

## **A Good Swedishness? Expressions of Swedish National Identity in Minority and Integration Policies**

*Ellinor Hamrén*

### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the Swedish official discourse on national identity by looking at Swedish minority and integration policies. It looks specifically at how 'the Good' is constructed in these policies, in other words: what type of national identity is seen as desirable? The Swedish case is then placed within a larger theoretical debate on national identity. The paper argues that the existing dominant theory regarding national identity has not come to terms with the 'civic-ethnic' dilemma, where inclusive/voluntarist national identity is seen as the *Good* and exclusive/organic national identity is seen as *Bad*, and discusses the problems of this Good-Bad dichotomy. The paper further argues that there exists a 'Good national identity' – an idea that a national identity that is inclusive of minorities is 'the Good'. This has proved applicable to the Swedish case, where an inclusive 'civic' interpretation of Swedishness is viewed as superior to an 'ethnic' exclusive one. The findings show that ethnic identities are only possible for minorities, whereas the majority is largely deprived from an ethnic characteristic in the discourse. The paper concludes that the insistence on inclusion leads to an affirmation of 'the national' way of thinking and argues that we need to rethink the notions of Good and Bad when it comes to national identity.

**Key Words:** Swedishness, national identity, nation, nationalism, civic-ethnic, multiculturalism, national minorities, immigrants, integration, discourse analysis.

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### **1. Introduction**

The nature of Swedish national identity has been discussed increasingly over the past few decades. The question has arisen due to large-scale immigration, which has created a more 'multicultural' population. It is often maintained that Sweden prior to the 1960s was a homogenous society and that the 'problems' of a multiethnic society are a new phenomenon. However, this is not entirely true as ethnic diversity always has been present in Sweden. Both the indigenous Sami population and the Tornedalers, who speak a Finnish language, inhabited the northern part of Sweden long before

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a Swedish nation-state was formed. In addition, Finnish, Roma and Jewish groups have populated the country for several hundred years.

A traditional debate within the studies of national identity is that of the civic-ethnic framework. While it is widely agreed today that most nations contain both civic and ethnic elements, scholars disagree on whether the civic-ethnic framework is still useful or not. A related discussion is whether it is possible to distinguish between good and bad nationalisms. Some argue that civic national identities are more inclusive of minorities, while ethnic nations exclude minorities, and that such a good-bad distinction therefore is relevant. While many scholars have challenged this view, it is still generally accepted that a national identity that is inclusive of minorities by definition is good. I argue that the civic and ethnic classifications are useful as normative concepts. Few nations are entirely civic, however there is often a self-image or desire to be civic, and hence, good.

This paper looks at the Swedish official discourse on national identity, as expressed in the minority and integration policies. It analyses whether there is a desire to portray Swedish national identity as civic and inclusive – whether there is a ‘Good Swedishness’ – and discusses what theoretical implications we can draw from the Swedish case.

## 2. Method

The empirical material used in the study consists of official publications in the form of government bills which constitute the key documents in the Swedish minority and integration policies. These have been analysed using discourse analysis as a method<sup>1</sup>. Neither of the traditional approaches within the field of discourse analysis (e.g. discourse theory or CDA) has been adopted, but an integrated approach is applied.<sup>2</sup>

Since ‘discourse’ is a notoriously vague concept used in a countless number of ways it is important to stipulate its definition. In this paper discourse will be used in two separate ways. One is in reference to the ‘official discourse on national identity’, which should be understood as the way in which language is used by the government in its minority and integration policies. This conception of discourse is more concrete, and is limited to the use of language within a certain genre, at a certain time. The second definition of discourse refers to ‘the national’ order of discourses<sup>3</sup>, and the competing ‘national discourses’ that fall into this group. This conception of discourse is more abstract and relates to the subsequent discussion on national identity.

Discourse analysis provides a number of useful analytical tools for studying texts. One such tool that is used in this paper is a so called *logic of equivalence*, which identifies multiple signs – or, in this case, identities – and their relationships with each other within a given discourse.<sup>4</sup> This means that the discourse restricts certain identities to certain people, and the task for the

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researcher is to deconstruct the discourse to identify how these are tied together.

### 3. The Good National Identity

As mentioned previously, many scholars have questioned the usefulness of the civic-ethnic framework. Yet I argue that the civic and ethnic classifications are important as normative concepts. Although it may be incorrect to say that civic is good and ethnic is bad, this is nevertheless a widespread view. Also among scholars it is generally accepted that a national identity that is inclusive of minorities is by definition good. This is also visible in theories aiming to replace the civic-ethnic framework, which instead distinguish between voluntarist and organic national identity.<sup>5</sup> Thus, even though few nations are purely civic, it seems that many nations tend to portray themselves as civic, and therefore 'Good'. As regards conceptualisation of the Good, civic *inclusion* is a dominant idea; only a national identity that is inclusive of minorities is acceptable. This phenomenon is what I call the 'Good national identity', i.e. that a national identity is seen as Good because it is inclusive.

Another noteworthy problem within the literature is confusion between the notions of 'civic' and 'multicultural'. One way of seeing civic is as a unitary national identity encompassing all groups, irrespective of ethnicity. Another interpretation of the notion of civic is as national 'supra identity' which allows for diversity and multiple identities below it. While the former understanding of civic - which I call *traditional civic* - opposes ethnicity altogether, the latter - which I call *civic-multicultural* - asks for an ethnically neutral supra identity which allows for multiple ethnic sub-identities. The difference between 'civic-multicultural' and simply 'multicultural'<sup>6</sup> national identities is that the civic-multicultural vision of the nation stresses the importance of an *ethnically neutral* national supra identity which can *include* minorities. The importance of this has to do with a belief in the possibility of an ethnically neutral, i.e. civic, national identity, and with the alleged necessity to include minorities in the national identity, which comes back to the idea of a 'Good national identity'.

Lastly, while 'ethnic' typically has a bad connotation, there is a paradoxical situation in the case of minorities in a civic-multicultural nation. While the national identity itself should refrain from any ethnic characteristic, its component ethnic minorities are ascribed essentialist, organic identities. This 'ethnic paradox' means that just as the national identity has to be ethnically neutral and inclusive, the identity of the minorities has to be ethnic and exclusive. Thus, there is a tension between ethnic neutrality and ethnic affirmation.

### 4. The Swedish Minority and Integration Policies

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The current Swedish minority and integration policies were both established just before the turn of the millennium. The integration policy was outlined in the 1998 government bill *Sweden, the future and the diversity – from immigrant policy to integration policy*<sup>7</sup> and involved a shift away from the focus on immigrants as a collective group, as in the previous immigrant policies, towards a policy of ‘integration’ that is said to concern the entire population. The minority policy was outlined in the 1999 government bill *National minorities in Sweden*<sup>8</sup>, which constitutes the first comprehensive minority policy and came about in connection with Sweden’s ratification of the Council of Europe *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* and *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*. Five national minorities were officially recognised: Roma, Jews, Swedish Finns, Tornedalers and the Sami. In addition, their respective languages Romani Chib, Yiddish, Finnish, Meänkieli and the Sami language were recognised as official minority languages in Sweden. One of the central aims of this policy was to take measures to preserve the minority cultures and languages as a part of the Swedish cultural heritage.

The integration policy distances itself from previous immigrant policies where immigrants were treated as a homogenous group and a collective, since this had negative consequences, such as a focus on their ‘otherness’, which in turn led to a situation where immigrants and second generation immigrants felt excluded from Swedish society. To avoid this situation it is suggested that the term ‘immigrant’ should only denote people who have themselves immigrated to Sweden and that (positive) differential treatment should only apply during their first years in the country. It is further stated that ‘multiculturalism’ has acquired a normative meaning in the Swedish context and that it has been incorrectly used as a synonym to ‘multiethnicity’. It is therefore suggested to replace multiculturalism with the ethnically neutral concept ‘diversity’. From this we can identify a logic of equivalence that looks as follows: *immigrants – individuals – equal treatment*.

The minority policy, on the other hand, has a different logic and takes the ethnic identity of minorities as a point of departure. Focus here is on their right to keep their distinct identities and differential treatment is seen as good and necessary on the grounds that their cultures and languages are an important part of the Swedish cultural heritage. The logic of equivalence here becomes: *minorities – collective – ethnicity – differential treatment*. The main difference between these two policies is that group-specific rights are seen as legitimate in the case of the national minorities, but not the immigrants. However, as we shall see, apart from this key difference the policies are not fundamentally different.

If one reads between the lines in these documents, there are some things that seem possible to say, whereas other things seem impossible. In

addition to their recognition as a national minority, the Sami are also recognised as an indigenous people, and it is clear that it is possible to talk about the Sami as a distinct ‘people’, at least with the epithet ‘indigenous’. However, the same is not true for the Tornedalers, who are also a territorially concentrated minority. They are instead described as a ‘Finnish-speaking settlement’, but there is no reference to them as a distinct people. While the term ‘people’ can be politically sensitive to use due to legal implications, as a ‘people’ has the right to self-determination according to international law, the term ‘nation’ is probably even more sensitive. A nation has by definition some kind of aspiration to statehood<sup>9</sup>, and thus becomes a threat to existing nation-states. Therefore it is not surprising that neither the Sami nor the other minorities are defined as nations. When ‘the national’ is mentioned it is exclusively in reference to the Swedish (or Norwegian and Finnish) nations. In the description of the Sami in the 1999 government bill *National minorities in Sweden* it is stated that:

There are several Sami national organisations and there is also a Sami cooperation across the national borders, since many Sami issues concern the Sami as an ethnic group, irrespective of national belonging.<sup>10</sup>

As this quote illustrates, it is clearly unthinkable to talk about the Sami as a separate nation.

As we have seen previously, the Swedish integration policy questions the term ‘immigrant’ as a signifier of anyone other than people who have themselves immigrated to Sweden. As a consequence, those people known as ‘second generation immigrants’ logically ought to be ‘Swedes’. But one might ask what this implies for Swedish ethnicity. Swedish ethnicity is rarely mentioned; instead reference is made to ‘the majority’, ‘majority society’, ‘person with Swedish background’, or simply ‘Swede’. In contrast, immigrants – or ‘persons with a foreign background’ – can be both ‘ethnic’ and ‘Swedish’, according to the logic of the integration policy. Here we can identify a logic of equivalence that looks like this: *Swede – majority – non-ethnic*.

When it comes to national minorities, they are mentioned as minorities with cultural, linguistic or religious differences from the majority population. However, it seems impossible to talk about national minorities as non-Swedish. It is stressed that their cultures and languages are part of ‘the Swedish society’ and that they are part of ‘the Swedish cultural heritage’.

Finally, it is possible to talk about integration – both in the integration and minority policies - but *segregation* is never an option. While it is unthinkable to force people to assimilate, not to integrate is hardly an option. Thus, it is possible to talk about both deliberate and semi-forced

integration. Segregation, on the other hand, is unthinkable whether voluntary or forced. In the minority policy it is stated that national minorities should be given support to protect their distinct cultures and languages, but this must not be done at the expense of the Swedish language or lead to the segregation of these minorities from wider society. Similarly, it is stated in the integration policy that “[s]egregation, self-chosen or forced, is [...] just as bad as forced assimilation”.<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, it is possible to talk about some minorities (e.g. the Sami) as a people, but never as a nation. Immigrants can be ethnic or Swedish, but identifying Swedishness in terms of ethnicity is less appropriate. National minorities can be described as being different, but never as non-Swedish. The main difference between immigrants and minorities is that group-specific rights are legitimate in the case of the minorities, according to the minority policy, whereas immigrants, who are only mentioned in the integration policy, are seen as individuals with no such rights. However, the fundamental logic of the two policies is the same; integration is the goal and is seen as desirable whether it is voluntary or semi-forced. Segregation, on the other hand, is unthinkable even if it were voluntary.

### 5. Rethinking Good and Bad

Based on the analysis of the Swedish minority and integration policies, is there a desire to portray Swedish national identity as civic and inclusive? Is there a ‘Good Swedishness’?

I argued that even though few nations are purely civic in reality, many nations portray themselves as civic since this is seen as the Good. The Swedish case confirms this view, where an inclusive Swedishness open to those who want to adopt it, such as second generation immigrants, is seen as desirable, whereas an ethnic, more exclusive interpretation of Swedishness is seen as bad. I further argued that it is relevant to talk about ‘civic-multicultural’ national identity rather than ‘multicultural’, as there is an idea of an ethnically neutral – civic – ‘supra identity’ allowing for multiple ethnic sub-identities. This is relevant for the Swedish case, since there is a reluctance to talk about Swedishness as ethnic, while at the same time immigrants, and in particular national minorities, are allowed and encouraged to identify themselves as ethnic. The fact that a Swedish ‘national ethnicity’<sup>12</sup> is seen as an inappropriate identity, whereas immigrants and in particular national minorities are viewed as ethnic in highly essentialist terms, is also comparable to what I call ‘the ethnic paradox’: While Swedishness must be an inclusive category, Saminess for example is viewed as organic and exclusive. This is one of the paradoxes of the civic-multicultural national identity, as it calls for ethnic neutrality and ethnic recognition simultaneously.

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What is problematic with these views on Good and Bad types of national identity? One of the central problems of the 'Good Swedishness' is that while it welcomes the inclusion of minorities within the nation, it does not offer minorities a choice to refrain from Swedishness if they wish to. That is, inclusion is *always* the Good, and exclusion is *always* the Bad. However, this position is not necessarily inevitable. If one sees the nation as a discursive construction, one could perhaps argue that this Good-Bad dichotomy is a result of 'the national' way of thinking. Insistence on including minorities within the nation would not be necessary if there were no such thing as a nation. One could argue therefore, that the quest to create an inclusive national identity in fact confirms and reinforces 'the national' way of thinking.

Let me give an example. The Sami are an ethnic group, or an indigenous people, inhabiting an area that reaches across the borders of several nation-states. In a world of nations, they have two options. One option would be to form their own, 'ethnic' nation – this would be the Bad option. Another option would be to be part of the Swedish, 'civic' nation – this would be the Good option. The latter option would not necessarily have to mean that the Sami have to give up their culture and language and assimilate into the culture of the majority, but it would mean that they have to adhere to the Swedish nationality. However, national belonging is arbitrary; had politics been different the 'Swedish Sami' could have been part of the Norwegian, Finnish or Russian nations. This of course would have been a matter of power held by the nation-states rather than a choice by the Sami themselves. Therefore the notion of *voluntarism* is misleading in the case of the Sami, as their national belonging is not a choice but a result of certain historical circumstances. The question is why the Sami have to be part of a nation – either their own ethnic nation or a Swedish civic nation – in the first place? Why is it not possible to be part of neither? What I have tried to illustrate by using the case of the Sami is that not only the ethnic, exclusive national identity, but also the civic, inclusive type of national identity in fact confirms and increases 'the national' way of thinking.

Another problem with the 'Good Swedishness' is the lack of room for a Swedish 'national ethnicity'. If an abundance of ethnic groups are included in the notion of a Swedish national identity, it is relevant to ask what happens to the Swedish national ethnicity. As with most majority populations, few Swedes belonging to the majority distinguish between their identities in terms of ethnic and national belonging. They are not 'Swedish in terms of ethnicity' and 'Swedish in terms of nationality', they are simply Swedish. Of course this has to do with the fact that Swedishness is not as inclusive in reality, and that Swedishness in fact often implicitly refers to an ethnic identity. However, in the case of a more inclusive Swedishness, this

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distinction becomes relevant. In a civic-multicultural Sweden, where does the Swedishness that had previously been taken for granted go?

In light of these examples, it is relevant to ask whether it is at all possible to reach beyond the Good-Bad dichotomy, which holds that voluntarism/inclusion is the Good and organicism/exclusion is the Bad, or if this distinction is in fact inevitable. Perhaps the ultimate question would be: living in a world of nation-states, can we at all reach beyond the national discourse?

## **6. Conclusion**

Based on an analysis of Swedish official national identity in minority and integration policies, we have been able to establish that a civic, inclusive Swedish national identity is viewed as superior to an ethnic, exclusive one. I have argued that this Good-Bad dichotomy is problematic for a number of reasons. First of all, the voluntarist, inclusive national identity, which is seen as the Good, not only confirms but in fact reinforces 'the national' way of thinking. A second point that has been made is that in the case of an inclusive national identity, the role of 'national ethnicity' makes itself felt: If only minorities are allowed to be 'ethnic', then it is unclear what is left for the majority to identify with. It is clear that we need to rethink the notions of Good and Bad when it comes to national identity and we need to continue to analyse and question 'the national discourse', including the forms that are commonly perceived as Good.

## **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> G Bergström and K Boréus, *Textens mening och makt*, Studentlitteratur, Lund, 2005, p. 306.
- <sup>2</sup> L Phillips and M Winther Jørgensen, *Diskursanalys som teori och metod*, Studentlitteratur, Lund, 2000, p. 131.
- <sup>3</sup> L Phillips and M Winther Jørgensen, *Diskursanalys som teori och metod*, Studentlitteratur, Lund, 2000, p. 134.
- <sup>4</sup> L Phillips and M Winther Jørgensen, *Diskursanalys som teori och metod*, Studentlitteratur, Lund, 2000, p. 50.
- <sup>5</sup> See E Kaufmann, 'The lenses of nationhood: an optical model of identity'. *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2008, pp. 449-477 and O Zimmer, 'Boundary mechanisms and symbolic resources: towards a process-oriented approach to national identity'. *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2003, pp. 173-193.
- <sup>6</sup> D Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism: Civic, Ethnocultural & Multicultural Politics*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 126
- <sup>7</sup> My own translation. Proposition 1997/98: 16, *Sverige, framtiden och mångfalden – från invandrapolitik till integrationspolitik*.
- <sup>8</sup> My own translation. Proposition 1998/99: 143, *Nationella minoriteter i Sverige*
- <sup>9</sup> A D Smith, *Nationalism*, Polity, Cambridge, 2001, p. 12.
- <sup>10</sup> My own translation. Prop. 1998/99: 143, p. 23.
- <sup>11</sup> My own translation. Prop. 1997/98: 16, p. 23
- <sup>12</sup> The term 'national ethnicity' is coined by Eric Kaufmann. E Kaufmann, 'Liberal ethnicity: beyond liberal nationalism and minority rights'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 23, no. 6, 2000, pp. 1086-1119.

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**Ellinor Hamrén** obtained her MRes in Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict from Birkbeck College, University of London, in 2008. She will complete her second master's in Political Science from Stockholm University in 2010. Her main research interests are in the area of nationalism and minorities. Currently she is working on a project on the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden.