

International Year of Indigenous Languages – Sami people and languages in the EU

Indigenous languages are the essence of indigenous peoples' culture and traditions. They constitute the majority of the almost 7 000 languages spoken all over the world, yet, tragically, almost half of them are threatened with extinction. The loss of an indigenous language results in the loss of culture, tradition and ancestral knowledge, mainly botanical, gathered throughout the ages by those who speak it, resulting also in the loss of biodiversity. In light of this, the UN General Assembly declared 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

United Nations International Year of Indigenous Languages

In 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted the UN [Declaration](#) on the rights of indigenous peoples, among them their linguistic rights, including their right to education and culture in their own language and to establishing their language media.

In December 2016, the UN adopted its [resolution](#) on the rights of indigenous peoples and proclaimed 2019 the Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL), drawing attention to a vast number of endangered languages, particularly indigenous ones, and the urgent need to preserve, promote and revitalise them.

The loss of indigenous, regional or minority languages diminishes linguistic diversity and reduces the world's cultural richness. These languages are important for the preservation of indigenous cultures and traditions as well as for indigenous peoples' survival, health, participation in economic and social life, access to justice, and the prevention of abuses against them in the countries they live in.

Indigenous peoples and languages

There is no single universal definition of indigenous peoples, but Unesco [defines](#) them by their descent from ancestral local populations and their distinct social, cultural and economic conditions. Language being an essential aspect of culture, indigenous languages are a defining factor of [indigenous peoples](#).

According to [Unesco](#), there are 370-500 million indigenous peoples living in the world today, who own, occupy or use 22 % of the global land area. The majority of the nearly 7 000 languages in the world are indigenous languages, [40 %](#) of which risk disappearing by the end of this century. This would lead to the loss of [intangible cultural heritage](#) and traditional knowledge on the sustainable use of resources and ecosystems, while also being detrimental to biodiversity.

Situation in the EU

Indigenous Sami languages

Northern Europe is home to 80 000-100 000 [Sami](#) people, the only indigenous peoples in the EU. The majority – 50 000-65 000 – live in Norway, 20 000-40 000 in Sweden, and 8 000-10 000 in Finland, 60 % of whom live outside their homeland. Some 2 000 live in Russia. Except for those living in certain areas of Norway and Finland, Sami people belong to the minorities. Some practise their [10 000-year-old](#) traditional livelihoods of hunting, gathering, reindeer herding and handcrafting, and also wear their traditional clothing and speak their native languages.

Nine different Sami languages that are distinct from the dominant languages of the region are still spoken. The last speaker of the tenth Sami language, Akkala Sami, died in Russia in the 1990s. Only [about half](#) of the Sami people speak their language as their mother tongue. With approximately 20 000 speakers in Finland, Norway and Sweden, North Sami is the most widely spoken of these languages. Inari and Skolt Sami are two other Sami languages spoken in Finland, by only approximately 300 persons. Eastern/Skolt Sami is also spoken in Norway, while Lule Sami and South Sami are spoken in Norway and Sweden, where Pite Sami (30 speakers, all beyond 50 years of age), and Ute Sami (20 speakers) are both severely endangered.

Only 28 000-60 000 Sami people speak an endangered indigenous language. Norway, which is part of the European Economic Area (EEA), hosts the majority of them and faces responsibility for the survival of their language as do the remaining countries concerned (see below).

European Commission position

The specificity of Sami indigenous populations' tribal history of colonisation and marginalisation, their geographical location in distant and scarcely populated northern areas of Europe, together with the region's vulnerability to climate change and its consequences on biodiversity and natural resources, render the task of preserving their indigenous languages a daunting one.

Respect for linguistic diversity within the EU, enshrined in [Article 3](#) of the Treaty on European Union, is reflected in the EU's regional policy and, specifically for the Sami people, in an [Integrated EU policy for the Arctic](#). The latter includes provision for dialogue with indigenous peoples and international cooperation among three EU Member States (Finland, Sweden and Denmark, including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Norway and Iceland as EEA countries, two EU strategic partners – the US and Canada – and Russia.

Within this framework, the Commission ran the [Arctic Stakeholder Forum](#) in 2017 to identify funding priorities in the region. The ensuing report highlighted the need to preserve the Sami culture, particularly through its languages, for example, via support to Sami film production and media. The Sami Council mentioned the need to invest in Sami museums and artefacts and cultural centres, as well as Sami language teaching. Language centres were highlighted as vital for indigenous people's access to healthcare services.

Every year the European Parliament awards its [LUX Prize](#) to a European (co-)production. The award goes to films that focus on fundamental EU values, such as the fight against poverty, the need to combat violence against women, and the integration of vulnerable communities. The 2017 award went to a Swedish, Norwegian and Dutch co-production, '[Sami Blood](#)', starring Sami actresses. The film tells a story of racism, race biology examinations, and marginalisation of traditional Sami communities in Sweden.

Regional development funding for linguistic work on Sami languages

The above-mentioned report also highlighted the role of the newly set up Nordic Resource Centre for Sami languages in overcoming the territorial division among these languages and in promoting their use, and emphasised the need to secure its funding. The [Giellagáldu project](#) (€1 846 199), through which the centre was set up, was carried out with support from the European Regional Development Fund (€922 439 through 'Interreg VA Nord'). It focused on a number of linguistic objectives, such as developing more than 4 000 new words, standardising 360 South Sami, Lule Sami, North Sami, Inari Sami and Skolt Sami words, as well as establishing official orthography for Ume Sami. Thanks to cooperation between the centre and the University of Tromsø (Norway), language learning technologies for Sami languages now incorporate new terminology and standardisation, web dictionaries and machine translation software.

Sami [cultural heritage](#) benefited from EU support (€42 250) focused on protecting the intellectual property rights of traditional Sami products as a way to ensure their authenticity, high quality and higher selling price. Such support helps preserve traditional knowledge that is developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community, as a part of its cultural or spiritual identity.

European Parliament position

In [March 2013](#), the Sami Parliament of Finland, the body representing indigenous peoples from the north of Finland, held its first plenary session in the European Parliament and benefited from the occasion to discuss the language and cultural rights of Sami people.

Two years earlier, in its [resolution](#) of 20 January 2011 on a sustainable EU policy for the High North, the Parliament stressed the need for special measures to safeguard the language and culture of the indigenous peoples of the region, and support activities to promote them, including the language and culture of indigenous Finno-Ugric peoples in Northern Russia. In a resolution of 16 March 2017 on an integrated [European Union policy for the Arctic](#), the Parliament highlighted the importance of access to all levels of education and training for the region's indigenous peoples in their own language.

