

# NEW KNOWLEDGE about Sweden

This briefing note highlights NEW KNOWLEDGE about Sweden.  
We present here new knowledge and key messages for policy makers and civil society.

On-going project

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## ACCOMMODATING ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN SWEDEN

Sweden has for a long time had cultural encounters with its neighbouring countries, but it is only in the post-World War II period that the stream of migrants became large and justified the statement that Sweden is a multicultural society in a descriptive sense. Moreover, since the middle of the 1970s, Sweden has also officially defined itself as a multicultural society in a normative sense of the term through the constitution (or “regeringsformen”). However, for most of the 20th century the model of coexistence between various groups could be described as a model of assimilation rather than a multicultural one. For many years it was assumed that immigrants and members of minorities should adopt the values, life styles and the language of the majority population. During the 1960s, this assimilation model received increased criticism from academics, politicians and trade unions (especially the Labor organization (LO)) and attempts were pursued to formulate a politics of multiculturalism. The multicultural policies that were developed during the 1970s in order to meet the challenges of cultural diversity have, however, proved to be insufficient.

In spite of attempts to formulate stronger anti-discrimination laws and institutions such as a unified Ombudsman against discrimination and the ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages, critics of the prevailing policies have argued that problems of discrimination and a lack of recognition of cultural differences still lingers on. The groups that have been at the focus of public debates have been the Romani, the Sami population and various non-European immigrant groups.

The prevailing idea of the modern welfare state and its well-known credo “the people’s home” used by the Social democrats during the 20th century can also explain why so much emphasis has been on social or economic rights and why cultural rights have been rather peripheral in governmental policies (except for cases such as “home language instructions” in schools since the middle of the 70s).

The Lutheran church has also had an important standing in Swedish society. In spite of recent trends of secularization and the fact that the Church of Sweden is no longer a state church (a divorce that took place in 2000), this church has still a strong political position and figures in official committees on ethical issues. It is estimated that over 75 percentage of the population are members of the Lutheran Church of Sweden. (The focus on private individual beliefs within this religious tradition also fits well with secularist models of the state, which downgrade the importance of religious pluralism and practices in the public sector.)

Sweden has also had limited experiences of any substantial minority rights schemes and in Swedish public life there has been a strong tendency toward uniform solutions - not least in the

field of education. Tolerance for cultural differences and the rights for minorities have also been understood in individualistic terms, i.e., the bearers of the rights are the individuals as members of various cultural communities. From the vantage point of labour market conditions, the policy in latter decades puts its emphasis on the responsibilities and rights of the individual - not his or her affiliations.

The more recent political rhetoric in Sweden's integration and minority politics often contains the words "same rights and responsibilities" and "same possibilities". The ideal of a multicultural Sweden was more and more downgraded and the emphasis was instead placed upon notions such as same rights and responsibilities and non-discrimination. If affirmative action or special rights for minorities were accepted it was only seen as a limited policy in the initial phases for the immigrant groups. As a general principle, it should be "same rights and same responsibilities" that should prevail. This has become all the more explicit since the beginning of the 21st century from both left and right wing governments. In other words, there has been limited acceptance for groups/collectives as bearers of rights, for example, in terms of self-determination or cultural autonomy for the indigenous population of the Sami. Sweden has, for example, not ratified the ILO convention (169) concerning the land rights of indigenous populations.

Critics of the official guidelines both in political and academic circles have emphasized that the traditional assimilation model, which characterized Swedish policy for several decades in the post war period is – on the whole - far from dead, and that the cultural diversity which has been endorsed officially has been rather limited in nature.

In the ACCEPT PLURALISM project, we investigated how ethnic, religious and cultural diversity is accommodated in two important areas: **education** and **political life**.

We examined in particular:

- **how diversity is accommodated in public schools with a specific focus upon highly visible religious symbols such as burqa and niqab;**
- **attitudes towards Islamic religious schools in the Swedish education system;**
- **and how local and national media represent the Sami parliament and the creation of a Sámi public sphere.**

In our analysis, we considered discourses and practices of dealing with diversity in Sweden on several levels. We looked at the institutional and legal framework and the position of state actors, public opinion tendencies and predispositions; as well as the actual situation on the ground.

#### **Evaluation of discourses and practices of tolerance in our case studies:**

	<b>Institutional and legal framework</b>	<b>Practical situation</b>	<b>Public discourses</b>
<b>Muslim independent schools</b>	Formal acceptance	Strict surveillance on the basis of "quality" and basic values	Rather wide intolerance
<b>Complete veiling in schools</b>	Decisions decentralised to the school level	Challenged practices	Wide-spread scepticism
<b>Participation of the Sámi in political life</b>	Formal recognition of self-determination and cultural autonomy	Sámi parliament's "hybrid" nature (administrative and representative)	Intolerant media discourse

## **TOLERANCE IN EDUCATION**

The Swedish school tradition during most of the 20th century is characterized by a low tolerance towards private independent schools. In effect, the secularized development of

Swedish society during the 20th century has effectively created obstacles for religious minorities to voice their religious demands regarding norms and practices in public life. At the same time, the law on religious liberty from 1951 also assumed a concept of religion and church which neglected the aspects of religious life in other traditions than the protestant churches. Moreover, for the Social democrats, who were in government for several decades, the idea of a centralized public education has been crucial. This idea has implied criticism towards more private and independent forms of education. These conditions have made it complicated for religious organizations and parents to start independent faith schools, i.e. recognition of cultural identity in the sense of own educational programmes and schools has generally been low.

The independent school system was introduced by the right wing government in 1992 and was heavily influenced by educational models from the United States. The establishment of Muslim denominational schools did not follow from an effort to recognize the cultural needs of migrant minorities but was made possible on the basis of a general ambition to decentralize and privatized primary and secondary education in order to increase freedom of choice in the education market. Independent schools are financed with contributions from the municipality, which are obliged to pay at least 85 per cent of the costs for each student. This created considerably far-reaching possibilities to start independent schools although conditions were quite demanding.

According to the curriculum for the mandatory educational system (Lpo 94), education must be non-confessional. The school law of 2010 also emphasises the importance of religious neutrality in the public schools. However, this does not apply to independent schools and preschools that according to the educational legislation (Swedish code of statute 1985:1100, 9 chapters. 2§) may have a confessional direction. The reason for this deviation from the general legislation is derived from Sweden's ratification of the European convention on human rights.

The rights of the confessional independent schools are established by law, but they are obliged to conform to the general "värdegrund", i.e., basic values considered to be fundamental for the Swedish society such as non-violence, tolerance, democracy, gender equity and generosity.

The debates on the existence of confessional independent schools have been quite intense, cutting across political parties. For example, the Social democratic party and the communist party ("Vänsterpartiet") are explicitly against faith schools in contrast to the left wing party "Miljöpartiet" /the environmentalist party/ who endorse them. Among the right wing parties the conservative party ("Moderaterna") and the Christian Democrats ("Kristdemokraterna") are in favour of faith schools while the liberal party ("Folkpartiet") is against them.

Our empirical research in the ACCEPT PLURALISM project included interviews with relevant stakeholders in the field of education. Their overarching concern was with regards to "educational equality", in other words educational justice in terms of "educational equivalence", a concept which reveals an egalitarian tradition in the field of education and puts limits on the toleration of alternative school arrangements. The establishment of Islamic denominational schools raised concerns in that they are perceived as divisive, both culturally and socially, while the quality of their instruction is considered inadequate in relation to the standards in the national curriculum and syllabi. Still, there were few calls in favour of shutting down these schools.

It seems that Muslim denominational schools are tolerated in a literal sense: they are accepted, sometimes pragmatically, but not liked. On the other hand, it could be said that the provision of a judicial and institutional space for religious minorities to establish denominational schools is part of "a politics of recognition", i.e. an educational policy which, under auspicious circumstances might provide the means for religious minorities to receive respect as equal and gain admission as normal.

As regards the practice of wearing the Burqa or Niqab, our interviewees focused less on

notions of gender equality (which dominate the media discourse) and more on concerns regarding identification and communication. These veiling practices were considered as obstructing the possibility of identifying students at school, while also rendering communication at school more difficult. Several interviewees claimed that a teacher must see the face of the student in order to teach and educate. Although the goal of equivalence was less relevant in this matter, the practice of veiling was questioned with reference to universal human rights, such as the rights of the child (concerning freedom of thought, conscience and religion). In addition, the wearing of the Burqa or Niqab was associated with phenomena such as mischief and the hidden, thus casting suspicion. In comparison with the issue of Islamic denominational schools, the non-tolerant stance was more manifest, although few explicit calls for a prohibition were made (even though debates on prohibition have attracted a lot of media attention the past few years thereby bringing the regulating dimension to the fore).

The results above harmonize with a common theme in Swedish public life – the tendency toward “equal” uniform solutions – especially in the field of education. More private and independent forms of education have not fitted in very well in the educational and political traditions of Sweden during most of the 20th century.

## TOLERANCE IN POLITICAL LIFE

In ACCEPT PLURALISM, Sweden is the only country with an indigenous population. This explains the inclusion of the Sámi people and their claims of political self determination, toleration and recognition in our empirical research.

The Sámi people have been affected by discriminatory policies, harassments, stereotypical images regarding their way of life and a restriction of their cultural rights in similar manners to other groups such as ethnic/religious immigrants and national minorities.

Our empirical research focused on the way in which the Sámi parliament is presented and evaluated in the Swedish media at both national and local level. Our findings highlighted the obvious and hierarchical power relation between the Sámi people and the Swedish majority society. The principle that the Sámi people should have a right to self determination seems to be severely criticized in the media on the basis of the descriptions and the evaluations of the work of the Sámi parliament. Two topics have been especially dominant in this context – the assumed political instability and the deficient administrative performance of the parliament where so-called internal explanations (the problems rest with the assembly) have been prominent. In effect, our empirical research suggested that the Sámi parliament – as a part of the Swedish political system – is not really included in the public sphere in a way that sends a signal to the voters that they have a “Sámi public sphere” of weight and relevance. This unavoidably affects voters’ incentives to make informed choices as well as the standing of the the Sámi parliament as an administrative or a representative agency.

This latter feature of the Sámi parliament fits in well with the so-called corporatism tradition of Swedish political life where the government has developed a close association with any interest group in the Swedish society. Hence, “self determination” or autonomy is tolerated as long as the link to the centralized state is kept in safe place. (In the background there is also a long tradition of a concept of national sovereignty where sovereignty is seen as unitary and indivisible and where equal citizenship is interpreted as being part of this indivisible whole on equal terms.)

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

There exists a discrepancy between formal recognition and “everyday practice” concerning multiculturalism in Swedish society. Even though multiculturalism (or freedom of choice

concerning culture) is emphasized in the constitution (“regeringsformen”) and through the ratification of various regional and international conventions, there is a clear distance with everyday practices and sentiments in public debates.

Although the legislative framework allows for Muslim independent schools as well as veiling practices in public schools, there exists a certain opposition against particular expressions of the Muslim faith in the public sphere and especially in the field of education.

The same kind of phenomenon also applies to the public discourse on the Sámi parliament in local and national media. Although Sámi autonomy is formally recognised, attitudes towards the main political expression of that independence, i.e. the Sámi parliament, remain sceptical. The pivotal criticism in media concerns the lack of “quality” in the sense of an assumed instability and a deficient administrative capacity. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the institutional recognition of Sámi political independence and autonomy and everyday practice (in the same vein as in the educational sphere concerning formal acceptance of diversity in schools and day-to-day practice). In both cases, criticism is expressed on the basis of references to assumed universal or cross cultural quality standards instead of normative principles that express explicit rejection of multiculturalism or cultural rights.

Our findings lead to some normative conclusions for legislation and policy makers. In the field of education it is important to secure and strengthen anti-discrimination policies. Policy makers must also create awareness, through local and national educational policy, about the proliferation of anti-religious and anti-Muslim beliefs, in teachers’ education as well as in teaching practice. Further, it is important to check that teachings on religion are devoid of racist and/or secular prejudices (this applies particularly to the teaching on Islam). The organization of schooling should facilitate for discussions and exchange of opinions between secular and religious students and teachers.

In the case of 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 recognized Sámi right to self-determination. This could mean a strengthening of the Sámi Parliament’s representative function, and a clarification of the administrative and representative roles of the Parliament. It could also mean 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). Finally, in addition to financial support for newspapers in the Sámi languages, the local and national media ought to act constructively for the development of a Sámi public sphere. This could, for instance, be done through a wider and deeper coverage of Sámi political life in general while avoiding the reproduction of historical stereotypical images of the Sámi people.

## FURTHER READINGS

To read more on the research findings presented here, see:

### **Tolerance and Cultural Diversity Concepts and Practices in Sweden**

By Hans Ingvar Roth, Fredrik Hertzberg, Ulf Mörkenstam and Andreas Gottardis (Stockholm University)

Download your copy from: <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/27518>

Other relevant publications include:

### **2012/02.2. Handbook on Tolerance and Diversity in Europe**

Anna Triandafyllidou (EUI)

Download your copy from:

<http://www.accept-pluralism.eu/Research/ProjectReports/Handbook.aspx>

## PROJECT IDENTITY

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>ACCEPT PLURALISM</b>
<b>Title</b>	<b>Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe</b>
<b>Short Description</b>	<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>
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<b>Web site</b>	<a href="http://www.accept-pluralism.eu">www.accept-pluralism.eu</a>
<b>Duration</b>	March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
<b>Funding scheme</b>	Small and medium-scale collaborative project
<b>EU contribution</b>	2,600,230 Euro
<b>Consortium</b>	17 partners (15 countries)
<b>Coordinator</b>	European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies),
<b>Scientific Coordinator</b>	Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
<b>EC officer</b>	Ms. Louisa Anastopoulou, Directorate General for Research and Innovation, European Commission