

The Swedish Government's initiatives to combat xenophobia and similar forms of intolerance



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Xenophobic and other views that run counter to the principle of the equal dignity and rights of all people are ultimately a threat to the fundamental values that underpin a democracy. Past lessons show that initiatives to foster respect for human rights, tolerance and openness must be conducted continuously. The Swedish Government is implementing several measures to counteract xenophobia and similar forms of intolerance.

Inquiry and conference

In May 2011, the Swedish Government appointed an inquiry with the remit of proposing how initiatives to combat xenophobia and similar forms of intolerance can be made more efficient. Among other things, the inquiry is to take stock of current knowledge about xenophobia and intolerant attitudes in society and submit proposals for measures that should be taken to counteract such attitudes. The final report is to be submitted by 26 October 2012 at the latest.

In March 2012, the Government Offices organised a national hearing on xenophobia and similar forms of intolerance. The purpose was to gather data and to hold dialogues about issues related to xenophobia and similar forms of intolerance. A series of actors in society, including government agencies, scientists, municipalities and civil society organisations, participated in the conference.

Living History Forum

The Living History Forum is a Swedish government agency which serves as a national forum tasked with promoting democracy, tolerance and human rights. The agency is particularly tasked with informing about the Holocaust and communism's crimes against humanity. Its activities should aim to strengthen people's will to work actively for the equal value of all people.

On instructions from the Government, Living History Forum has conducted a survey of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia on the national and international level, which was submitted in August 2011. The report indicates that the internet and social media are the major sources for spreading anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. In addition, a great deal of hate is spread through comment fields in various media.

Initiatives to enhance knowledge about xenophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia

During the period 2012–2014 the Swedish Government intends to implement a three-year initiative to improve children and young people's knowledge of xenophobia and similar forms of intolerance. Special knowledge-

enhancing initiatives for children and young people to combat anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are among the activities planned within the framework of this initiative.

In 2011 a special webpage on tolerance was launched on the Swedish Government website. The 'tolerance page', which is in Swedish (www.regeringen.se/tolerans), refutes some of the most common internet myths about immigrants and minorities with facts.

State support to civil society activities to combat discrimination, racism and similar forms of intolerance

According to the Swedish Government's ordinance concerning support to activities to combat racism and similar forms of intolerance, state aid is distributed annually to civil society organisations that operate in this area.

According to another ordinance, support is allocated to organisations that prevent and combat discrimination, such as anti-discrimination offices. Anti-discrimination offices are non-profit organisations that work at local and regional levels to promote diversity, equal treatment and gender equality. In November 2011, the Uppsala Anti-Discrimination Office received a special grant aimed at strengthening the Office's efforts in a project to prevent or counteract xenophobia that is spread online.

Security for the Jewish minority

The Jews are one of Sweden's five recognised national minorities. The other national minorities are the Sámi, Roma, Swedish Finns and Tornedalers. Strengthening the protection of national minorities is one aspect of Sweden's efforts to safeguard human rights. The Swedish Government's policy on minorities aims to protect national minorities, enhance their opportunities to exert influence in society and help keep long-established minority languages alive. This long-term goal is to be followed up in several subareas, including discrimination and vulnerability.

Protecting national minorities entails safeguarding human rights, combating discrimination against people belonging to national minorities and promoting respect in society for differences in origin, identity, culture and language.

Although tolerance in Swedish society is high and rising generally speaking, surveys reveal that anti-Semitic views have not declined to the same degree. Jews are still subjected to anti-Semitic hate crimes and harassment. At the national minorities' consultation with Government representatives, representatives of the Jewish minority have repeatedly stated that they have difficulty enjoying

rights to which they are entitled by law due to lack of security. This is a serious problem. In December 2011 the Swedish Government therefore decided to set aside funds for the Jewish minority's internal security work. The objective is to enhance security and reduce the vulnerability of the Jewish minority in society. Within the framework of this initiative, the Official Council of Swedish Jewish Communities has received funds that, following an assessment of the need for security-enhancing measures, have been allocated to Jewish communities and other associations and organisations that conduct activities for the Jewish minority.

Intensified efforts to promote the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people are still subjected to discrimination, harassment and other degrading treatment in Swedish society. This is unacceptable. The Swedish Government is therefore intensifying its efforts to promote equal rights and opportunities, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. At the end of November 2011, a hearing was arranged at which organisations working for the rights of LGBT people had the opportunity to draw attention to problems that they had observed, but also to present their views concerning measures that need to be taken. The matter of how the rights and opportunities of LGBT people can best be promoted is currently being processed by the Swedish Government Offices. An inter-ministerial working group has been tasked with drafting proposals for the Government's continuing work in this area. The viewpoints that emerged at the hearing, or that have been received through other channels, will be added to this work.

Legislation

The Swedish Discrimination Act prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex, ethnic origin, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation, transgender identity or expression, and age. In principle, this protection encompasses all areas of society. The Office of the Equality Ombudsman monitors compliance with the Discrimination Act.

In addition, there are several criminal law provisions that target acts or statements that are of a xenophobic, homophobic or discriminatory nature. The penal provision for agitation against a national or ethnic group protects against threats to or contempt for an ethnic group or other group of people on grounds of race, colour, national or ethnic origin, religious belief or sexual orientation.

The provisions against unlawful discrimination impose criminal sanctions on discriminating against people on grounds of race, colour, national or ethnic origin, or religious belief in business operations. This prohibition also extends to those who are employed in public service or who have a public assignment.

Other penalty provisions that can be used to protect individuals against abuse and maltreatment of a xenophobic or homophobic nature are provisions on insulting behaviour, defamation, inciting rebellion, assault, unlawful threats, molestation and vandalism. When assessing the penal value, it is to be considered an aggravating circumstance if a motive for the crime was to violate a person, an ethnic group or other such group of persons on grounds of race, colour, national or ethnic origin, religious belief, sexual orientation or other similar circumstance. This applies regardless of what crime has been committed.

Hate crimes statistics

On instructions from the Swedish Government, hate crimes statistics are published annually. These statistics are based primarily on reported crimes and are structured to reflect whether the perpetrator's motive was based on the victim's ethnic background, religious belief, sexual orientation or transgender identity or expression. On instructions from the Government, the statistics are to be developed on an ongoing basis. For instance, reporting in recent years have been done at a more detailed geographic level than previously. Another ongoing development of the statistics is that a large-scale and recurrent questionnaire in Sweden on youth crime now also contains questions pertaining to hate crimes.

Action plan to safeguard democracy against violent extremism

The Swedish Government has adopted an action plan against violent extremism for the period 2012–2014. The action plan states that extreme right-wing violence is a particularly serious problem for such minorities as Muslims, Jews, Roma and LGBT people. The action plan consists of a series of measures that are carried out to bolster the preventive work and safeguard democracy against violent extremism. Measures are taken to enhance awareness of democratic values, prevent individuals from joining violent extremist groups and support defectors from these groups, as well as eliminate the breeding grounds of ideologically motivated violence.



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