



CHAIRMANSHIP OF CROATIA
Council of Europe
May - November 2018

PRÉSIDENCE DE LA CROATIE
Conseil de l'Europe
Mai - Novembre 2018



Minorities and Minority Languages in a Changing Europe

Conference on the occasion of the 20th 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

18 – 19 June 2018

Panel Session: Minority Languages 2.0 – Digitalisation and other new Developments

19 June 2018

Ms Maimu Berezkina

In many highly digitized countries, online public services have become the default medium of state communication and information dissemination to the public. When a significant part of the provision of state services moves online, we are dealing with the emergence of a digital, or virtual public sector, with the websites of public sector institutions functioning as ‘virtual client service centers’. It is important that digital solutions in the public sector do not lead to new barriers for minority languages.

The provision of digital public services in minority languages is especially important:

- For the visibility, prestige and status of that language, so it comes to be accepted or even ‘taken for granted’ in various domains and contexts.
- For the developing of the language through new terminology.

I’ll focus on the way Sami, mostly Northern Sami, is used in digital public services in Norway.

The Internet penetration rate in Norway is 96.3%, and communication with public services is being increasingly digitized. Tax authorities, Directorate of immigration, welfare services – all online. And digitalization in the health sector is so important that in 2016, a new Directorate for e-health was created. It is very important that minority languages are not left behind in the rapid digitalization processes.

When it comes to the use of Sami, a lot has already been done. Most central state websites in Norway provide some information in Northern Sami.

When it comes to the health sector:

- Remote consultation with Sami-speaking doctors, also for outside of the Sami administrative district. This is especially important for those Sami speakers who have low Norwegian skills.
- Remote interpretation can help a lot in the health sector. A study shows that 1 out of 15 did not get Sami interpretation in the health sector, although they asked for it. Sometimes family has to interpret, and this can be difficult due to privacy issues, knowledge of terminology etc.
- Samvalg (from University Hospital in Northern Norway) – “Choosing together”, when doctor and patient make the choice regarding future treatment together. Exists online also in Sami.
- Central texts on the websites of state institutions in Sami, to understand one’s rights.
- When your first language is Sami and you are ill or under a lot of stress, it is not sure that you will manage to communicate in Norwegian without mistakes. (A story from an acquaintance who has high school in Sami, university education in Norwegian: she got a child and filled out a form in Norwegian and made quite a big mistake. Because it was not in her mother tongue!)

When it comes to other public services, then you can for example choose Northern Sami when sending in your tax declaration electronically, as well as forms regarding reindeer herding.

Other important developments:

- Machine translation, “Google Translate” for Northern Sami from [Giellatekno](#). Translates both text, documents and URL. Developed at the Arctic University in Tromsø, freely available. Started in 2010 but now has been lifted to a good level of quality. Gives Norwegian speakers a possibility to follow Sami debates, but most importantly, those Sami speakers who have lower Sami language skills. A deliberate choice to only have it from Sami to Norwegian, not the other way around. Otherwise the web would get many texts in “a kind of Sami”, bad quality Sami. Doesn’t use statistical data but uses linguistic rules instead. In the future, there will also be developed an online translation platform between various Sami languages. Giellatekno online dictionaries and grammar check are also customized for other countries.
- University of Tromsø (*Divvun*) has created a spell check program for Northern, South and Lule Sami, developed iPhone and Android keyboard in Sami.
- Developing speech synthesis for Sami (artificial production of human speech, text-to-speech). Especially important for older speakers who have low levels of literacy in Sami. Also for younger people and their interaction with mobile phones.
- It’s important that Sami languages don’t develop in different directions in the different countries. Sámi Giellagáldu – an organization for the Sami speakers in the Nordic countries. Language developing, terminology, place names, language norms. For five Sami languages. New terminology needs to be approved by the experts.

However, there are many challenges for Sami in digital communication.

First, there are numerous technical issues:

- Many official registers do not accept Sami letters, so that Sami personal and place names cannot be written correctly. And the system cannot manage forms filled out in Sami. Important also for databases and GPS.
- Often, there is no possibility to have a language switch for a website, it’s not a well-developed functionality.
- In the Sami administrative district, you have the right to contact authorities in your own language. But it happens that when sending an e-mail to an official institution, the mailing system doesn’t understand the diacritics, and all the Sami special characters become numbers, codes. Looks like spam. Then you are forced to write in Norwegian.
- The website for Karasjok municipality – they ordered a new website but it didn’t manage internal search in Sami characters or a functioning Google search.

Another challenge is connected to attitudes. Even when national policies support the use of a minority language online, the enforcement of such policies can be problematic due to local attitudes, both among those who implement the policies in practice, and among the speakers of the minority language themselves.

- Most central state websites are created in Oslo, not in Northern Norway where the Sami administrative district lies.
- Sami is not prioritized in public sector digitalization processes. Most often it's because of economic arguments and a lack of human resources who could translate and maintain the translations up-to-date.
- There are still assumptions among the majority population that Sami is used mostly in oral communication and not so much in writing. Google Analytics statistics is used to support that point. But you cannot use such statistics with a small minority language like Sami, it will always be the least used language version next to Nynorsk or English. This is not a valid argument for not doing the translations. It's like continuing Norwegianization.
- The budget is usually the same for all different language versions of the website. Prioritizing translations into English and maybe even immigrant languages, especially Polish. Arguments that the Sami speakers understand Norwegian as well, but immigrants don't. Although a great majority of the Sami speakers are bilingual, allowing also the use of Sami is fundamental to the status of Sami and it's development (terminology).
- [Central Government Communication Policy](#), p. 3.4. – “Government agencies must pay special attention to users of the Sami languages”. This leaves a lot of room for interpretation. What can happen when you just provide a minimal offer in Sami: Tax Administration's Sami page having for a long time the phone number as the most visible element on the page. So the mere presence of a language on a state website does not mean that it is in fact possible to use the virtual client service center in that language.
- Despite the official legislation now supporting the revitalization of Sami, language attitudes among the Sami population still remain negatively affected by past assimilation politics. Furthermore, the move to the Internet involves a command of the written standard. Many Sami speakers lack competence in Sami when it comes to official written communication and use the majority language instead.

To conclude, it's important that:

- Minority languages are not left out of the public sector digitalization processes.
- They are not under-prioritized due to for example, translations into new minority languages.
- Technological platforms are adapted for the minority languages.
- The existing legislation is adapted to the new digital realities.