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# Minorities and Minority Languages in a Changing Europe

Conference on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Council of Europe, Strasbourg, France  
Palais, room 1

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**Keynote speech by Ms Josefina Skerk, Member of the Swedish Sami Parliament and Legal Advisor at Civil Rights Defenders, Sápmi, Sweden**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, the Council of Europe and the Croatian Chairmanship of its Committee of Ministers, I am very happy to be here.

I come from a place in the far Northwest of Sweden, an area where I live and my family has been living for hundreds, if not thousands of years. I also live there now.

This picture is from my favourite time of year, the fall, when we go moose hunting. In the corner, you can see my late grand uncle Kuno. I follow my elders and they teach me the stories of our family and the land. They tell me how the moose thinks and moves. They tell me where our pathways lead and how we should behave. They teach me our spirituality, language and most of all, they teach me about our ancestor. The Sami language only recently became a written language. Before, we saved our stories in the land. We tied the memories to specific places. The land is our library. When we cross that creek, we remember a story about a person that did something here; we remember that person. That stone, that valley, all those stories.

But the stories started to die. Sweden had during a long time a policy of shaming the Sami, claiming that we were a lower standing human species, prone to die out. My grandmother tried to protect her children from the dangers of being Sami. Back in those days, children could get beaten by their teachers for speaking Sami in school. Sami women could get forcibly sterilized. My grandmother did her best to hide her Saminess.

However, as an Indigenous People in the far North, we are experts on adapting. We wouldn't have survived in those harsh Arctic conditions if we weren't good at thinking outside the box. Now, we use that ability to adapt to this loss. Now, we work to revitalise and cherish our cultures knowledge and ways.

If the most powerful people in society tells you that all that you are is bad and shameful, something happens to your soul.

However, when I see happy Sami children like these... This is Freja and Ailo, the children of a friend of mine, they have been fishing, prepared it and they are learning to a fire. As you can see, they are wearing knives. Knives are important in the Sami culture and we give them to children from a young age. Today's situation for the Sami languages is not perfect, Sweden has still a long way to go, but it's far different from my grandmother's situation.

After 400 years of colonization and Sweden trying to eradicate the Sami culture, I can't help but to think about the paraphrased words of Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulos, "They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds."

The Sami culture has always been diverse, some hunted and fished, others herded reindeer, and today, a new Sami culture is forming. Sami youth that are growing up in cities or have moved to cities to study or work are transforming their Sami culture into something adapted to their lives. It might be things like decorating your skate board in Sami colours. For them, new technology is especially important. They use social media to connect with other language speakers. They might speak to their elders by Skype. What is crucial in their situation is to enable language education, in

case no teacher can be hired, by face to face distance education. Resource schools are also needed, where the kids can meet other Sami children and feel that there are lots of other Sami, too.

It is possible to revitalize a language and culture, even though it has suffered a loss, especially if we do it together. If the leaders of countries signal that minority and Indigenous languages are important, we can change the attitude in society. Attitudes are a large obstacle today to revitalize the languages. By ensuring funds for education in the language from preschool to university, and especially teacher education, a almost lost language can flourish again.

For ourselves, we have a lot to do on attitudes ourselves, but we are working on it in the Sami Indigenous communities. Today, beginner classes in Sami at universities in Sweden are often full. There are so many are requesting Sami language education for their children that schools are turning every stone in trying to find teachers. Also in elderly care, media and government agencies, and many more, there is a huge demand for Sami speaking staff. If you want to be certain of getting employed in Sweden, learn Sami!

Key elements to remember for this is ensure human rights, so that people feel safe in openly expressing their identity, and not face high discrimination and hate crimes.

Let's also aim high! Let's not aim for an hour per week of language education, let's aim for full immersion! Let's aim for kids getting a good, rich language both in the majority society language and their minority or Indigenous language! It is possible, we can do it.

It will cost, that is a hard fact, but I believe it will be worth it. Not only economically, but as a human to another.

A diverse world isn't a burden. Knowing and being proud of your roots, makes you able to open your heart to others without feeling threatened. I stand strong enough to find joy in others being themselves, just as they are and want to be.

Today, my grandmother tells me that she is proud of me for wearing this dress, for learning our language and for speaking in places like this, trying to improve our situation.

I am very happy to be here. Ollu giitu, thank you!