

Debates over the status of the Finnish and Swedish languages in Finland tend to ignore the fact that Finland has developed into a truly multilingual country.

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*Finland has two official languages: Swedish and Finnish. The status of both languages has recently generated debate within the country, particularly over the mandatory teaching of Swedish in Finnish language schools. **Pasi Saukkonen** assesses the current controversy, noting that the situation within the country has changed markedly since Finland's language policy was developed in the early 20th century. A far greater number of languages are now spoken by people living in Finland, and individuals are also more likely to have more than one mother tongue. This greater linguistic plurality is beginning to put the country's bilingual policies under pressure.*



When Finland became independent, in 1917, the country was declared officially bilingual. Swedish, spoken by the numerical minority, had been the language of public administration and higher education, and the normal domestic language of the upper classes for centuries. The majority vernacular, Finnish, had received fully equal status only some years before independence. The language policy solution was a compromise that proved sustainable despite many extraordinary features. In contrast to many officially bilingual or multilingual states, Finland is not a federal state. Unilingual territorial autonomy has been limited to the small and peripheral Åland islands.

Finnish language policy is a combination of a territoriality principle and a personality principle. The Finnish constitution recognises both Finnish and Swedish as national languages. People belonging to both language groups have the right to use their own language before courts of law and other authorities, and to receive official documents in that language. Public authorities must provide for the cultural and societal needs of Finnish-speakers and Swedish-speakers on an equal basis. The language of many welfare services is determined by the language status of local communities. Municipalities can be either unilingual Finnish or Swedish, or bilingual, depending on the size of the minority language group.

The 20th century is an era in European history of both ethnic conflict and linguistic strife, and of slow but unquestionable improvement in the cultural rights of minorities. In this context, the Finnish model was remarkably stable and peaceful. There were some ruthless years in the interwar period, but since then there have been hardly any serious disputes. Violent outbursts are extremely rare. When the Finnish welfare state was constructed, the language policy model was accommodated to it without changing the basic foundations of the system. Finnish bilingualism has been the object of much attention abroad, and has frequently been used as an example of a successful language policy arrangement. The New York Times once went as far as mentioning the Swedish-speakers of Finland as the 'most pampered' minority in the world.



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Not everything was in order, however. Canadian researcher Kenneth D. McRae aptly remarked at the turn of the Millennium that in the Finnish case the problem was not language conflict, but linguistic instability. The Swedish-

speakers were not so much suffering from intergroup prejudices, or hostility, but from slow diminishing, quiet attrition. The absolute size of the Swedish-speaking community had decreased only slightly, but the change was more dramatic as a share of the whole population. In less than a century, the proportion fell from almost 15 per cent to close to 5 per cent. Reasons behind this development can be found in lower fertility rates, emigration, and language change. Furthermore, domestic migration has turned many formerly unilingual Swedish regions bilingual, and many bilingual regions into areas clearly dominated by the majority language. Access to Swedish language public services has deteriorated, little by little.

The new Language Act which came into force in 2004 was supposed to mend apparent shortcomings. With hindsight, however, one can conclude that the reform laid bare more structural problems and brought increased dissatisfaction towards the system, both among Swedish-speakers and Finnish-speakers, into the daylight. There have always been some jingoistic groups arguing in favour of Finland becoming officially unilingual. Nevertheless, their number was small, and their arguments had little significance to the wider public debate. An issue that has recently raised more disagreement is the status of the Swedish language as an obligatory subject in all Finnish-language schools, including in areas where there are hardly any Swedish-speakers at all. Opponents to this arrangement have vigorously and skillfully used the Internet to express their criticism. Some prominent politicians and well-established organisations have also started to question the rationality of the policy.

At the same time, dissatisfaction among Swedish-speakers has increased due to the perception that new legislation cannot bring about notable improvements. On the contrary, public administration reforms that often include centralising tendencies, for example, have caused linguistic domain losses for Swedish-speakers. The Swedish People's Party, traditionally covering a safe majority of the Swedish-speaking electorate, has been urged to better safeguard linguistic rights.

The linguistic situation has now become tense, and one can observe rival conceptions of the nation and of language rights. However, the situation has also become more complex than it was in previous decades: something which both sides of the new linguistic strife tend to ignore. The Finnish system was built upon the idea that there were two language communities in the country, and that people could be easily divided into either Finnish-speakers or Swedish-speakers. Linguistic groups could also be regarded as ethnic communities: as something approaching 'nations within the nation'.

Contemporary Finland, however, has become a multilingual society, mainly as a result of immigration. In 2011, there were 36 language groups comprising more than a thousand speakers. The groups of Russian-speakers, Estonian-speakers and Somali-speakers have grown remarkably. With about 60,000 speakers Russian has become by far the largest language after the two official languages, and it is still growing.

Another development that brings complexity into the current system is the increasing multilingualism at the individual level. Because of inter-ethnic marriages, time spent abroad, and the maintenance of minority languages while learning the majority language, lots of people nowadays master at least two languages completely, and identify with two or more linguistic groups. Official linguistic registration, upon which Finnish language policy is constructed, however, only allows individuals to indicate one mother tongue. *De facto* multilingualism of the society, and *de facto* bilingualism of individuals, are thus not recognised by the legal framework of Finnish bilingualism. A solution to the above mentioned dissatisfaction and irritation among both Swedish-speakers and Finnish-speakers should therefore be sought against the background of the new linguistic realities. A complete re-thinking of Finnish society is required.

Increasing linguistic plurality and complexity are not, of course, solely Finnish phenomena. Many societies have become multilingual, and this development is likely to continue even when linguistic assimilation is factored into the equation. The future development of the Finnish case might provide Europe with interesting lessons on how to cope with linguistic diversity.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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