POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE SÁMI IN THE COUNTRIES OF NORTHERN EUROPE

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The modern understanding of representative democracy includes not only the rule of the majority, but also the protection of the rights of minorities. One such minority is indigenous peoples, including the Sámi population that lives in four European countries, namely in the northern territories of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. In these countries, the Sámi, as a minority, find it difficult to achieve an adequate level of representation in traditional political structures that are responsible for articulating interests (parties, parliaments), therefore special mechanisms were found that allowed this indigenous people to participate in political decision-making processes more actively. The purpose of the article is to study the evolution and features of the political representation of the Sámi in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. The choice of countries is dictated by the cross-border nature of the Sámi settlement and the practice of diffusion of institutions of political representation. The methodology is based on neo-institutionalism and constructivism theories. It is concluded that after World War II, global transformations of the institutional environment took place in developed countries, and they were expressed in the rejection of the racial paradigm, the establishment of the supremacy of democracy and human rights. In the countries of Northern Europe at the end of the XX — beginning of the XXI centuries, the concept of "Arctic identity" was formed instead of identity through the construct of the "Nordic race", which was characteristic of the first half of the XX century. At the center of it is the concept of indigeneity. From the beginning of the XX century, the Sámi that were subjected to forced assimilation in all three countries (discriminatory policies of "swedification", "norwegianization" and "finnization") and that were forced to fight for their rights with minimal chances of winning over the dominant discourse of racial inferiority, became beneficiaries of the changes, received special status, collective rights, and opportunities for political representation in modern conditions. However, several problems and discriminatory practices against the Sámi remain relevant and require solutions at the level of public policy.

Keywords:
Sami, identity, political representation, parliaments, Norway, Sweden, Finland

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Introduction

The theoretical foundation for research on policies regarding minority ethnic groups, including indigenous peoples, is based on the works of Kymlicka (multiculturalism) [1], Lijphart (consociational democracy) [2], Brubaker [3], Tishkov [4], Drobizheva [5] (nationalism and citizenship), and Oskolkov [6] (ethnopolitics).

The policies of Sweden, Norway, and Finland regarding the Sámi people, as well as the evolution of state-indigenous relations in these countries, are examined in the works of Minde [7], Oksanen [9], and Nyyssönen [11]. The studies of Valkonen [8] and Lantto [10] focus on the policy of forced assimilation of the Sámi, while the processes of recognizing and implementing the Sámi people's right to self-determination have been explored by Henriksen [12]. Trosterud [13] conducted a comparative analysis of linguistic assimilation policies in Norway and Russia.

The political representation of the Sámi is a central focus of political scientists. De Villiers [14] and Nimni [15] argue that for indigenous peoples who do not form a regional majority in their ancestral territories and whose primary challenges stem from cultural and linguistic vulnerability, non-territorial autonomy is more suitable than territorial autonomy. However, other researchers, notably Kymlicka [1] and Nieguth [16], point out the shortcomings of this model of self-governance, emphasizing its inability to protect indigenous peoples' ancestral lands and natural resources, which have historically been the foundation of their existence over an extended period.

Theoretical concepts of multiculturalism, consociational democracy, and nationalism serve as the foundation for analysing the mechanisms of political representation of the Sámi in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. This study seeks to evaluate and validate the applicability of these theories in safeguarding indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination and political representation.

The research aims to analyse the evolution of interactions among key actors and the development of mechanisms for the political representation of the indigenous Sámi people in Sweden, Norway, and Finland, while also identifying overarching trends and country-specific characteristics. The methodology is based on a synthesis of constructivist and neo-institutionalist approaches. Constructivism (Wendt [17], Onuf [18]) focuses on the concept of identity as a continuously evolving and reproduced process of mutual representations between actors and structures. Neo-institutionalism (March, Olsen [19], and North [20]) focuses on the formation of norms, rules, and procedures governing the interactions of social groups and institutions (in this case, the state) as a result of political changes driven by the transformation of the institutional environment.

Before proceeding with the analysis of Sámi political representation in the three Nordic countries, it is necessary to provide a general overview of the Sámi people and consider the historical and political context that has shaped the contemporary features of their political representation.

The Sámi people — population, languages, and traditional livelihoods

Currently, there is no statistical data providing the exact figure for the Sámi population. This is because, since the end of World War II, Norway, Sweden, and Finland have not conducted censuses that document indigenous identity. Additionally, policies of assimilation and discrimination in these countries have led many indigenous individuals to abandon their Sámi identity. According to the Sámi Council, an international organisation uniting Sámi organisations from Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, the Sámi population is estimated to exceed 100,000 people.[1] However, this figure likely includes individuals who do not explicitly self-identify as Sámi. For example, before Sweden adopted the Sami Parliament Act in 1992,[2] the state defined Sámi identity solely based on reindeer ownership and herding. As a result, large groups of Sámi were not officially recognized by the state. Since the adoption of the Sami Parliament Act, language has become the primary marker of Sámi identity.

To determine the number of adult Sámi[3] who officially recognize their ethnic identity, it is necessary to refer to special voter registers created to enable Sámi participation in elections for their representative bodies. To register in these lists, individuals must confirm their indigenous affiliation and meet specific criteria based on both genealogical and linguistic factors [21, p. 1119]. According to voter registry data from the three countries for the period 2021—2023, a total of 35,829 people declared their Sámi identity: 20,543 in Norway,[4] 9,226 in Sweden,[5] and 6,060 in Finland.[6]

[1] Saami Council, 2024, *Arctic Council*, URL: https://arctic-council.org/ru/about/permanent-participants/saami-council/ (accessed 15.12.2023).

[2] Sametingslag (1992:1433), 2022, *Sveriges riksdag*, URL: https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/sametingslag-19921433_sfs-1992-1433/ (accessed 15.12.2023).

[3] Eligibility to vote in Sámi parliamentary elections requires a minimum age of 18.

[4] Valgresultat. Sametingsvalg, 2021, *Valgdirektoratet*, URL: https://valgresultat.no/valg/2021/sa (accessed 09.12.2023).

[5] Valresultat. Sametingsval 2021, 2023, *Valmyndigheten*, URL: https://www.val.se/valresultat/sametinget/2021.html (accessed 09.12.2023).

[6] Saamelaiskäräjävaalien tulos, 2023, *Samediggi*, URL: https://www.samediggi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Saamelaiskarajavaalin-tulokset-2023-1.pdf (accessed 09.12.2023).

Modern Sámi speak nine Sámi languages, though not all members of the indigenous group are fluent speakers. The majority of Sámi either do not speak any of the Sámi languages or use Sámi as a second language [22]. Many Sámi chose to abandon their identity due to past assimilation policies, which led to a decline in the number of Sámi language speakers. Although recent revitalization efforts have achieved some success, there is still a significant risk of language loss [23, p. 404]. According to UNESCO criteria, all Sámi languages are currently classified as endangered.[1]

The main traditional livelihoods of the indigenous Sámi people are reindeer herding, fishing, and hunting. However, most Sámi have now abandoned their traditional way of life and shifted to other, more in-demand sectors of employment [24, p. 11].

Evolution of the political and legal status of the Sámi

From the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, the Sámi in Norway, Sweden, and Finland were subjected to forced assimilation policies [25, p. 12]. Before this period, the northern territories traditionally inhabited by the Sámi did not attract significant interest from the dominant populations, primarily due to their harsh climate. However, with the discovery of natural resources during the Industrial Revolution, the economic exploitation and development of these territories accelerated. The expansion and industrial use of the northern regions resulted in the indigenous people losing their unique rights to their land. In addition to land dispossession, other Sámi rights were also restricted. The indigenous population became increasingly subjected to policies of forced assimilation and oppression.

One of the main reasons behind these policies was the goal of establishing centralized unitary states and achieving societal homogeneity. This objective was pursued, in part, by suppressing ethnic diversity. This was particularly significant for Norway, which gained independence from Sweden in 1905, and for Finland, which declared independence from Russia in 1917. In Sweden, nation-building efforts also intensified, especially during the rise of so-called "scientific" racism and the cult of the "Nordic race," which was deliberately constructed by the State Institute for Racial Biology (*Swed.* Statens institut för rasbiologi), founded in Uppsala in 1922 with the support of Sweden's major political parties [26, p. 153]. The Sámi were classified as inferior people who

[1] Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, 2010, *UNESCO*, URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20220608054501/http://www.unesco.org/tools/fileretrieve/43fdd320.pdf (accessed 09.12.2023).

could not be granted the same rights as the dominant population. Accordingly, Sámi culture was also considered less developed in comparison to that of the majority population.

The forced assimilation policy toward the Sámi was characterized by a ban on the use of Sámi languages, the denial of their culture, and the restriction of their right to autonomy. Additionally, in Sweden, reindeer-herding Sámi were subjected to forced relocation from their ancestral lands in the north of the country to more southern regions [27, p. 3].

During that period, the Sámi had no opportunity to participate in the political life of their countries. Although Norway, Sweden, and Finland introduced universal suffrage in the early 20th century, the level of political participation among the indigenous population remained extremely low. For example, in Sweden, certain restrictions prevented the Sámi from voting. To be eligible for suffrage, individuals were required to either pay taxes to the state, serve in the military, or receive social assistance due to poverty [28, p. 293]. Sámi engaged in reindeer herding and leading a nomadic lifestyle did not meet any of these criteria and, as a result, were excluded from the electoral process.

However, after the end of World War II, the political and legal status of the Sámi began to improve significantly. The Nuremberg Trials acted as a trigger for radical changes in the institutional environment, leading to the establishment of an egalitarian interpretation of human rights in international law. A key milestone was the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948,[1] followed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention № 107 on Indigenous and Tribal Populations in 1957.[2] The adoption of these international documents marked a qualitative shift in the institutional framework of both international and national law and became a decisive stimulus for the advancement of minority rights.

Against the backdrop of decolonization and democratization, the Sámi movement gained momentum, although its origins date back to the first quarter of the 20th century. The first-ever Sámi assembly took place on February 6, 1917, in Trondheim (Norway), where Norwegian and Swedish Sámi gathered to coordinate their efforts across national borders. This historic date was later recognized as Sámi National Day in 1992 [29, p. 17]. Notably, the chair of the organizing committee for the assembly was a woman — Elsa Laula Renberg (1877—1931), a civil rights activist and writer advocating for Sámi rights. She trained as a midwife in Stockholm, married a reindeer herder, and had six children. She was also

[1] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, *United Nations*, URL: https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights (accessed 19.12.2023).

[2] Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention (№ 107), 1957, *International Labour Organization*, URL: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C107 (accessed 19.12.2023).

the author of the political pamphlet "Infor lif eller död? Sanningsord i de Lappska förhållandena" (*Eng*. Are We Facing Life or Death? Words of Truth About the Situation in Lapland). In her pamphlet, published in 1904, Elsa Laula Renberg addressed key issues faced by the Sámi, including education (boarding schools with racial segregation), voting rights, and land ownership. The pamphlet is believed to have contributed to awakening the Sámi national spirit and marked the beginning of their decolonization process [30, p. 234]. After the events of 1917—1918, the Sámi movement faded and remained largely inactive until the 1950s, when it reawakened in response to the construction of hydroelectric power stations in Norwegian Lapland. This period also saw the establishment of the National Union of the Swedish Sámi People (*Swed*. Svenska Samers Riksförbund) [9, p. 1146].

A new impetus for the revitalization of the Sámi movement was the first International Sámi Conference held in 1953, followed by the establishment of the Sámi Council in 1956.[1] This international organisation was created to coordinate efforts in addressing common challenges faced by the Sámi people. As its primary political goal, the Sámi Council defined the achievement of self-determination and self-governance, which they understood as the ability to control their own destiny and actively participate in decision-making processes concerning their development.

Moreover, in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, there was a growing recognition that the classical model of representative democracy, based on the principle of "one person, one vote", creates a situation in multicultural states where minorities are subjected to majority rule and lack the opportunity to be heard [31, p. 6]. As a result, perceptions of majority-minority relations in these countries began to shift.

Finland was the first country to take a significant step toward increasing Sámi participation in political decision-making processes. In 1973, Finland enacted a law that established an organisation to represent the interests of the indigenous population in their traditional territories — the Sámi Delegation.[2] In 1996, the Sámi Delegation in Finland was officially replaced by the Sámi Parliament.[3]

The establishment of the Sámi Delegation had an even greater impact on the Sámi movement in neighbouring Norway and Sweden, increasing pressure on

[1] About the Saami Council, 2024, *Saami Council*, URL: https://www.saamicouncil.net/en/the-saami-council (accessed 20.12.2023).

[2] Asetus saamelaisvaltuuskunnasta (№ 824), 1973, *Finlex*, URL: https://finlex.fi/fi/laki/alkup/1990/19900988 (accessed 20.12.2023).

[3] Act on the Sámi Parliament (№ 974), 1995, *Ministry of Justice, Finland*, URL: https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/1995/en19950974_20031026.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwjY7cjxpvSDAxVRPBAIHVZwC4EQFnoECA0QBQ&usg=AOvVaw17xYp_96KPXraNIATbKzZu (accessed 20.12.2023).

their central governments. A key factor that led to a radical shift in Sámi policies in these two countries was the emergence of conflicts between the indigenous population and the state. In Norway, from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, a series of Sámi protests took place in Finnmark County against the construction of a hydroelectric power plant on the Alta River. The project would have led to the flooding of a Sámi village, forcing the indigenous population to relocate and disrupting their traditional livelihoods. In Sweden, in the early 1980s, Sámi communities in Jämtland Province also came into conflict with the state over land ownership rights. The Sámi and their ancestors had cultivated these lands and used them for reindeer grazing for generations [32, s. 25]. However, the Swedish Sámi were ultimately unable to secure their land rights, and their protests were unsuccessful. The Sámi protests in Norway were also suppressed, and they failed to prevent the construction of the hydroelectric plant. Nevertheless, these conflicts heightened the importance of Sámi rights and placed their issues at the forefront of political discussions. Following the Alta protests, the Norwegian government decided to initiate dialogues with Sámi organisations in 1980—1981. As a result, a special committee was formed to review the legal status of the Sámi [33, s. 234]. This committee eventually proposed the establishment of a Sámi representative body and the adoption of the Finnmark Act, which transferred approximately 96 % of land and freshwater resources in Finnmark County to the local population[1]. Since then, this territory has been managed by the Finnmark Estate Agency.

The examples above demonstrate that conflicts between the Sámi and the state played a significant role in triggering a radical shift in Sámi policy. In Norway, the Sámi were constitutionally recognized as an indigenous people in 1988. In contrast, although the Sámi in Sweden trace their first official recognition by the Riksdag back to 1977, their constitutional recognition did not occur until 2011. Additionally, Norway ratified ILO Convention № 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in 1990, whereas Sweden has yet to do so [34, p. 1206].

In Norway, the Sámi Act was adopted in 1987[2] and came into force in 1989, leading to the eventual establishment of the Sámi Parliament. Sweden was the last of the three countries to establish a similar parliament in 1993.[3] The laws creating the Sámi parliaments also officially recognized Sámi languages and culture.

[1] Act relating to legal relations and management of land and natural resources in Finnmark, 2005, *Lovdata*, URL: https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/2005-06-17-85?q=Finnmark%20Act (accessed 21.12.2023).

[2] The Sámi Act (№ 56), 1987, *Regjeringen*, URL: https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/the-sami-act-/id449701/ (accessed 21.12.2023).

[3] The Sámi Act (№ 1433), 1992, *Sametinget*, URL: https://www.sametinget.se/9865 (accessed 21.12.2023).

Thus, the political representation of the Sámi was significantly expanded as a result of compromises reached between the central government and the indigenous population.

The establishment of similar indigenous self-governance bodies in all three countries was not coincidental. Norway and later Sweden borrowed the original Finnish model of Sámi self-governance. The phenomenon of states adopting political models from others is explained within neo-institutionalism by the theory of diffusion, which suggests that states — especially friendly ones — may develop similar institutions [35, p. 10]. Another relevant concept is institutional isomorphism, which refers to the resemblance of institutions within a given social space, whether due to independent development or borrowing, particularly in the context of modern globalization [36, p. 2]. The differences between the Sámi parliaments, however, can be explained using the concept of path dependence [37, p. 86]. According to this theory, institutions that are initially created with similar goals and frameworks may evolve in different directions, sometimes in ways that were not originally anticipated. The specific differences between the Sámi parliaments are explored in greater detail in another section of this article.

Today, the Sámi people have the same political rights as the majority population, including the right to vote and stand as candidates in elections. They are also entitled to establish their own civic organisations and even political parties. However, formal equality does not necessarily lead to actual equality. In societies divided into a majority and a minority, rights and responsibilities are often distributed disproportionately. Despite significant improvements in their political and legal status, the Sámi remain a minority, which presents both challenges and unique characteristics in their political representation. Moreover, the Sámi still experience a certain degree of discrimination. Sámi ethnic identity and the use of Sámi languages correlate with a higher likelihood of reporting discriminatory experiences. There is also a trend indicating that Sámi individuals who maintain their cultural traditions, speak Sámi languages, and engage in reindeer herding tend to have lower health and socio-economic indicators [34, p. 1208; 23, p. 406]. Thus, it can be concluded that the Nordic countries have not yet fully eliminated discriminatory practices against the Sámi population.

Political representation of the Sámi in national, regional, and local parliaments

Today, through political representation, the Sámi in Norway, Sweden, and Finland influence political decision-making at the local, regional, and national levels. Their participation occurs through local, regional, and national par-

liaments, Sámi parliaments as cultural self-governing bodies, and cooperation agreements with regional and municipal authorities. However, the degree of influence varies across these channels, and not all provide equal opportunities for the Sámi to participate in political decision-making. Additionally, it is important to consider that not all Sámi prioritize their ethnic identity over their civic identity, which may affect their political behaviour and participation in legislative bodies.

The Sámi have never had significant representation in national parliaments. Although the first Sámi representative was elected to the Norwegian Parliament in 1906, the indigenous population has been unable to increase its political representation in this legislative body. By comparison, in Finland, the first Sámi representative was elected to the national parliament only in 2007, while in Sweden, no Sámi representative has ever been elected to the national parliament [31, p. 12].

It is also important to note that national parliaments do not have reserved seats or quotas for indigenous peoples. In Sweden, during the 1920s and 1930s, two proposals were introduced regarding Sámi representation in the Riksdag through quotas [38, s. 74]. However, these proposals did not gain significant support, and since then, the issue has not been revisited in parliamentary discussions. Similarly, in Norway, there have been occasional proposals to ensure Sámi representation in the Storting. For example, in 1974, the Liberal Party raised the issue of granting the Sámi the right to elect two representatives to the national parliament [31, p. 14]. However, much like in Sweden, this proposal remained only an idea and was never implemented.

Sámi political representation at the regional and local levels remains limited, with a few exceptions. In Norway, candidates of Sámi origin are occasionally elected to the regional legislative bodies in Trøndelag, Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark. However, they secure only a small number of seats and typically represent national political parties, such as the Labour Party (*Norw.* Arbeiderpartiet) and the Red Party (*Norw.* Rødt), rather than Sámi-specific parties, which struggle to compete in regional elections. Only in the most recent elections in Finnmark in 2023 did Sámi candidates run under two Sámi political parties, with the Sámi People's Party (*Norw.* Samefolketsparti) failing to secure enough votes and not winning any seats, while the People of the Northern Calotte (*Norw.* Nordkalottfolket), for the first time in a regional election, won 19 % of the vote, finishing in second place and securing 7 out of 35 seats.[1] In the previous regional elections in 2019, when Troms and Finnmark were still

[1] Valgresultat. Finnmark, 2023, *Valgdirektoratet*, URL: https://valgresultat.no/valg/2023/fy/finnmark%20finnm%C3%A1rku#partyDistribution (accessed 22.12.2023).

a unified county, Nordkalottfolket won only one seat. Additionally, two seats were won by Sámi candidates from the Samelista — a special electoral list commonly used in Norwegian elections to unite candidates who do not belong to any political party.[1]

Moreover, under the Finnmark Act, the land and freshwater resources of Finnmark County have been managed since 2005 by a board of directors consisting of six members, with half appointed by the Sámi Parliament and the other half by the regional council. This system of representation has finally granted the Sámi of Norway the ability to defend their rights to use the lands and waters that their ancestors had relied on for generations.

A similar governance system was proposed for Troms and Nordland counties, with the creation of an organisation called Hålogalandsallmenningen to oversee 50 % of the land and freshwater resources in these regions.[2] However, this proposal did not receive significant support and has not yet been implemented.

At the local level, the Sámi are best represented in the municipalities of Karasjok and Kautokeino, which serve as cultural centres of the Sámi and where the majority of the population speaks a Sámi language.[3] Their municipal councils include both independent Sámi representatives and Sámi affiliated with Norwegian national and Sámi political parties. Among the Norwegian national parties represented are the Labour Party (*Norw.* Arbeiderpartiet), the Conservative Party (*Norw.* Høyre), the Liberal Party (*Norw.* Venstre), the Progress Party (*Norw.* Fremskrittspartiet), and the Centre Party (*Norw.* Senterpartiet). The Sámi political parties include Árja (*Eng.* Effort) and the Sámi People's Party (*Norw.* Samefolkets Parti).

In Sweden and Finland, Sámi representation at the regional and local levels is even lower than in Norway, as most Sámi tend to avoid participation in national political parties. At the first pan-Sámi assembly in 1917, the Sámi of Sweden explicitly rejected party politics [38, s. 71]. One possible reason for this decision was that Sámi interests related to reindeer herding would inevitably clash with the interests of political parties advocating for the development of forestry and agriculture. Another reason may have been the Sámi's reluctance to be depend-

[1] Valgresultat. Finnmark, 2019, *Valgdirektoratet*, URL: https://valgresultat.no/valg/2019/fy/troms%20og%20finnmark#partyDistribution (accessed 22.12.2023).

[2] Hålogalandsallmenningen. Om forvaltning av fast eiendom i Troms og Nordland, 2008, *DUO Research Archive*, URL: https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/21880/87315.pdf (accessed 22.12.2023).

[3] Valgresultat. Karasjok, 2021, *VG*, URL: https://www.vg.no/valgnatt/2023/ko/fylker/finnmark-finnmarku/kommuner/karasjohka-karasjok (accessed 22.12.2023) ; Valgresultat. Kautokeino, 2021, *VG*, URL: https://www.vg.no/valgnatt/2023/ko/fylker/finnmark-finnmarku/kommuner/guovdageaidnu-kautokeino (accessed 22.12.2023).

ent on decisions made by non-Sámi representatives. Even today, most Sámi in Sweden continue to stay away from national political parties, leading to only sporadic Sámi candidacies in local elections. Sámi political representation is more significant only in their cultural and political centres, Jokkmokk and Kiruna. In the municipality of Jokkmokk, the Sámi Well-being (*Swed.* Samernas Väl) Party has recently begun winning seats in the local legislative assembly,[1] while in Kiruna, Sámi representatives secure mandates through the independent electoral list (*Swed.* Sámelistu).[2]

Thus, despite the initial rejection of party politics by the Swedish Sámi, the establishment of the Sámi Parliament, followed by the formation of Sámi organisations and parties, has led to greater electoral participation among the indigenous population, particularly in the municipalities of Jokkmokk and Kiruna. Although this increase in political representation remains modest, it still marks progress. Another achievement has been that, with the creation of the Sámi Parliament, several Swedish political parties, including the Social Democratic Workers' Party (*Swed.* Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti), the Left Party (*Swed.* Vänsterpartiet), and the Green Party (*Swed.* Miljöpartiet de gröna), have developed Sámi-focused policies, which improves the chances of greater political representation for Sámi interests.

As for the Sámi in Finland, it is worth noting that, like the Sámi in Sweden, they are not particularly active in national political parties. Since they do not have their own parties, those who do participate in elections typically represent Finnish political parties, primarily the Centre Party (*Fin.* Keskustapuolue),[3] which has often supported Sámi rights and was the party through which the first Sámi representative was elected to Finland's national parliament. Additionally, given that the Sámi population in Finland is significantly smaller than in neighbouring Norway and Sweden, their election to regional and local legislative bodies is even less common. However, Sámi political representation is somewhat higher in their cultural centres, particularly in the municipalities of Inari, Utsjoki, Enontekiö, and Sodankylä.[4]

Overall, it can be stated that Sámi political representation exists in both institutionalized forms, such as parliaments and political parties, and non-institutionalized forms (Table 1).

[1] Kommunval. Jokkmokk, 2022, *Valmyndigheten*, URL: https://valresultat.svt.se/2022/kommunval-2510-jokkmokk.html (accessed 22.12.2023).
[2] Kommunval. Kiruna, 2022, *Valmyndigheten*, URL: https://valresultat.svt.se/2022/kommunval-2584-kiruna.html (accessed 22.12.2023).
[3] Kuntalista, 2022, *Vaalitulokset*, URL: http://vaalitulokset.kp24.fi (accessed 23.12.2023).
[4] Saamelaiset Suomessa, 2023, *Samediggi*, URL: https://www.samediggi.fi/saamelaiset-info/ (accessed 23.12.2023).

Table 1

Institutionalization of Sámi political representation

Form of Political Representation (as of 2024)	Norway	Sweden	Finland
Sámi representation in the National Parliament	+/–[1]	–	–
Sámi parliaments	+	+	+
Sámi political parties	+	+	–
Sámi organisations and movements	+	+	+

The Sámi people focus their political representation efforts primarily on participation in Sámi parliaments, as well as in Sámi political parties, organisations, and movements, since achieving adequate representation at the national, regional, and local levels of government remains challenging. Furthermore, Sámi identity does not always determine the political preferences and decisions of indigenous representatives, especially given that they live in countries with well-developed civic identities. To fully assess Sámi political engagement, it is essential to consider not only their presence in legislative bodies but also their active participation in political and cultural institutions dedicated to protecting their rights.

Sámi participation in elections is often sporadic, with the exception of greater representation in their cultural and political centres and within the framework of the Finnmark Act. Nevertheless, the Sámi have the opportunity to advocate for their interests through cooperation agreements between Sámi parliaments and both regional and municipal authorities within their traditional settlement areas. These cooperation agreements cover key areas such as Sámi language revitalization, cultural development, education in Sámi languages, the promotion of traditional livelihoods, and combating racism. Since the establishment of Sámi parliaments, Sámi-related issues have gained greater recognition, prompting national political parties to develop Sámi-focused policies, which has improved the chances of greater representation of Sámi interests. This is particularly evident in Norway, where the Sámi are the most politically active within national political parties.

Sámi parliaments as representative bodies

Due to the inability of the Sámi to achieve adequate political representation at the national, regional, and, in most cases, local levels, Sámi parliaments emerged as a solution to increase Sámi participation in political processes.

[1] There are currently no Sámi representatives serving as full members of the Norwegian national parliament (*Norw.* Storting). However, in 2021, H. G. Danielsen, who has Sámi heritage and advocates for Sámi interests, was elected as a deputy representative for Sør-Trøndelag from the Socialist Left Party.

Since the Sámi do not constitute a majority in their traditional settlement areas, all three countries adopted a non-territorial model of self-governance. The Sámi were granted cultural autonomy, with Sámi parliaments serving as its institutional embodiment. These parliaments provide Sámi communities with the opportunity to preserve and develop their culture, language, and traditional livelihoods. At the same time, their functions extend beyond cultural self-governance and include elements of political representation, distinguishing them from other forms of national-cultural autonomy, which generally lack political authority.

Thus, Sámi parliaments represent a unique combination of cultural self-governance and political representation, highlighting the importance of their institutional analysis in the context of indigenous political representation.

There are many similarities among the Sámi parliaments of Norway, Sweden, and Finland. The primary goal of these institutions is to achieve equal political, economic, social, and cultural rights for the Sámi people while preserving and protecting their indigenous languages, culture, and traditional livelihoods.

The parliaments share similar powers. First, they serve as official representatives of the Sámi population, making the protection of Sámi interests their core function. Second, they have the authority to allocate budgets in accordance with their objectives and needs, with funding provided by national governments [39, s. 391]. Third, they can make decisions regarding Sámi language and culture, as well as education in Sámi languages. Fourth, they work to raise awareness about the issues facing the indigenous population, which is essential for safeguarding their rights. Fifth, they submit policy proposals to government authorities on social policies affecting the Sámi, such as economic well-being, living and working conditions, education levels, language revitalization, and cultural preservation. Finally, Sámi parliamentary representatives participate in parliamentary hearings, although they do not have veto power over decisions made by state authorities. Additionally, the Sámi Parliament in Norway has the unique ability to monitor the use of certain traditional lands, as its representatives take part in the management of land and freshwater resources in Finnmark County.

All three Sámi parliaments function as consultative bodies with the authority to make decisions within a limited scope directly affecting the Sámi population. They operate under specific government ministries: in Finland, the Ministry of Justice; in Sweden, the Ministry for Rural Affairs; and in Norway, the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion — though other ministries are also involved in Sámi policy matters.

The role of Sámi parliaments is twofold: on the one hand, they represent the interests of the indigenous population, and on the other, they serve as intermediaries in implementing state policies concerning the Sámi [40, p. 109]. It cannot

be said that Sámi parliaments are completely independent from state authority. The government determines their powers and provides financial support for their operations. According to M. Berg-Nordlie, a certain degree of state oversight over indigenous self-governing bodies is necessary to prevent decision-making processes from being monopolized by groups that do not represent the majority [39, s. 392]. Berg-Nordlie further emphasizes that Sámi do not constitute a majority in any of their traditional settlement regions, except for a few municipalities, meaning that Sámi-related policies inevitably affect the broader population as well.

An important aspect of Sámi political representation is access to participation in the formation of Sámi parliaments. As mentioned earlier, special voter registers enable Sámi individuals to take part in Sámi parliamentary elections, both as voters and candidates. In recent years, an increasing number of Sámi have registered and participated in elections. However, not all Sámi individuals are able to register in the voter rolls. Some face difficulties in proving their Sámi identity, particularly those whose families lost their language due to past assimilation policies.

For a more comprehensive understanding of the functioning of Sámi parliaments, it is useful to analyse their size, electoral structure, and political-ideological composition. These parameters provide a clear basis for comparing the workings of Sámi parliaments in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, contributing to a deeper assessment of their role within the political system of each country (Table 2).

Table 2

Comparative analysis of Sámi parliaments in Norway, Sweden, and Finland: size, electoral structure, and political-ideological composition

Parameter	Sámi Parliament of Norway	Sámi Parliament of Sweden	Sámi Parliament of Finland
Size	39	31	21
Electoral structure	Proportional electoral system with seven districts, ensuring geographical and cultural representation. Elections are held every four years	Plurality system in a single nationwide electoral district. Elections are held every four years	Elections take place in a single electoral district covering Sámi ancestral territories, with consideration of cultural subgroups. Elections are held every four years
Political-ideological composition	Norwegian Sámi Association dominates; national Norwegian parties such as the Labour Party and the Centre Party also participate	The dominant party is “Hunting and Fishing Sámi Party”; other Sámi parties and organisations are also represented in the parliament	No Sámi political parties; all candidates run as independents

Elections for Sámi parliaments are held every four years. The most recent elections took place in Norway and Sweden in 2021, while in Finland, they were held in 2023. Voter turnout is highest in Norway, where it has remained consistently between 67 % and 70 %.[1] In Sweden, turnout for the Sámi Parliament elections increased by 10 % over the past eight years, reaching 64.8 % in 2021.[2] The lowest voter turnout is observed in Finland, where in the 2023 elections, it was 51.6 %,[3] compared to 48.58 % in 2019.[4] A drop in turnout below 50 % could indicate the Finnish Sámi Parliament's difficulty in engaging Sámi voters in political participation as the electoral register expands. In Finland, as in Norway and Sweden — but to a greater extent — there is a trend where some Sámi individuals register in the voter roll not to participate in Sámi democracy but simply to have their Sámi identity officially recognized.

The high voter turnout in the Norwegian Sámi Parliament elections can be attributed to its unique electoral district system. Norway uses a proportional electoral system with seven districts, covering all regions of the country, which is particularly important given the geographical dispersion of the Sámi population [41, p. 267]. Moreover, these electoral districts are designed to ensure that different cultural subgroups within the indigenous population have the opportunity to participate in elections. The Norwegian Sámi Parliament consists of 39 seats,[5] with the number of representatives elected from each district depending on the number of registered voters in that district.

In Sweden, elections for the Sámi Parliament are also held nationwide, but within a single electoral district. The parliament consists of 31 representatives, elected through a plurality system[6]. Voters have the option to cast their vote either for a political party or for an individual candidate from that party.

[1] Valgresultat. Sametingsvalg, 2021, *Valgdirektoratet*, URL: https://valgresultat.no/valg/2021/sa (accessed 23.12.2023).

[2] Valresultat. Sametinget, 2021, *Valmyndigheten*, URL: https://www.val.se/valresultat/sametinget/2021.html (accessed 23.12.2023).

[3] Saamelaiskäräjävaalien tulos, 2019, *Samediggi* (2019), URL: https://www.samediggi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Saamelaiskarajavaalin-tulokset-2023-1.pdf (accessed 23.12.2023).

[4] Vaalit, 2019, *Samediggi*, URL: https://dokumentit.solinum.fi/samediggi/?f=dokumenttipankki/vaalit/suomeksi (accessed 23.12.2023).

[5] Sametinget i Norge, 2024, *Sametinget*, URL: https://sametinget.no/_f/p1/i50a5462d-5adf-4638-8376-ef2405c9792a/sametinget-brosjyre-a4-norsk-230623.pdf (accessed 23.12.2023).

[6] Sametingsvalet, 2022, *Sametinget*, URL: https://www.sametinget.se/val (accessed 23.12.2023).

In Finland, the Sámi Parliament consists of 21 representatives.[1] As in Sweden, elections take place within a single electoral district, but this district exclusively covers the territories traditionally inhabited by the indigenous Sámi population. The electoral district is divided into four sub-districts, designed to ensure representation of different Sámi cultural subgroups. Each sub-district elects at least three representatives, in addition to at-large representatives from the entire electoral district. Despite considering the votes of different Sámi cultural subgroups, this system does not account for Sámi individuals living outside these designated regions, excluding them from representation in the Sámi Parliament.

In the Sámi Parliament elections in Norway and Sweden, candidates include Sámi political parties and organisations, reindeer herding communities, and independent candidates. In Norway, the Norwegian Sámi Association (*Norw.* Norske Samers Riksforbund, NSR) has consistently won the largest number of seats since the first Sámi Parliament elections.[2] In Sweden, since 2005, the Hunting and Fishing Sámi Party (*Swed.* Jakt- och fiskesamerna) has consistently held first place in the Sámi Parliament elections.[3] As of today, the Sámi representative bodies in both Norway and Sweden are composed of seven parties and organisations. It is also important to note that in Norway, Sámi candidates also run under national Norwegian political parties, including the Labour Party, the Centre Party, and the Progress Party.

In Finland, the Sámi do not have their own political parties. The Central Association of the Sámi in Finland is the only major indigenous organisation in the country, but it does not participate in the formation of the Sámi Parliament. Candidates for Sámi parliamentary elections in Finland are exclusively independent candidates. As previously mentioned, the fact that Sámi in Finland and Sweden do not run for Sámi parliaments under national political parties is due to the general reluctance of the Sámi population to engage in party politics.

Conclusion

This article has examined various aspects of Sámi political representation in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Using a neo-institutionalist approach, it has been concluded that the current characteristics of Sámi political representation are shaped by a specific historical and political context, which includes significant

[1] Saamelaiskäräjien vaalien tuloksen määräytyminen, 2023, *Samediggi*, URL: https://www.samediggi.fi/vaalit-2023/saamelaiskarajien-vaalien-tuloksen-maaraytyminen/ (accessed 24.12.2023).

[2] Valgresultat. Sametingsvalg, 2021, *Valgdirektoratet*, URL: https://valgresultat.no/valg/2021/sa (accessed 24.12.2023).

[3] Valresultat. Sametinget, 2021, *Valmyndigheten*, URL: https://www.val.se/valresultat/sametinget/2021.html (accessed 24.12.2023).

changes in the legal and political status of the Sámi and the compromises reached between the state and the indigenous population, often as a result of conflicts. Applying a constructivist methodology allowed for an analysis of identity formation as the foundation of the Sámi movement, which initially focused on economic, cultural, and social demands before expanding to include political representation.

A common challenge for Sámi across these countries is their inability to achieve adequate political representation at all levels of government, except in their cultural centres. Sámi participation in elections is often sporadic, and the low level of engagement among Swedish and Finnish Sámi in national political parties further distances them from politics at all levels. In contrast, the Sámi in Norway are more politically active within party structures. The greater political involvement of Norwegian Sámi can be explained by historical factors that have provided them with more opportunities for political engagement and integration into national party structures. Norway also has a more developed system for protecting indigenous rights, including the ratification of ILO Convention № 169, which enables Sámi participation in national politics without conflicting with economic interests or dependence on the non-Sámi population. Meanwhile, the Sámi in Finland and Sweden, facing less favourable conditions, tend to avoid party politics in order to preserve their autonomy and maintain control over the protection of their interests.

The establishment of Sámi parliaments has significantly increased Sámi political engagement and given them the ability to determine their own path of development. In all three countries, Sámi parliaments function primarily as consultative bodies operating under government ministries, with their powers and budgets determined by the central authorities. Among them, the Norwegian Sámi Parliament is the most effective in integrating Sámi into political processes, due to both its more inclusive voter registration criteria and its authority to oversee certain traditional Sámi lands. Norway has also implemented the most effective electoral district system, ensuring both geographical and cultural representation of the Sámi, which is particularly important given their dispersion across a vast territory and migration from traditional settlement areas. In Finland, however, the electoral district for Sámi Parliament elections only includes traditional Sámi territories, excluding those who have migrated to other regions of the country from participating in Sámi democracy.

Sámi representation in Sámi parliaments is also associated with several challenges. Some Sámi individuals register in the electoral roll not with the intent of participating in Sámi democracy but simply to affirm their identity. Additionally, “statusless Sámi” face significant difficulties in proving their indigenous identity, as their families lost the Sámi language due to past assimilation policies. Currently, some Sámi continue to lose their connection to their indigenous language,

adopting the culture and lifestyle of the majority population. Finally, despite the official abandonment of assimilation and discriminatory policies toward the Sámi, there is still skepticism about fully integrating the indigenous population into political decision-making processes.

In conclusion, this study has confirmed the relevance of multiculturalism, consociational democracy, and nationalism theories for analysing Sámi political representation. These theories help explain how cultural differences are accommodated, minority integration is facilitated, and ethnic identity plays a role in the political process in Norway, Sweden, and Finland.

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