

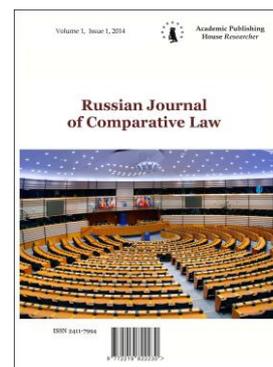
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Published in the Slovak Republic
Russian Journal of Comparative Law
Has been issued since 2014.

ISSN 2411-7994
E-ISSN 2413-7618
2017, 4(1): 31-37

DOI: 10.13187/rjcl.2017.1.31
<http://ejournal41.com>



The Legislative Protection of Sámi Languages in the Nordic Countries and the Russian Federation

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Abstract

The Sámi people form an indigenous community identified by its diversity of dialects and languages, and that is spread in different European countries, mainly the Nordic countries (Norway, Finland and Sweden) and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. Throughout their history, they have fought against the spread of the majority languages of their respective countries in order to preserve their distinctness and their culture. Today, as indigenous people are slowly recovering rights and recognition, different legal systems for the protection of Sámi languages were put in place in the foregoing states. However, while some of these provisions seem wide and strong, the practical reality does not reflect it. We will therefore examine the international undertakings and national implementations of these countries with regards to experts' observations in order to establish their shortcomings in the protection of Sámi languages.

Keywords: Sámi, language, legal protection, Nordic countries, Kola Peninsula, implementation.

1. Introduction

The Sámi people form the only indigenous group recognized by the European Union. They are dispersed in the Nordic countries and the Russian Federation, but are mostly found in Norway and Finland. We estimate the number of Sámi people between 40,000 and 60,000 in Norway, between 15,000 and 20,000 in Sweden, approximately 9,000 in Finland and 2,000 in Russia (Tauli-Corpuz, 2016) where they are concentrated in the Kola Peninsula. We can also count three principal Sámi dialects, divided in nine distinct sub-dialects. Heterogeneous regarding their languages, religions and livelihoods, they still present themselves as one common ethnicity (Language, dialect or variety: 98).

A glance at the discrimination and the atrocities Sámi people have been the target of before and during the Second World War suffice to understand these people's claims for a better recognition and protection (Koivurova et al. 2004: 99, 100; Kotljarchuk, 2012: 61, 62). As a pillar of the Sámi culture, the Sámi languages represent a first-importance stake in the related negotiations. To this day, Norway, Finland, Sweden and the Russian Federation, home of these communities, have legislatively responded, although differently, to Sámi people's demands. The Nordic Sámi Convention, a document pleading for the standardization of the protections in place in the Nordic countries, if yet to be adopted was nevertheless drafted and is being negotiated among the interested parties. However, remainders of the pre-war Sámi languages crisis (Ricco) can still be

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found in each of the States under study, and concerns keep being raised among the indigenous communities. Without denying the major role of politics in this matter, this comparative study will concentrate on the legal aspects of the protections in place across the aforementioned jurisdictions and their concrete impact on the situation of Sámi languages.

2. Materials and Methods

We will first take a look at the most important international instruments in place for the protection of Sámi languages and examine which undertakings were taken by every State under study. We will then concentrate on the national implementations of these undertakings among the States and on the other national protections offered. Finally, an analysis of the disparities between the different systems will allow us to notice the improvements that are still to be made in each country.

This work represents a recension of existing publications relating to Sámi languages issues and protections. Sources have been found mainly in the Åbo Akademi University digital and physical libraries, as well as online. Being a Canadian law student, I wrote the first version of this essay while completing a four-months semester abroad in the city of Turku, Finland, as a requirement for the course Comparative Law - Public Law. It is to be noted that I have not been able to collect my own data and acknowledge the actual situation of Sámi languages in the states under study for myself. However, the present version has been through processes of correction and peer review.

The international undertakings for the protection of minorities rights represent commitments of the States towards the improvement of their internal situation. When evaluating the efficiency and sufficiency of the domestic legal protections of Sámi languages such commitments must therefore be borne in mind. Here are some of the most important international instruments to consider.

The ILO Convention No. 169 entered into force in 1991. It pleads notably for the equality of treatment of indigenous peoples as well as the recognition and promotion of their cultural and social identity (Art. 2(a) and (b)). It provides children with the right to be taught, when possible, how to write and read in their indigenous language (Art. 28(1)) and obligates the signatory States to translate the regulation related to indigenous peoples in their languages (Art. 30). So far, only Norway has ratified the Convention, while Finland is currently studying a proposal for ratification (Tauli-Corpuz, 2016). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (“UNDRIP”), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007, reiterates the principles of the ILO Convention No. 169. In addition, it provides indigenous peoples with the rights to autonomy and self-governance in matters relating to their internal and local affairs (Art. 4), pleads for their representation in the media (Art. 16 and 17) and their consultation prior to decisions on matters that may affect them (Art. 18 and 19). Since it is a declaration, it automatically applies to all UN Member States, including Norway, Finland, Sweden and the Russian Federation (ILO standards: 1, 2).

Another important instrument is the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, adopted by the Council of Europe in 1992. With even broader provisions, especially regarding the learning of minority languages in the mandatory curriculum from pre-school to secondary (Art. 8) and their inclusion in the judicial and public spheres (Art. 9 and 10), it additionally provides for a monitoring system in the form of a periodical review (Art. 15). Only Russia omitted to ratify the Charter after its signature (Chart).

3. Discussion

National Legislative Protections

Norway. Norway’s legislative initiatives for the protection of Sámi languages significantly started with the adoption of the Sámi Act, in 1987, which had the purpose of enabling the Sámi people to safeguard and develop their language, culture and way of life (s. 1-1). It created the Sámi Parliament and defines the Sámi people with regards to linguistic and self-consideration criteria. The Sámi Parliament is habilitated to give opinions or refer concerns to authorities regarding “any matter that in [its] view [...] particularly affects the Sámi people” (s. 2-1). In return, public bodies have the duty to consult the Sámi Parliament before making decisions on matters of its business (s. 2-2). Finally, the Act provides that Sámi and Norwegian languages are “of equal worth” (s.1-5).

Norway soon amended its Constitution, in 1988, to add the following protection: “It is the responsibility of the authorities of the State to create conditions enabling the Sami people to preserve and develop its language, culture and way of life.” (Art. 110a) This modification led to

the inclusion of chapter 3 in the Sámi Act on languages, which especially provides Sámi people with the right to give and receive communications in their indigenous languages for matters that concern them and for all public services within the six municipalities enumerated in section 3-1(1). It also gives the right to Sámi education (s. 3-8) – this right is also protected by chapter 6 of the Education Act – and created the Sámi Language Council, under the supervision of the Sámi Parliament (s. 3-12).

The ratification of the ILO Convention No. 169 by Norway also led to two important domestic reforms: the Finnmark Act of 2005 on the management of natural resources in traditional Sámi areas, as well as a formal agreement between the State and the Sámi Parliament, guaranteeing the participation of the Sámi people in decisions that affect their interests (Mörkenstam et al., 2016: 16, 17).

Other domestic laws contain provisions to strengthen the protection of Sámi languages, like the Place Names Act, the Kindergarten Act, the Courts Act and the Patients' Rights Act (Action Plan for Sámi Languages, 2009: 14).

In 2009, the Government of Norway released a detailed Action Plan for Sámi Languages (Action Plan for Sámi Languages, 2009: 14). Despite all of the foregoing legislative protections, the plan acknowledges the critical situation of Sámi languages and suggests a variety of detailed improvements to be made regarding, notably, the instruction in Sámi languages, the use of these languages in public services and their visibility to the public. The final report on the Action Plan, which was expected in September 2016, is yet to be published (Tauli-Corpuz, 2016).

Finland. The first important legislative action of Finland towards the protection of Sámi languages goes back to 1991, with the adoption of the Act on the Use of the Sámi Languages Before Authorities. It provided Sámi people with the rights to give and receive communications with public authorities in Sámi languages (The Finnish Sámi Parliament, 1997).

The 1919 Constitution Act of Finland was amended, in 1995 and 1996, to include the right of Sámi people and other indigenous groups to “develop their own language and culture” and the basis of the Sámi peoples' cultural autonomy regarding languages and culture in their homelands (Koivurova et al., 2004: 100). These provisions were later picked up in sections 17 and 121 of the actual Constitution of Finland, entered into force in 2000.

Following this constitutional reform, a new Sámi Language Act was born in 2003, with the aim to “ensure the constitutional right to maintain and develop their own language and culture” of the Sámi people (s. 1). If its scope is for most part similar to the former Act (now abrogated), its provisions were rewritten in order to “secure the linguistic rights of the Sámi without them needing specifically to refer to these rights” (s. 1). For instance, while the former Act merely allowed Sámi people to receive, upon request, translations of public communications in their own languages, additional provisions in the new Act formally require public authorities to have personnel trained for communication in Sámi (s. 14 to 18). The new Act contains measures to promote the Sámi languages, such as the possibility for personnel of public authorities to receive paid leave of absence in order to learn Sámi languages. Each public authority is henceforth responsible for the supervising of the Act and the Finnish Sámi Parliament, for the monitoring of the Act by the means of recommendations and initiatives. It applies the controversial - but nevertheless applicable – definition of a Sámi given in the Act on the Sámi Parliament of 1995 (s. 3(2)).

The Act on the Sámi Parliament recognized the linguistic and cultural autonomy of Sámi people within three municipalities and the area of the reindeer owners' association of Lapland in Sodankylä, and created the Sámi Parliament (s. 1 and 4). The role of the Finnish Sámi Parliament is to “look after the Sámi language and culture, as well as to take care of matters relating to their status as an indigenous people” (s. 5(1)) by the means of initiatives, proposals and statements to the national authorities on these matters (s. 5(2)). It also represents the Sámi people in national and international relations (s. 6). In addition, the national authorities are obligated to “negotiate with the Saami Parliament regarding all far-reaching and important measures, that directly or indirectly may affect the Saami's status as an indigenous people (s. 9). However, as we will discuss later, the latter statutory protection is not efficiently implemented in practice. Finally, this Act defines the Sámi people with regards to criteria of land, taxation and population registers in addition to the linguistic criterion that existed under the former decree on the Sámi Delegation. This more recent definition was rejected by the Sámi Parliament (The Finnish Sámi Parliament, 1997).

The Basic Education Act of 1998 allows the teaching of Sámi languages as first or second languages, and specifically provides those living in the Sámi administrative areas to be taught in

their own languages (s. 10). It recognizes Sámi languages as mother tongues (s. 12). On the counterpart, provided by the Act on the Financing of the Provision of Education and Culture of 2009, the education in Sámi languages is today restricted to the Sámi administrative areas, even though most of the Sámi students live outside of them. The lack of funding provided by the national Government leads to shortages in Sámi teachers and education material. Moreover, in the Sámi administrative areas, there are no official Sámi schools, but rather Finnish schools applying a translated version of the Finnish curriculum. Still, the national Government undertook in 2014 to bring considerable improvement to the situation by 2025 (Tauli-Corpuz, 2016: 59).

Sámi languages are also partly protected through their media, especially in consequence of the Sámi-only language policy. Among others, radio and the increasing television shows in Sámi are the most important media platform. The policy even requires that the television shows originally in Finnish majority languages is translated in the three Sámi languages spoken in Finland (Northern, Inari and Skolt). On the counterpart, the press lacks of resources. Only one magazine in Inari Sámi is released quarterly. Finally, the Internet gives a new access point to join the youth of this community, which is less interested by the other media. Numerous challenges are still to be faced by Sámi community, including the undeniable impact of the majority languages on their owns as well as the enterprise of simultaneously fulfilling both of their missions: ensuring the remembrance of Sámi culture while promoting its evolution (Pietikäinen, 2008: 19).

Overall, as stated in section 1 of the Language Act, it must be remembered that the official languages of Finland remain Finnish and Swedish, and that Sámi languages do not have the same legal status.

Sweden. The Sámi Parliament Act of 1993 established the Swedish Sámi Parliament, giving it the “primary task of monitoring questions related to Sámi culture” (s. 1). Therefore, it can put forward initiatives and has decision-making powers regarding Sámi languages, culture and schools, but is not an official body that has to be consulted by the national Government (Koivurova et al., 2004: 101). The Act also defined the Sámi people with regards to a linguistic criterion, without referring to any land, taxation or population register criteria (s. 2).

The next major legislative measure for the protection of Sámi languages came in 2009. The National Minorities and Minority Languages Act introduced protections of the right to use national minority languages in the public administration and courts, extended the Sámi administrative areas to twenty and established a special working group under the Government responsible for the supervision of minority protection (Zimmermann, 2010).

In the same year came the Swedish Language Act, which reiterates the status of Swedish as the principal language of Sweden in general (s. 4), the official language in international contexts (s. 13) and as the language of the public sectors (s. 10). However, it does not affect other legislations on the use of minority languages in the public sectors (s. 10) and mentions the public sector’s “particular responsibility to protect and promote the national minority languages” (s. 8).

Sweden’s constitutional recognition of the Sámi people only arrived in 2010 (The Constitution of Sweden; Mörkenstam et al., 2016: 14), with the incorporation of the following provision in the Instrument of Government: “The opportunities of the Sami people [...] to preserve and develop a cultural and social life of their own shall be promoted.” (Chap. 1, Art. 2) A new Education Act followed, adding to the existence of Sámi schools under the former Act by expressly addressing the right of Sámi children to be taught in their indigenous language, provided that they learn Swedish as a second language. However, the Act lets the government the ability to put restrictions on the education in maternal language (chap. 13, s.7). Indeed, the Swedish Educational Decree adopted in 2011 recognizes the right of Sámi people to receive teaching in their mother tongue, but contrarily limits the mother-tongue teaching to half of the total teaching, in order to increase Swedish teaching (Tauli-Corpuz, 2016).

Russia. The Russian Federation does not formally recognize the existence of ‘indigenous peoples’. Article 69 of its Constitution provides that: “The Russian Federation shall guarantee the rights of the indigenous small peoples according to the universally recognized principles and norms of international law and international treaties and agreements of the Russian Federation.” This concept comprises only the “ethnic groups of less than 50,000 members, maintaining a ‘traditional’ way of life and inhabiting certain remote Northern or Asian regions of the country” (Raipon, Infoe, 2008: 6), including the Sámi people of the Kola Peninsula. Three federal acts

provide for the protection of indigenous small peoples, none of which address the language issues of the Sámi people (Rohr, 2014: 14).

The RF is very reluctant of using the concept of 'self-determination' when it comes to indigenous communities. The Kola Sámi Assembly, created in 2010 by the Sámi population on the model of the Sámi Parliaments of the Nordic Countries, was not recognized by the federal government. It is rather civil society organizations (CSOs) like the Association of Kola Sámi and the Governmental Organization of the Murmansk Region Sámi (OOSMO) that represent Sámi people in matters of their interests (Berg-Nordlie, 2011: 54).

4. Results

On the international level, apart from the fact that Norway is the only country to have ratified the ILO Convention № 169 and that Russia is the only State that is not part of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, most of the instruments examined bind all of these States. However, it is clear that the situation of Sámi people varies a lot at the national, or even local level. These undertakings represent a will to improve, but the global picture shows the relative impact of international law in the concrete fight against racial discrimination (Lenzerini, 2008: 164-166). The true commitment of the countries in improving the situation of Sámi languages must be examined with regards to their domestic laws, as implements of their international undertakings. Overall, we must acknowledge that, on the legislative level, Norway is the one that complies the most with its international undertakings, therefore offering the best protection of Sámi languages, while Russia clearly makes the least efforts.

The protection of a minority's languages necessitates the protection of the minority itself. The protection of a minority passes first by an adequate definition of the members of this minority. Otherwise, the protections offered run the risk to be applied to the wrong persons, therefore scrambling the identity of the people concerned and leading to a contrary effect. This problem is observable in Finland, where the definition of Sámi people partly relies on criteria of land, taxation and population register. This too broad definition allows Finnish people who never participated in the Sámi community to consider themselves as part of it and benefit from their protections, to the detriment of the identity of these communities (Koivurova et al., 2004: 108-109). Meanwhile, Norway and Sweden rather rely on a linguistic criterion that prevents people that have no link with Sámi languages to claim the status.

The protection of a minority passes also by its due constitutional recognition. On this matter, the wording of Norway's Constitution is much stronger. It gives the 'responsibility' to the 'State' to 'protect and promote' Sámi languages. Finland, for its part, recognizes the 'right' of Sámi people to 'develop' their own language and culture, without putting a clear burden on the State. Even worse, the Swedish Constitution vaguely says that the 'opportunities' of development on Sámi languages should be 'promoted', not even clearly recognizing the right of Sámi people to protect their languages.

The perception of a country on a minority's languages can also be observed through the status that it gives them. Norway's equal treatment of Sámi and Norwegian languages stands out from the recognition of Sámi languages as minority languages in Finland and Sweden. Still, all the states undertook to make Sámi languages useable in the public sectors. The status of the languages in the education system must also be considered. The concept of Sámi schools exists in both Norway and Sweden. However, this is not a gage of quality education in Sámi languages. For instance, in Sweden, the law only requires a minimum of four hours of teaching in Sami per week and children can only be taught in Sámi for half of their total education (Tauli-Corpuz, 2016). Still, this represents a stronger protection than what Finland provides: no Sámi schools, but rather Finnish schools that apply a translated version of the Finnish curriculum, which does not properly consider Sámi culture and languages.

To ensure the progression of the situation of Sámi languages in the Nordic countries, the representation and consideration of Sámi people in the legislative reforms is essential. This is why the roles of the Sámi Parliament is crucial. The Norwegian and Finnish Parliaments have a statutorily recognized influence on their respective national governments, especially due to the latter's duty to consult them, in opposition with Sweden's Sámi Parliament. However, such position is worthless if no actual political structure is built to implement these provisions, as it is especially the case in Finland, were that shortcoming adds up to the lack of competency of the public authorities regarding Sámi matters. The composition and the resources of the Parliaments also

justify the accrued influence exercised by the Norwegian Parliament (Mörkenstam et al., 2016: 16; Josefsen, 2010: 8).

May it be understood that none of the States under study can claim perfect situation. Norway's Government accuses derogations to some agreements it reached with the Sámi people (Mörkenstam et al., 2016: 17) and still has to work towards a complete implementation of its Action Plan. Finland especially has to negotiate with its Sámi Parliament to agree on a clear definition of the Sámi people and build a true Sámi education curriculum that adequately considers Sámi languages and culture. Sweden, for its part, is known for its weak wording and its lack of willpower to effectively implement the even little legislative protections it has put in place. It must also make the Sámi Parliament more independent from the State and more influential (Tauli-Corpuz, 2016). Russia does not give a proper voice to Sámi people of the Kola Peninsula (Berg-Nordlie, 2011: 54).

5. Conclusion

The overall portrait is quite grim. Notwithstanding the legislative means in place for the safeguard of Sámi languages, concrete improvements hardly follow-up. Even in Norway, where the protections are stronger on paper, all of the Sámi languages are actually considered as either "definitely endangered", "severely endangered" or "critically endangered" (Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, 2010).

The true problem remains one of implementation. For instance, if the Sámi Parliaments of Norway and Finland seem legislatively strong, Sámi Parliaments are still generally considered as having a limited impact on the outcome of negotiations (Lenzerini, 2008: 379-380). As indicated by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

The Sami languages are central to Sami identity and essential to their survival as a people. [...] While the Special Rapporteur appreciates that the Governments concerned have adopted different affirmative measures to revitalize Sami languages, more needs to be done." (Tauli-Corpuz, 2016).

The foreseen Nordic Sámi Convention represents an additional effort from the governments of Norway, Finland and Sweden towards the protection of Sámi languages and culture. It notably includes provisions related to its implementation and a complaint mechanism. The three countries participated actively in the negotiations, which were planned to be done by March 2016, but the UN Special Rapporteur remains concerned with the delay for the completion of the document. It also hopes that the outcome will be translated in a more uniform implementation among the States Parties and that the Convention will be harmonized with the States human rights international undertakings (Tauli-Corpuz, 2016). Still, the efficiency of the new complaint mechanism will have to be proved and negotiations will have to be engaged with the Russian Federation regarding its ratification of the agreement.

One pessimist will say that the fight of indigenous people for recognition is an everlasting one and that no initiative will ever suffice. But when it comes to survival, the resilience of the endangered must never be underestimated. The timeline of improvements regarding the protection of Sámi languages is a long one. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that efforts made by the community are promiscuous. While a lot remains to be done, history says that it can be.

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