

Sweden's Roma

A National Minority

FACT SHEET

Ministry of Justice, Sweden

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On 2 December 1999 the Swedish Parliament adopted the Government's proposals for a new unified policy on minorities, thus conferring national minority status on the country's Roma and recognising Romany Chib as an official minority language.

Roma in Sweden since the 16th century

The history of the Roma in the Nordic area is not fully known. Sweden has had a Romany population since the 16th century. In Stockholm's Book of Meditation, clergyman Olai Petri described how a large company of Roma visited the city in 1512. He referred to them as *Tater*. Until about 100 years ago they were alternately referred to as *tattare* (a catch-all word for wandering vagrants, vagabonds, travellers, etc, often used contemptuously) or Gypsies. A great number of the Roma who originally reached Sweden were deported over the centuries to Finland, which used to be part of the Swedish empire. In Sweden as elsewhere, the secular and ecclesiastical authorities issued various edicts during the 17th century decreeing that the Roma were to be driven out of the country. During the 18th century many Roma were drafted into the army. Others were dispatched to forced labour or forced settlement. A ban on Romany immigration was introduced in Sweden in 1914 and remained in place until 1954. During the period between the two world wars, the 'Gypsy and *tattare*' issue was the subject of a fierce debate which had racist overtones and frequently drew on racial biology.

Diversity with a common origin

Compared to many other countries, Sweden in the past had a relatively homogeneous population. This is no longer the case, as today one inhabitant in five has a non-Swedish ethnic background. The present population of Sweden includes an estimated 40,000-50,000 Roma, including travellers. The number is difficult to determine. Swedish population statistics do not include details of ethnic background.

The Romany population in Sweden is not homogeneous. It includes descendants of the Romany groups referred to back in the 16th century, but also Roma who moved to Sweden during the second half

of the 20th century. Among the oldest groups are the about 3,200 Finnish Kalé Roma. Some of them move back and forth between the two countries. Also the travellers, estimated to about 20,000, have their roots back in the 16th century. The Romany community in Sweden also includes the 2,500 or so Swedish Kelderash Roma whose forefathers came here as immigrants some 100 years ago. The majority of the country's Roma, the 'non-Nordic' Roma, estimated to about 15,000, arrived in Sweden in the 1960s or later. Some came as immigrant labour, for instance as refugees from former Yugoslavia or elsewhere. As a result of the collapse of former Yugoslavia, at least 5,000 Roma, many of them from Bosnia and Herzegovina, have been given sanctuary in Sweden. Among the non-Nordic Roma currently living in Sweden are many with personal experience of the *Porajmos*—the Romany Holocaust of the Second World War.

In view of the diversity that characterises the Romany population in Sweden, there are naturally many varieties of the language, *Romany Chib*. Besides the linguistic differences there are also differences and variations in the traditions and cultures of the various groups. Despite these differences, however, it is important to emphasise that the Roma are and view themselves as one people or nation. The things that the various groups have in common are of great importance and bind them together in their Romany identity. These are the language, awareness of a common origin, and similar values, traditions, cultures and experiences, all of which have made the Roma culturally indomitable. In matters of faith, the Roma include Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox and Muslim believers as well as others. There is considerable religious interest among Roma in Sweden today, and many have joined one or other of the Free Church communities.

Roma in Sweden have been domiciled since the 1960s. Most of them live in metropolitan Stockholm, Gothenburg or Malmö or surrounding areas. The Roma still occupy a highly vulnerable position in Swedish society and are exposed to discrimination. Generally speaking, many Roma encounter great difficulties in virtually all spheres of society. This

applies to education, the labour market, housing and health care and to their possibility of participating in the community on the same terms as the majority population.

A national minority

In February 2000, following the Parliament's decision, Sweden ratified the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. As a result the following groups are considered national minorities in Sweden: Sami, Swedish Finns, Tornedalers, Roma and Jews. Furthermore Sami, Meänkieli (Tornedal Finnish), Romany Chib (all forms) and Yiddish are considered official minority languages.

A council on Roma issues

The Swedish Government has cooperated with Roma organisations in organised forms since 1996. In October 2002 this cooperation was taken one step further with the establishment of the Council on Roma Issues as an advisory body to the Government. The Council has a broad representation from the Roma community, both women and men, representing all larger Roma groups in Sweden. The majority of members are Roma, but it also includes representatives of the National Integration Office, the Office of the Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities. The Chairman is

the Minister for Democracy and Integration Issues, Ms Mona Sahlin.

The main responsibility of the Council is to be proactive in national efforts to promote the situation of Roma in Swedish society. It should take initiatives in line with the fact that the Roma are a national minority and that Romany Chib has been recognised as a minority language. A children's perspective, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, should permeate the work of the Council as should a gender equality perspective, with the aim of offering equal conditions and opportunities to Roma women and men.

Another aim should be to take advantage of the resources represented in the Roma population and to bring these to the fore. Good examples that can serve as models should be highlighted.

A process has also been started to encourage Roma women to set up networks and to become involved in traditionally male-dominated Roma organisations. In order to strengthen the position of Roma women and to increase their participation in community life, an informal working group has been set up with representatives of the Government Offices and Roma women.

For further information about Sweden's policy on minorities, see the fact sheet National minorities and minority languages—a summary of the Swedish Government's policy on national minorities.



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