Our empirical research explored dominant perceptions of the Sámi Parliament as reflected through Swedish mainstream media. We aimed to understand in what ways, if any, this sort of institutional arrangement challenges conceptions of tolerance in Swedish multicultural society. We thus discuss the boundaries of Swedish tolerance, and look closer into the coexistence of a range of public reforms of recognition on the one hand, and a discourse of intolerance, or a very limited tolerance, on the other hand.

In a European perspective our case is unique as well, as the Sámi is the only people living within European borders that are recognized as an indigenous people in accordance with international law, although there are specific institutional arrangements in Denmark for the Inuit's of Greenland as well. (The case of Greenland and Denmark is special in the sense that Greenland is not really a part of Europe and has a long history of colonization.) In addition, the institutionalization of a popularly elected Sámi Parliament is also a quite radical reform in terms of recognition of a minority group in a wider European and international perspective. In a UN-report, for instance, the Sámi Parliaments in the Nordic countries has been presented as important models for indigenous self-governance and participation in decision-making.

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

"Pure Balkan war in the Sámi Parliament - a negotiator sorts out the chaos"

(Newspaper Norrländska Socialdemokraten (NSD) 000112)

In our case study in the context of the ACCEPT PLURALISM project, we investigated the potential coexistence of recognition and intolerance through an analysis of the media coverage of the Swedish Sámi Parliament since its inauguration in 1993. We analyzed the media coverage of the Sámi Parliament in eight national and local daily newspaper from 1993-2011, emphasizing particularly on election periods.

The core questions that guided our research were the following:

- Is the Sámi right to self-determination widely accepted in Swedish society as portrayed by the media?
- Or, is this institutional accommodation of the Sámi people challenged by a widespread intolerance? If so, then what might be the consequences of this intolerance for the political representation of the Sámi?

The Sámi Parliament's political instability was explained in two ways. First, the problem was presented as *internal* to the parliament and a result of: a persistent and unsolvable conflict between the political parties, a firm unwillingness to compromise, or a personal antagonism between the members of parliament (MPs). Second, the problem was considered to be *external* to the Sámi Parliament. The analysis in these articles focused on the institutional design of the parliament as both a government agency and a representative body; these two functions were considered to be hampering the political stability of the parliament and acting as a strait-jacket for the political parties and the MPs.

"The work of the Sámi Parliament has got completely wrecked. The result of the conflicts is that almost no decisions are made this year."
(NSD 110507)

"The Parliamentary Ombudsman (JO) criticizes the Sámi Parliament in four cases for slow handling or negligence of managing cases." (NSD 111107)

"The Sámi Parliament [...] was disrupted Friday when several matters were still at the agenda. Now it is a huge quarrel about the proceedings. It is very unfortunate that the Sámi Parliament is paralyzed by conflicts on regulations and procedural issues"

(Newspaper Västerbottenskuriren (VK), 971118)

The implications of the different explanations are significant. If the problem is external, the blame for the deficiencies of the parliament is basically assigned to the Swedish state; it is primarily the design of the parliament that ought to be the focus of discussions and, from a wider perspective, Swedish Sámi policy at large. If the origin of the problem is internal—which in fact was the dominant discourse in the media—then, the blame is with the Sámi themselves. From this perspective, discussions tend to focus on the political parties and the individual MPs as elected representatives rather than the institutional prerequisites for their actual work.

These two explanations are equally put forward with regards to the Sámi Parliament's weak administrative performance. In most analyses, weak performance is associated with the individual incompetence of the MPs or the functionaries, their immature behavior, or the strong and deeply engrained internal divisions between the subgroups of the Sámi population. On the rare occasion,

alternative explanations are sought in some analyses, mainly concerning the Parliament's institutional design. Indeed, the following quote is a rare example of such a view.

"The complaints about the disorder in the parliament and that it does not work is unfair to the Sámi Parliament as many parliaments have not found their structure in ten, twenty years." (Norrbottenskuriren (NK) 050508)

What conclusion can be drawn concerning the boundaries of Swedish tolerance in the case of the Sámi people and the Sámi parliament? Is the Sámi right to (political) self-determination accepted in the Swedish society as portrayed by the media? Or is the formal recognition of the Sámi people and their self-determination challenged by widespread intolerance?

Our analysis indicates that the recognition of the Sámi people on an institutional level is hampered by the way the media represents the Sámi parliament. Through neglecting the controversial issue regarding the relation between the Sámi people and the dominant Swedish society (i.e. regarding the right to self-determination) it is obvious that in the Swedish news coverage, the Swedish state still is considered to be the sole legitimate authority to decide on Sami issues. The practice of toleration as it is expressed in the media is thus based on disrespect, rather than recognition and respect. In that way, the media discourse could be characterised in terms of a clearly limited "tolerance".

So, what might the consequences of this intolerance be for the political representation of the Sámi?

In our view, this one-sided news representation of the Sámi parliament is problematic and has effects for the political representation of the Sámi people. The media discourse as represented by the newspapers analysed has both direct and indirect consequences for the political representation of the Sámi and delimits their recognized right to political participation and self-determination.

In direct ways, it affects the construction of a Sámi public sphere, indispensable for the parliament to function in its role as a representative political body. The news reporting is limited in scope as it privileges reporting on internal conflicts and individual behaviour among the Sámi officials. In other words it tends to neglect or ignore fundamental political problems of the Sámi people. Hence, it contributes to a de-politicisation of Sámi politics. Furthermore, it contributes to a conception of the parliament as problematic and dysfunctional, and thus undermines the potential level of trust of its constituency.

Indirectly, the emphasis on the democratic and administrative immaturity of the Sámi parliament reproduces the historical stereotypical images of the Sámi as unable to handle their own affairs. These stereotypes may limit the range of possible political options of the Sámi: if it is the Sámi Parliament (and Sámi politicians) in itself that is the crucial problem and not the Swedish Sámi policy formulated by the government – or – the relation between the dominant majority society and the Sámi minority, political proposals trying to increase Sámi self-determination will easily be rejected within the public discourse.

Key Messages for Policy Makers

INCREASE THE POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF THE SÁMI PEOPLE AND THE MEDIA COVERAGE OF IMPORTANT “SÁMI” ISSUES

Policy-makers should take action to reformulate Swedish Sámi policy in accordance with the recognised Sámi right to self-determination. This could, for instance, include:

- 1) Strengthening of the Sámi Parliament’s representative function, and a clarification of the administrative and representative roles of the Parliament;
- 2) Further investigation into the Sámi rights to land and water, including a possible ratification of the ILO Convention 169 on the rights of indigenous peoples;
- 3) Improving institutionalized arrangements for consultations between the Sámi Parliament and the Swedish State on issues where there are conflicting interests;
- 4) Addressing discrimination in accordance with already endorsed declarations and conventions such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) and the European framework conventions concerning minority languages and national minorities (2000), and:
- 5) Providing financial support for newspapers in the Sámi languages.

The local and national media ought to act for the construction of a Sámi public sphere. This could, for instance, be done by:

- A wider and deeper coverage of Sámi political life in general;
- Including topics of interest to the Sámi people, such as a discussion on what the right to self-determination means in political practice;
- Avoiding reproduction of historical stereotypical images of the Sámi people, and;
- Focusing on problems stemming from the relation between the Sámi people and the Swedish State.

Methodology

EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

The empirical material consists of articles in eight national and local daily newspapers containing the term “Sameting/et” (Sámi Parliament), a total number of 1251 articles. We analyzed the years 2005, 2009-2011. We also analyzed articles from the election years 1993, 1997, and 2001 ten days before and ten days after the elections, and we started out by an analysis of the headlines of all the articles published in three non-election years (1994, 2000, and 2011). The national newspapers chosen, *Dagens Nyheter* (DN, liberal) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD, conservative), are two of the most influential daily newspapers in Sweden. The local newspapers were selected primarily to represent three counties in northern Sweden, Norrbotten, Västerbotten och Jämtland, which are traditional Sámi settlement areas. The journals chosen, *Norrländska Socialdemokraten* (NSD, social democratic), *Norrbottnens-Kuriren* (NK, conservative), *Norran* (N, liberal), *Västerbottens Folkblad* (VF, social democratic), *Västerbottens-Kuriren* (VK, liberal), and *Östersunds-Posten* (ÖP, center-right) are the most prominent local newspapers in these counties. It is worth noticing that there are no local or regional daily newspapers in Sámi in Sweden.

HEADLINE ANALYSIS

A first indication of how the Sámi Parliament is depicted in the media can be obtained by looking at the range of topics covered in the newspaper articles. Earlier research show that news reports about ethnic minorities may be biased in the sense that they rely on negative stereotypes. In other words, minorities are often portrayed in terms of a very limited set of topics, something that we emphasized above. The major theme of an article is typically expressed in the title. So, in order to get an impression of what kind of topics the Sámi Parliament was associated with in the media we examined a total of 217 articles that mentioned the word “Sameting/et” in the headline in three different non-election years.

When we sorted the headlines we found two dominant topics. The first concerned the performance of the parliament as an administrative authority; the second described the political (in)stability of the parliament and thus evolved around its role as a representative body of the Sámi people. The other topics we found, although rarely, concerned the cultural identity of the Sámi people, the construction of a new building for the Sámi Parliament and public grants.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

In order to provide a more thorough understanding of the Swedish press coverage, the representation of the Sámi Parliament was analyzed as an order of discourse, emphasizing how arguments are structured and how subjects are constituted in language. The purpose of this methodological approach is to reveal the assumptions that lie behind a certain representation as well as the effects that such a representation might produce. More specifically our focus was on how the problem of the parliament’s political instability and weak administrative performance was explained in and by the media. What kind of problem was the parliament represented to be? What news representations were produced and reproduced within the media discourse? What was taken for granted and thus not critically examined?

Project Identity

Acronym:	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title:	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description:	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
Website:	www.accept-pluralism.eu
Duration:	March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
Funding Scheme:	Small and medium-scale collaborative project
EU contribution:	2,600,230 Euro
Consortium:	17 partners (15 countries)
Coordinator:	European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies)
Person Responsible:	Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
EC officer:	Ms Louisa Anastopoulou, Project Officer, Directorate General Research and Innovation, European Commission