



PERMANENT DELEGATION OF NORWAY TO THE OSCE

STATEMENT BY NORWAY ON THE OCCASION OF THE SAMI PEOPLE'S DAY

As delivered by Ambassador Robert Kvile
to the Permanent Council,
Vienna, 6 February 2014

Thank you Mr Chairman,

Today we celebrate the Sami People's Day. The Sami people are the indigenous people mainly inhabiting the Arctic area of Sápmi, which today encompasses parts of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia. There is an estimated total population of between 50 000 and 80 000 Sami People, with a majority of approximately 40 000 living in Norway.

The Sami People have traditionally pursued a variety of livelihoods, depending on their geographical surroundings. Hunting, fishing, and nomadic reindeer herding are nevertheless amongst those most closely associated with Sami tradition. Today however, the Sami community is about as diversified as any modern society, and it is telling that some of the largest concentrations of Sami People in Norway are found in the cities of Oslo and Tromsø.

Mr Chairman,

The occasion of the Sami People's Day reminds me of one of the darker chapters of my country's history, namely the treatment of the Sami People during the consolidation of modern Norway. Towards the end of the 19th century, the Norwegian state introduced a policy of norwegianisation, the aim of which was the total assimilation of the Sami people and other ethnic minorities.

Influenced by the theories of social-Darwinism, the policy was grounded in the notion that the Sami were an inferior people, and that their way of life was outdated and useless. Driven through by the schools, the church and local authorities, the process of norwegianisation fostered widespread discrimination, and had substantial negative

consequences for Sami culture, language and society. The ban on Sami language in schools was particularly effective. Ultimately, many Sami families and societies came to reject their own Sami identity and lose their command of the Sami language.

Mr Chairman,

It was not until after World War Two that a more positive view of the Sami minority began to dominate Norwegian public life. Crucially, new international ideas about human dignity and minority rights influenced the authorities and paved the way for a new policy. Gradually, the rights of the Sami people were recognized by the state.

In the 1980s several public reports were produced concerning Sami rights, with active participation from Sami civil society. This work culminated in the Sami Act which provided special rights for the Sami People, including the establishment of a Sami parliament. In addition, a special provision guaranteeing the right of the Sami people to develop their language, culture and society was added to the Constitution of Norway.

Mr Chairman,

Since then work has continued to ensure that Sami culture and society can thrive in Norway. The Finnmark Act of 2005 is a recent milestone that helps to secure the material basis for Sami culture. Another landmark is the agreement between the government and the Sami Parliament on consultations in matters that may directly affect the Sami. Moreover, steps were taken by the state to confront the past. In a symbolic moment at the opening of the Sami Parliament in 1997, HMK Harald V apologized for the injustice the Norwegian state had inflicted on the Sami people through the policy of norwegianisation.

Mr Chairman,

Even though tremendous progress has been made to reverse the effects of decades of shameful policies, the Sami culture and society are still vulnerable. There is still prejudice against the Sami People. When we today, together with the Sami People, celebrate the Sami People's Day, we should not forget the injustices of the past, and take steps to ensure that they are never repeated. Let this occasion encourage us to use our organization to promote tolerance and non-discrimination, and fight prejudices wherever they are gaining strength.

Thank you Mr Chairman.