

Swedish in Finland





The Swedish-speaking Population of Finland

According to the Constitution of Finland, Finnish and Swedish are the two national languages of Finland. The Swedish language therefore enjoys strong constitutional protection. Finland formed a part of Sweden until 1809, when Russia conquered Finland. During the Russian period, Swedish remained the language of administration and education, and when Finland declared its independence in 1917, the equality of the two languages was established due to the deep roots of the Swedish language in the history of the country.

In Finland, the mother tongue of every citizen is registered. The earliest language statistics date from 1880. At the time, Swedish-speakers numbered just under 295,000, which accounted for 14 per cent of the population. Up until the mid-1900s, their number increased to approximately 350,000, which was followed by a decrease due to a wave of emigration to Sweden.

The population development has changed over the last few decades. Emigration has come to a halt, and interest in Swedish has increased significantly in families with a mixed linguistic background. Nowadays, cross-language marriages increasingly lead to bilingual families. Approximately two thirds of children from such families are registered Swedish-speakers and an even greater percentage of them are placed in Swedish-speaking schools. This change is one of the reasons why the population decrease has come to a virtual standstill. However, the large number of marriages across language borders also fosters a new kind of bilingual identity.

Today, the Swedish-speaking population stands at roughly 290,000 (2021), accounting for 5.2 per cent of the country's population. The latest forecasts indicate that the number of Swedish-speakers will remain at this level for the next few decades.

The Swedish language remains a vibrant force in Finnish society, culture and identity. Strong Swedish-speaking political influence at the national level, combined with support from the Finnish-speaking side, has created good conditions for maintaining a bilingual Finland.



Identity and Culture

Swedish-speakers in Finland, also known as Swedish-speaking Finns, form a language group of their own. They perceive themselves as Finnish people who speak Swedish as their mother tongue. Their identity is formed by the language and continuous cultural traditions of the group. Swedish-speakers have their heart in Finland, but through the Swedish language there is also a strong bond with the other Nordic countries.

In the fields of education and culture, Finland's Swedish-speaking population enjoys cultural autonomy, with institutions that function in Swedish in parallel with Finnish. Every child in Finland has the right to attend early childhood education as well as pre-primary and basic education in their own language, either Finnish or Swedish. This applies throughout the country. For the Swedish-speaking population, this right is a precondition for their language and culture to remain vibrant. All school pupils are also taught the other national language as a compulsory subject – Swedish in Finnish-speaking schools, and vice versa. Some municipalities also arrange language immersion at day care centres and schools. The demand for language immersion is currently greater than the supply. It is also possible to continue studying in Swedish after basic education. In Finland, secondary education is divided into general upper secondary education and basic vocational education. Higher education is provided at universities and at universities of applied sciences. In addition to the unilingual Finnish universities, there are bilingual and Swedish-speaking universities. The largest university, the University of Helsinki, is bilingual.

Finland has compulsory military service for men, and Swedish-speaking men as well as female volunteers can choose to do their military service in the Nyland Brigade in Dragsvik. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland also has a Swedish-speaking diocese with its own bishop, the Diocese of Borgå, in which all the country's Swedish-speaking parishes are included.

Swedish culture in Finland is rich and varied in literature, theatre, film and music, and many other fields. Many of Finland's greatest authors and musicians have worked in Swedish. The number of Swedish-speaking media outlets in Finland is also significant. Several newspapers and magazines are published in Swedish. The national television and radio broadcasting company Yle has a Swedish-speaking unit consisting of two radio channels as well as a partly Swedish-speaking TV channel.

The Swedish-speaking population of Finland is slightly more active in various associations than Finns on average. Associations are considered important to the sense of community and identity.







Basic Linguistic Rights

According to the Constitution, Finnish and Swedish are the national languages of Finland, and society is committed to catering equally to the social and cultural needs of both the Finnish and Swedish-speaking population. This means, for instance, that the authorities are obliged to provide education, healthcare, social services and information in both Finnish and Swedish.

The basic linguistic rights are described in greater detail in the Language Act. The basis of the Act is the right of an individual to use their own language. The authorities must ensure, on their own initiative, that the right of every individual to receive service in Finnish and Swedish is secured in practice. The Act applies to courts of law, other state authorities and bilingual municipalities.

According to the Language Act, municipalities are unilingual or bilingual with either Finnish or Swedish as the majority language. A municipality that has both Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking residents is bilingual if the minority accounts for at least eight per cent of the population or includes at least 3,000 people. Today, 16 per cent of Finland's municipalities are bilingual or Swedish-speaking. The linguistic status of a municipality determines the level of services provided in Swedish.



In bilingual municipalities, residents have the right to receive healthcare and public social services in both Finnish and Swedish. The municipality is also obliged to ensure that forms and other written material, including signage, are available in both languages. Even if the language of a municipality is Finnish, Swedish-speakers are allowed to use Swedish when dealing with state authorities. This applies, for example, to the police, emergency services and the tax administration. The right to speak Swedish also extends to the courtrooms. State-owned companies, including the postal service (Posti) and the railway and transport company (VR), are also obliged to provide services and information in Swedish, although not to the same extent as the state authorities themselves.

The Language Act does not apply to private companies. However, many companies still take pride in offering services in Swedish. The Act also does not apply to universities or the church, as they are governed by their own acts.

The Language Act does not apply in the Swedish-speaking region of Åland, which is autonomous.





Regions Where Swedish is Spoken

Most of Finland's Swedish-speaking residents live in the coastal areas of Uusimaa (Nyland in Swedish), Turunmaa (Åboland in Swedish) and Ostrobothnia (Österbotten in Swedish). The largest number of Swedish-speakers live in Uusimaa, which is also the most densely populated area in Finland. However, due to the large number of residents, most of the municipalities in Uusimaa are bilingual with a Finnish-speaking majority. There are approximately as many Swedish-speakers in Ostrobothnia as there are in Uusimaa, but Ostrobothnia is more sparsely populated and there the Swedish-speaking population is in the majority. This means that everyday life differs greatly between these regions as far as the linguistic landscape is concerned.

Most Swedish-speakers in Uusimaa, especially in the capital region, work in Finnish-speaking workplaces and live in a bilingual environment where Finnish is on the increase. Swedish remains a vibrant language in Uusimaa thanks to the education system and the range of media outlets available in Swedish. Many bilingual families consider it an advantage that their children become bilingual, which is why the children most often attend school in Swedish. However, it is often difficult to access public services in Swedish in the capital region.

In contrast to Uusimaa, Swedish is strongly present everywhere in Ostrobothnia. Over half of the population in the Ostrobothnia region speaks Swedish as their mother tongue. There, it is possible for one's private and professional lives to be lived out exclusively in Swedish – a reality that is unheard of in most other parts of Finland.

The archipelago south of Turku, Turunmaa, is bilingual with a Swedish-speaking majority, but in the City of Turku, there are just over 9,200 Swedish-speakers, approximately 5 per cent of the population. Swedish is not very visible in the life of the city, but strong Swedish-speaking institutions, such as the Swedish-speaking Åbo Akademi University, contribute to maintaining its presence.

There are also groups of Swedish-speakers who do not live on the coast but in Finnish-speaking cities. These cities, such as Kotka, Oulu, Pori and Tampere, are sometimes referred to as “language islands” from a Swedish-speaking perspective.

When Finland declared its independence in 1917, a conflict arose between Finland and Sweden regarding which country the Åland Islands should belong to. The League of Nations ruled that the region should belong to Finland but be governed as an autonomy that guaranteed





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the status of the Swedish language. The regional government of Åland is responsible for legislation and administration in areas such as education, culture, healthcare, social services, municipal administration, postal services, radio and TV as well as matters related to business and finance. Matters outside the jurisdiction of Åland's regional autonomy include foreign and defence policies and taxation. This means that the Finnish State manages customs and border control in Åland. The official language of the region is Swedish, and contact between the authorities in Åland and the Finnish State takes place in Swedish.



Society and Politics

Even though the laws and structures necessary for the preservation of service in Swedish are in place, it does not always work in practice. It has become increasingly difficult to provide Swedish-speaking citizens with equal services, especially in areas where the Swedish-speaking population is small. This is why it is extremely important that there are politicians and organisations actively promoting a vibrant bilingualism in Finland.

At present, every party represented in Parliament, except one, are also active in Swedish to varying degrees. The Swedish People's Party was established in 1906 for the express purpose of being a uniting political force for the country's Swedish-speaking population, and today approximately 70 per cent of Swedish-speakers vote for the party. Among the other parties, Swedish is most prominently represented within the Social Democratic Party. Its Swedish-speaking party district was established in 1899 and is the oldest of the currently active party organisations in Finland. The National Coalition Party, the Centre Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance and the Christian Democrats are all bilingual. These parties also target their messages at Swedish-speakers, and Swedish-speakers have held leading positions within the parties. Several of the parties also have Swedish party districts or organisations.

The Swedish Assembly of Finland (Svenska Finlands folkting/Folktinget in Swedish), established in 1919, is a statutory organisation of cooperation for the Swedish-speaking population of Finland. Folktinget operates across political lines, and all parliamentary parties with operations in Swedish are active within the organisation.

According to the Act on the Swedish Assembly of Finland, the organisation's mission is to safeguard and promote the rights and interests of the Swedish-speaking population as well as actively share information about the Swedish language in Finland and the bilingualism of the country. Folktinget is also working to support and strengthen the status of the Swedish language and culture in Finland.

Protecting the linguistic rights of the Swedish-speaking population is a core task of Folktinget. The public can contact the organisation in issues relating to linguistic rights and the obligation of the authorities to respect these rights. Folktinget is actively working to safeguard the rights of Swedish-speakers within both state and municipal administration and the education sector as well as within social services and healthcare in Finland. Folktinget is a recognised referral body and issues statements to various authorities. It has thereby been able to impact the drafting of legislation and reforms that are of central importance for the Swedish-speaking population. The parliamentary committees consult Folktinget on a number of issues concerning the Swedish-speaking population.







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Linguistic Diversity in Europe

The linguistic situation in Finland, with two national languages, is by no means unique. Linguistic diversity is one of the core values of Europe and now seen as an asset. The European Union has 24 official languages, but in addition to the official languages, some 40 million Europeans speak a regional or local language.

Apart from Finland, there are also several other European countries, such as Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland, that have two or more national languages, or official languages as they are sometimes called. In all these countries, it is required at the national level that everyone must study the other official language. There are also several EU countries, such as Spain, where the minority language is obligatory at the regional level.

The language and minority policies of the European Union are part of the area of competence of the Member States, which is why the scope of influence of the European Union is limited in terms of policy and legislation. However, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights established that the EU is to “respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity,” which means that the EU has a legal obligation in this area.

Several EU programmes currently support projects that promote regional and minority languages. Folktinget is a full member of the Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity (NPLD), the leading European network for language planning. NPLD works to strengthen the position of regional and minority languages in Europe by proactively promoting linguistic diversity. Folktinget also actively cooperates with FUEN (the Federal Union of European Nationalities), an organisation that brings together some 90 national minorities and linguistic groups across 32 countries in Europe.

The purpose behind Folktinget’s international activities is to exchange concrete ideas and experiences with European cooperation partners in language planning and the promotion of linguistic diversity.

Folktinget also shares information about its best practices and bilingualism in Finland. In addition, the organisation provides regular reports on the status of the Swedish language in Finland for the purpose of monitoring the implementation of Council of Europe conventions on languages and minorities. Nordic cooperation is also important to Folktinget and a central goal is to promote the language and culture community.





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