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Discourse Surrounding the Recognition of Elfdalian in Sweden[1]

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Abstract

This article employs inductive discourse analysis to examine the discussion surrounding the recognition of Elfdalian in Sweden. Although multifaceted in terms of framing, most parliamentary initiatives tend to focalise Elfdalian's qualities as a language. In contrast, local advocates see recognition as empowering revitalisation efforts, addressing historical injustices, celebrating heritage, and diversifying funding opportunities. Governmental communications cite findings of the specialist minority committee's 1997 report and class Elfdalian as a *folkmål*. Conflict between discourses appears where the legally undefined term *folkmål* enters and obscures the language discussion. Whereas the government sees integration into the public and administrative spheres as integral to recognition, local advocates reject this legal protection. The article concludes that working with a unified terminology would facilitate the discussion and outlines potential avenues for recognition.

Keywords: Elfdalian; Älvdalen; language recognition; minority language; folkmål

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1. Introduction: History of Elfdalian and its relationship with Swedish

Prior to Sweden's ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) in 2000, a committee of specialists on minority languages was ordered to determine which languages were to be included in the country's new minority language law. In doing so, the report fleetingly discussed dialects and so-called *folkmål,*[2]arguing against their inclusion. Classified as one such *folkmål* was Elfdalian. Whilst failing to lobby for Elfdalian's inclusion at that time, the grassroots language organisation arguing for official recognition, *Ulum Dalska,*[3] has only grown in size since then. Local activists have embarked upon a language A*usbau*[4] project that has garnered increasing amounts of attention both domestically and abroad, spurring a lively discussion about whether Elfdalian ought to be granted official status in Sweden.

Spoken by up to 3,000 people throughout the North-Dalecarlian parish of Älvdalen, Elfdalian is part of the Upper Siljan branch of the so-called Dalecarlian vernaculars (Sapir, 2005), a dialectal continuum located in the remote parts of western central Sweden. Linguists choose to discuss these as a peripheral group of distinctive Swedish dialects or separate languages. Analyses present a wide range of both remarkably conservative and innovative linguistic features when compared to modern Swedish, suggesting that Elfdalian split from Old East Norse, the predecessor of standard Swedish, at least 700 years ago (Sapir & Lundgren, 2024, pp. 18-20; Levander, 1925, p. 43).

Like modern-day linguists, Swedish dialectologists from the 19th and early 20th century already remarked upon Elfdalian's distinctiveness, even from the surrounding Dalecarlian vernaculars (Noreen, 1886; Levander, 1909). With the introduction of Swedish into the region, standard Swedish became the inter-communal lingua franca. Geographic isolation preserved Dalecarlian vernaculars well into the 20th century, but a combination of organic development and a state-sponsored drive for Swedification through schooling and the church impacted hitherto peripheral communities and contributed to dialectal levelling nationwide. Central to Elfdalian's decline was its strict exclusion from schools and forced containment to the private domain (Sapir & Lundgren, 2024, pp. 29-30). Amongst generations growing up at that time, the resulting stigmatisation engendered a sense of shame around Elfdalian (Helgander, 2004, pp. 16-18). Consequently, knowledge of Elfdalian plummeted within the span of a single generation, which was discouraged from speaking it and reluctant to pass it on. In 2008, estimates were that a mere third of the community still spoke or understood it (Larsson, 2008). In recent years, interest and programmes for revitalisation have risen significantly, but rapid approximation to standard Swedish amongst younger speakers and the aging of the main speaker base remain difficult obstacles to overcome. Added to this precarious sociolinguistic situation is the lingering question of its official recognition as a minority or regional language in Sweden.

1.1 Swedish language policy in relation to Elfdalian

Under the ECRML, Sweden granted protection to the two non-territorial languages of Romani and Yiddish based on Part II of the Charter, and agreed to further commitments under Part III to the three regional language groups of Sámi, Finnish, and Meänkieli. Elfdalian was classified as a *folkmål*, about which the committee concluded that its inclusion into the minority language legislation goes against the ECRML's intended purpose of strengthening the language's status in public and official domains, like in court proceedings, with governmental authorities, and in industry. The committee thus concluded:

> In our view, there is no reason to support the old and locally coloured forms of expression that *folkmål* are by increasing their use in public contexts. Nor do we believe that use of such *folkmål* in public life would support their preservation. We therefore consider, on balance, that the application of the Convention [ECRML] in Sweden cannot include *folkmål*.[5] (Minoritetspråkskommittén, 1997, p. 94)

Much has happened since then. In 2004, *Råðdjärum,*[6] the first Elfdalian Language Conference, was held on the 20th anniversary of *Ulum Dalska*. It was a cooperation between *Ulum Dalska,* Uppsala University, and the Municipality of Älvdalen. This tripartite cooperation between local promoters of Elfdalian, academia, and local government embarked upon a language-A*usbau* project that has since granted Elfdalian all but official language recognition. The adoption of a standard alphabet, research articles on Elfdalian's distinct linguistic features, expert-led petitions for official recognition, language courses, as well as the composition and translation of literature and song writing granted Elfdalian international attention. For example, the USA-based linguistic organisation SIL Global (2016) granted Elfdalian a separate ISO-code (OVD), and UNESCO (2022) included it in its World Atlas of Languages. Since 2013, the Council of Europe (CoE) has repeatedly called upon successive Swedish governments to reassess Elfdalian's status. Its expert committee classified it as a language in 2020, concluding that it fulfils the criteria to fall under Part II of the Charter (CoE, 2020, p. 8). It has recommended Sweden to include Elfdalian in its triennial reports on the ECRML. Finally, Kenneth Hyltenstam, a member of the committee of specialists on minority languages that classified Elfdalian as a *folkmål*, has since then withdrawn his support from that conclusion and signed an expert-led petition urging the government to recognise Elfdalian (Hyltenstam *et al*., 2021).

Moreover, apart from the local municipal administration, Elfdalian has enjoyed quasi-recognition from other Swedish governmental departments. In practise, agencies like the Swedish Inheritance Fund (*Allmänna arvsfonden*) and the Agency for Accessible Media (*Myndighten för tillgängliga medier*) have started treating Elfdalian as a distinct language. Between 2018 and 2022, the Swedish Inheritance Fund supported a language revitalisation project called *Wilum og Bellum*[7] aimed at revitalising Elfdalian amongst younger generations, and has committed to financing another such project starting in October 2024, officially stating its support for the preservation of the language (Busch & Forssmed, 2024, p. 112).

In 2022, the Swedish Agency for Accessible Media (2021) has finalised a braille alphabet for Elfdalian, treating it as a separate language. Furthermore, the Swedish Committee on the Constitution, consisting of sitting members of parliament (MPs) who are responsible for annual reports on parliamentary motions, paid an official visit to Älvdalen in 2023. Given the positive attitude taken by the Committee on the Constitution (Schmidt, 2023) and the weight that its standpoint holds, this visit may well have an important effect on future decisions made regarding recognition.

1.2 Statement and Research Questions

The momentum caused by the CoE's involvement propelled political interest in recognition. Between 2006 and 2015, only three parliamentary motions on Elfdalian were tabled. However, the Swedish Parliament saw eight motions requesting similar measures in 2022 alone. Additional interpellations and written questions have spurred an unprecedented discussion in the Swedish Parliament that presents an interesting case study into how definitions of language, identity, and sociolinguistics play out in high politics between selected MPs from a range of parties covering the entire political spectrum, sitting governmental representatives, and local advocates themselves. Even though Karlander (2008) touched upon the overall use of sociolinguistic terminology in politics vis-à-vis Elfdalian, no elaborate case study exists on how discourse has affected the recognition process of Elfdalian and its effects. Through discourse and thematic analysis of parliamentary sources and interviews with prominent advocates for language recognition, this article attempts to determine the nature of the debate, identify potential areas of conflict between discourses and how these affect the overall developments in respect to the recognition of Elfdalian.

The project works with the following research questions:

I. How is the discourse in the parliamentary debate surrounding the recognition of Elfdalian shaped?
   a. What framing tendencies exist?
   b. What are the main focal points of the discussion?
II. What main themes can be identified amongst the local community striving for language recognition, in relation to argumentative patterns, goals, and wishes?
III. What argumentative patterns does the Swedish government use when denying language status to Elfdalian?
IV. What areas of conflict can be identified in the discursive dynamic between local advocates, parliamentary initiatives and the government position?
   a. What effects does this have regarding the process of Elfdalian recognition?

2. Methodology

To achieve the aforementioned goals of the project, this research takes a three-pronged approach. First, I collected relevant data from the Swedish Parliament in the shape of relevant motions, written questions, and interpellations. This large dataset was then subjected to

structural discourse analysis to determine which frames are most prevalent in the ongoing political debate that advocates for recognition of Elfdalian as a minority language in Sweden, as well as what they say about the concept of language. Secondly, I conducted six interviews with prominent advocates for language recognition who are associated with the interest organisation *Ulum Dalska*, the Municipality of Älvdalen or academia. These interviews were coded in order to determine prevalent themes. Thirdly, government communications and responses were analysed in a similar fashion in an effort to find core argumentative patterns and identify how these reflect upon the government's stance towards the concept of language in opposition to the former group. Finally, this project aims to conceptualise this triangular dynamic between MPs, local activists, and the government with the intention of identifying areas of conflict between discourses and their effects on the overall state of affairs.

This project analysed all 36 motions by the 18 MPs in the Swedish parliament who tabled such initiatives regarding Elfdalian from 2005 up to August 2024. Three written questions (2005, 2020, and 2022) and the introductory descriptions from two interpellations from 2021 were also included in this dataset. This dataset was then subjected to inductive coding. The codes were quantitatively sorted and compared to create an overview of how the parliamentary discourse has been shaped both in the past and the present. The motions were sorted along party lines and years. Thereupon, I sought out specific patterns that allow relevant comparison, contrasting, and analysis.

Four interviews were conducted in person in Älvdalen, one online, and one in writing. Apart from the interview conducted in writing, all interviews were semi-structured and recorded. They explored relevant themes based on an interview guide (Annex I), which was also available to the interviewees beforehand. In the case of the written interview, this interview guide was simply adapted so the interviewee was able to write their replies underneath each question.

The interviewees were selected for their roles within the language organisation *Ulum Dalska*, their prominence in media and academia, or their work on Elfdalian as a profession. Their influence on shaping the discourse of local language advocacy is important to this paper, hence their inclusion over non-activist speakers. Every participant signed a data protection document that took into consideration the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation. After conducting the interviews, I subjected the transcriptions to thematic analysis through coding in order to identify overarching themes regarding the question of Elfdalian recognition.

Data from governmental communications were compiled from the transcribed interpellations, the written responses, and yearly reports from the Committee on the Constitution. I identified key argumentative patterns and analysed their discursive implications for the discussion as a whole, especially concerning their concept of language and recognition.

This study has potential limitations. The fact that only one author conducted the study within a limited timespan might have affected factors such as the interpretation of frames and the overall breadth of this work. Future projects might rectify this by analysing longitudinal data to add a historical dimension, interviewing non-activist speakers of Elfdalian to determine

attitudes and discourses amongst the broader community, and further examining the legal frameworks and potential consequences of different recognition statuses.

3. Theoretical Framework

The project and its approach to data collection and creation is based on the constructivist grounded theory as defined by Charmaz (2006). Given the unique situation of political and popular discourse surrounding the issue of language recognition of Elfdalian, an inductive and hypothesis-generating approach that allowed me to let data collection steer the research was most relevant. The nature of this research is in line with grounded theory in that it does not aim to prove or disprove hypotheses, but instead attempts to understand an under-researched situation, explain the ongoing discussions, and create a middle-range theory on how this situation might develop in the future. In doing so, it makes use of the three aforementioned guiding research questions. Furthermore, Part III of the analysis follows the instructions by Naeem et al. (2023) when conducting the limited thematic analysis as a compliment to the overall approach based in grounded theory.

In addition to this, it is pertinent to elaborate upon the concept of an *Ausbau* language as defined by Kloss (1967). The term *Ausbau*[8] is used in relation to how pre-existing vernaculars like Elfdalian are provided with the necessary infrastructure befitting an official language: i.e., a standardised alphabet, orthography, and grammar. Furthermore, *Ausbau* languages are also used independently from other languages in cultural contexts (e.g., schooling and literature). In light of this, the article treats the term *Ausbau* as a reference to the necessary features that allow such a vernacular to function as a *de facto* language in all but recognition. Such features include book translations, inclusion in school curricula, film dubbing, music and literary productions, and language courses as well as international recognition like that of SIL Global and UNESCO.

In this same work, Kloss (1967) also described *Abstand* languages, in which intrinsic and linguistically-measurable difference from one language is taken as proof of the *Abstand* language's distinctiveness. Kloss describes such a case as a "language by distance" (1967, p. 29). This article makes use of this concept as well. Such measurements have been attempted with the case of Elfdalian vis-à-vis other Nordic languages in terms of lexical and grammatical difference (Dahl, 2005; Sapir & Lundgren, 2024, p. 37).

4. Results

4.1 Part I: Discourse in Parliamentary Initiatives

At the time of ratifying the Charter in 2000, political interest for Elfdalian remained locally bound and inconsequential for the overall debate on which languages to include in Sweden's adoption of the law on national minority languages. While active since 1984, *Ulum Dalska* failed to garner a sufficient amount of political attention and the *Ausbau* of Elfdalian, kick-started by the first conference with *Ulum Dalska* in 2004, did not manage to profile itself sufficiently to influence the official committee responsible for reporting on the issue.

In contrast, the contributions from the CoE had an important impact in the domestic discussion. It was only after the CoE started actively recommending scientific reassessment of Elfdalian's status from 2013 and demanding that Sweden include Elfdalian in its triennial minority language reports from 2020 that more motions began trickling into parliament. In other words, a direct link between the CoE expert committee's recommendations and the parliamentary initiatives tabled in Sweden could be observed (Figure 1). MPs tabled three motions per year between 2015 and 2019. The CoE's classification of Elfdalian as a language in 2020 prompted two interpellations to the then-Culture Minister, Amanda Lind, and spurred an increase in parliamentary motions (Figure 1). The assurances of local advocates that they did not desire the right to be able to use Elfdalian in official communications with authorities resulted in the CoE's decision that Elfdalian qualified for protections under Part II of the ECRML (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 8), as is the case with Romani and Yiddish in Sweden.

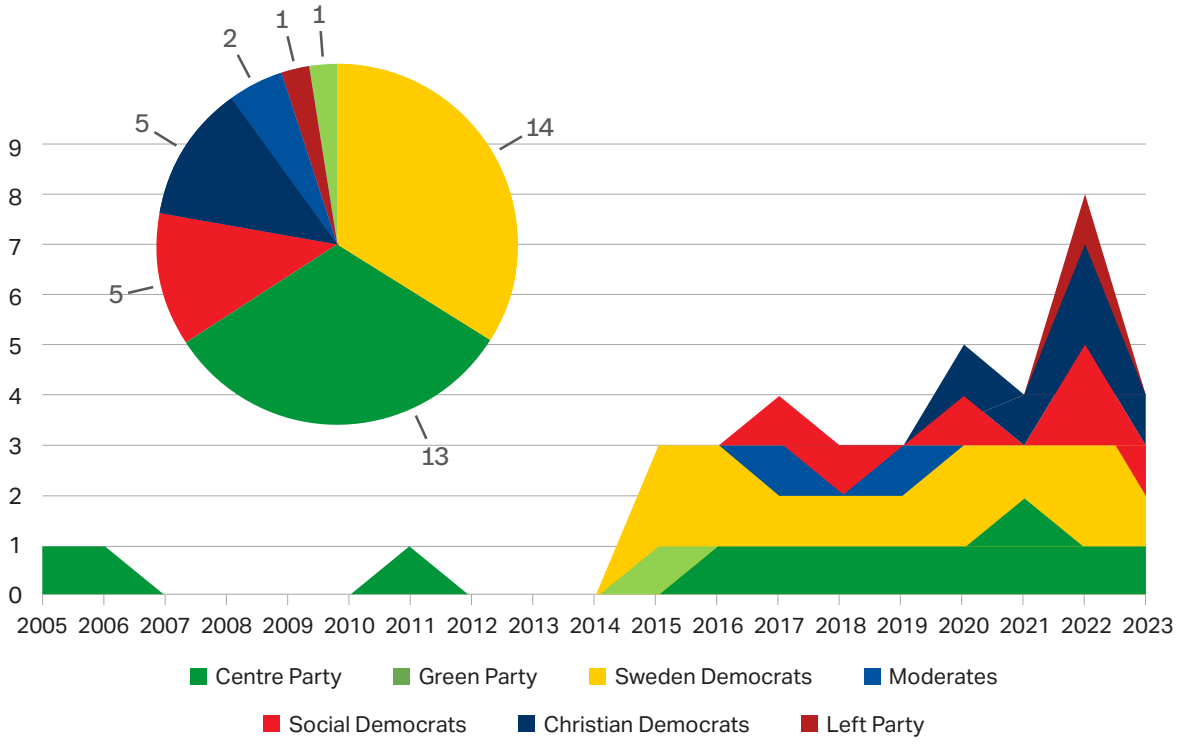

Figure 1. All 41 parliamentary initiatives (36 motions, 3 written questions, and 2 interpellations) regarding the recognition of Elfdalian from 2005 up to 2024 by MPs divided along party affiliations. Y-axis: Number of initiatives. Pie Chart: Overall division of parliamentary initiatives by party affiliation. All data taken from the Swedish Parliament's website (https://www.riksdagen.se). Graphic by the author.

In total, 36 motions, three written questions, and two interpellations were made between 2005 and 2024. Henceforth, these will be summarily discussed as parliamentary initiatives. Two-thirds of the initiatives came from MPs from two non-governing parties, the liberal Centre Party (C) and the far-right nationalist Sweden Democrats (SD). Nevertheless, except for the Liberal Party, every major political party in Sweden has tabled a motion in parliament, indicating broad ideological interest in the issue (Figure 1). Notably, MPs from the Christian Democrats (KD) have spearheaded efforts since 2020 (Figure 1)

and have included the recognition of Elfdalian in their party programme. Apart from KD, the Left Party also took a party-wide position in support of recognition (Dadgostar, 2022). While individual members of all political camps argue for either direct recognition (or a renewed assessment) regarding Elfdalian or its mere inclusion into school curricula, they all frame the issues differently. Determining these differences sheds light on the state of the political discourse.

When subjecting the initiatives to discourse analysis, differences in argumentative patterns along party lines become noticeable. Inductive coding identified the following eight ways in which the issue is framed to justify recognition, bearing in mind that no frame excludes another and frequently appears alongside others in any given motion.

1) '*Abstand*': Frames Elfdalian's linguistic distance from Swedish as an argument that it is a separate language and thus in need of official recognition.
2) '*Ausbau*': Frames the *Ausbau* of the Elfdalian language; i.e., the existence of language infrastructure and its *de facto* functioning as a language as reasons for recognition.
3) 'Council of Europe': Frames Elfdalian as requiring official recognition because of the CoE's recommendations, often from the standpoint of adherence to international treaties.
4) 'Expert': Frames the interest of academic and linguistic specialists in Elfdalian (and studies about it) as proof that it is a language and thus worthy of recognition.
5) 'Fight': Frames the struggle for recognition by local activists as a counterhegemonic and populist endeavour worthy of support – i.e., recognition.
6) 'Heritage': Frames Elfdalian as a fundamental part of the local or national intangible heritage, the value of which justifies protection and recognition.
7) 'Old': Frames Elfdalian as an old or ancient language, often with roots in pre-modern Swedish history, as proof of its linguistic distinctiveness and thus worth protection and recognition. Parallels are often drawn with Icelandic, probably due to the perceived prestige of that language in Nordic circles (Ringmar, 2005, p. 20).
8) 'Rights': Frames Elfdalian's non-recognised status as breaking native speakers' fundamental language rights (like that of schoolchildren to learn their native language), as an injustice that needs to be addressed through recognition (or inclusion into school curricula).

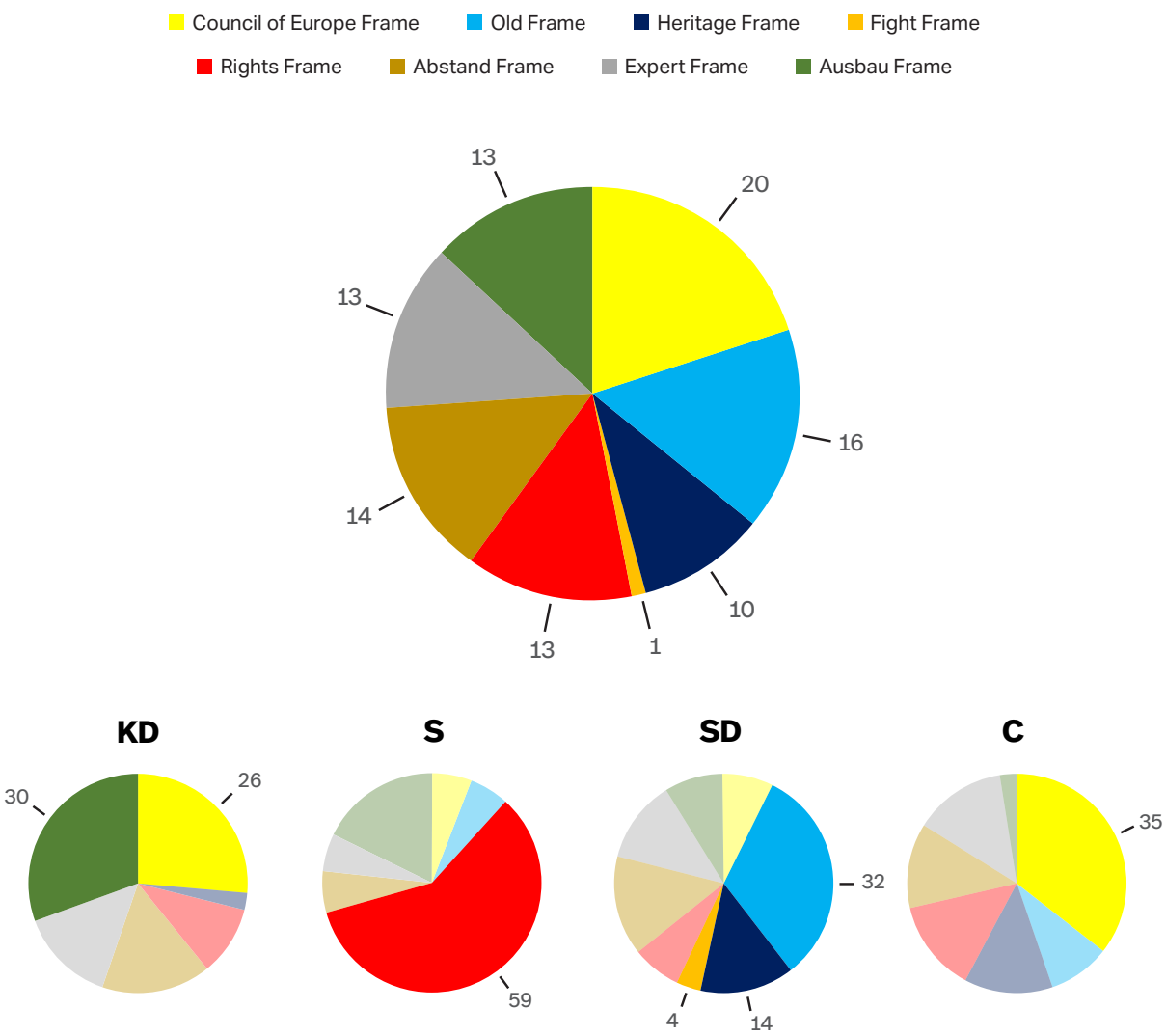

Figure 2. Above, Frames used to justify recognition of Elfdalian in all 41 parliamentary initiatives between 2005 and 2024. Below: framing used by MPs of four political parties. The colours of the dominant frames are highlighted in each pie chart. Parliamentary initiatives taken from the Swedish Parliament's website (https://www.riksdagen.se). Graphs by the author.

An analysis of initiatives in the Swedish Parliament ought to always take into account the influence of the individual on argumentative patterns and framing. For instance, MP Stenkvist alone (co-)tabled half of the initiatives from SD; MP Helander five out of C's 13 initiatives, and MP Brunegård singlehandedly led all of KD's efforts in this regard. Therefore, the personal approach of these MPs will have influenced along party lines the overall framing tendencies that this article discusses. Irrespective of this, the clear overarching discursive discrepancies between MPs with differing party affiliations that the coding analysis suggests hint more at fundamental ideological differences, rather than individual viewpoints at odds.

To begin with, only C, SD, KD, and the Social Democrats (S) tabled motions in such a quantity that framing analysis became possible. Figure 2 (above) demonstrates that, with the exception of the 'Fight' frame, all of the overall framing patterns are divided equally, with the 'Council of Europe' frame being slightly more prevalent than the others.

Stark contrasts appear when inspecting the framing patterns from individuals along party lines. For instance, MPs from C – and to a lesser extent MP Brunegård from KD – use the 'CoE' frame more often than other frames (Figure 2). Here, the CoE's decisions and recommendations are mainly reiterated and listed. Recognition is framed as being "in accordance with the Council of Europe's treaty [ECRML]"[9] (Johansson, 2011). It is pertinent to note that this frame spikes after the classification of Elfdalian as a language by the CoE in 2020 (Figure 3).

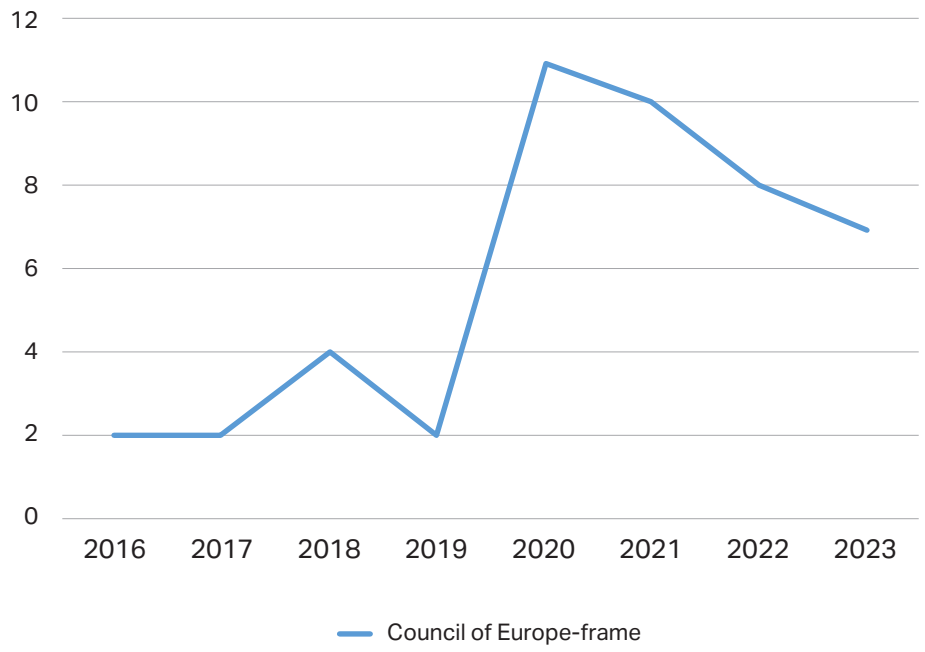

Figure 3. Prevalence of the 'Council of Europe' frame in all parliamentary initiatives between 2016 and 2023. Graph by the author.

No MPs make as much use of the '*Ausbau*' frame as MP Brunegård from KD (Figure 2). Quotes like "Elfdalian is, in practice, already a functioning language"[10] (Brunegård & Bengtsson, 2023) define KD's dominant framing of the issue of Elfdalian recognition.

The rhetoric changes with MPs from SD. References to the perceived ancient characteristics of Elfdalian dictate the general framing of the issue at hand. Statements that classify Elfdalian as an "ancient language [...] with roots from the Bronze Age" and its grammar as being "from the Viking Age"[11] (Stenkvist, 2016) define the discourse (Figure 2). In this context, it is important to note that only occasions where the archaic features of Elfdalian are emphasised to create a stereotypical image of a language unaltered for centuries are counted as 'Old' frames. They distort linguistic development by overlooking Elfdalian's innovative linguistic features. Statements like "[Elfdalian] distinguishes itself through a series of archaisms and novations"[12] (Helander & Johnsson, 2017) are thus not counted as 'Old' frames due their unbiased factuality.

MPs from SD especially highlight the perceived ancient characteristics of Elfdalian as proof of its distinctiveness, and define it as constituting invaluable intangible heritage worthy

of protection. C and SD make particular use of the 'Heritage' frame (Figure 2), but certain characteristics of SD's populism seeps through into its MPs' framing. MP Eklöf (2022) frames the struggle for Elfdalian recognition from a nationalist and populist angle, stating that "people who dedicate their lives to protect different parts of our Swedish culture and identity are heroes".[13] MPs from SD are the only ones that use the 'Fight' frame (Figure 2).

For much of the debate, S has remained inactive (Figure 1) and out of their five motions, four, while titled 'Älvdalska',[14] do not discuss recognising Elfdalian per se. Instead, they discuss protecting all local vernaculars and dialects by including them in school curricula within the scope of the existing law for "the survival and development of all our local languages and dialects"[15] (Olsson, 2017). In light of this, the rights of schoolchildren in Sweden to learn their native language in the national school system are highlighted, hence the dominant 'Rights' frame.

As for their discussion of what constitutes a language, there is no unified voice to analyse discursively. However, the pre-existing frames can be divided between those indulging in the discussion of what defines a language, and those that frame the issue as part of a different discussion. The majority of the 'Old', 'CoE', '*Abstand*', '*Ausbau*', and 'Expert' frames directly give reasons for why Elfdalian is a language, as opposed to a dialect. On the other hand, the vast majority of 'Heritage', 'Rights', and 'Fight' frames tackle the issue from their respective angles – i.e., cultural heritage, human rights, and populism. This means that up to three-quarters of the parliamentary discussion revolves around the topic of what a language is and whether Elfdalian qualifies.

In conclusion, the discursive landscape surrounding the recognition of Elfdalian in the Swedish parliament makes use of a wide range of different frames that are disproportionally divided along the party affiliation of MPs. The most common frame views the issue as a question of adhering to international treaties and of following the recommendations of the CoE's expert committee. Framing tendencies differ depending on the MP's party affiliation and certain frames appear more frequently amongst MPs from certain parties, as is the case of the 'Old' frame and SD; the 'Rights' frame and S; as well as the '*Ausbau*' frame and KD. The framing analysis also suggests that the focal point of the discussion lies on the discussion of what a language is vis-à-vis Elfdalian. Not unexpectedly, the political debate is coloured by the ideological beliefs of different political movements, but the pliability of justifying recognition or status reassessment is characterised by how freely those parties frame the issue differently.

4.2 Part II: Core Themes in Interviews with Local Advocates

Given the tripartite cooperation between *Ulum Dalska*, the Municipality of Älvdalen, and academia on the matter of recognition for Elfdalian, this project interviewed six relevant actors, all of whom are associated with one or more of the aforementioned. The interviewees were Björn Rehnström and Emil Andersson from *Ulum Dalska*; Ing-Marie Bergman, the Municipal Co-ordinator for Elfdalian; Peter Egardt, the Chairman of Älvdalen's Municipal

Board; and Ulla Schütt, who is associated with both *Ulum Dalska* and the municipality. Yair Sapir, Senior Lecturer at Kristianstad University, was consulted in writing. In line with the signed data protection agreement, the interviewees' answers are quoted anonymously. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, all citations in this section are anonymous quotes from the interviews.[16]

The stated aim of the interviews was to let the participants speak their mind on certain topics freely, allowing them to choose their own forms of argumentation and topics most relevant to them. In doing so, the study could identify which themes reoccur the most as chosen by the interviewee. As per the objective of the interviews, their semi-structured nature allowed for rich discussions that delved into the main issues and points of contention surrounding the process of recognition and allowed the interviewees to touch upon the themes most relevant to them. The interviews successfully yielded results in the form of thematically mapping the participants' expectations, standpoints, and wishes regarding the current discussion around Elfdalian as a language, the matter of recognition, and future developments.

Because of the relatively limited size, five full interviews and one consultation in writing cannot be justified as representing the entire community of language activists. Nevertheless, the most prominent individuals from the local movement for language recognition participated in this project. Their attitudes are expected to reflect how the debate is conducted at the local level. Furthermore, despite the fact that all interviews followed the same guidelines, the semi-structured nature led to certain issues being explored more thoroughly in one interview than in others. In order to maintain a high level of comparability, this section inductively identified overarching themes that allowed their prevalence in the interviews to be measured. The following themes stood out:

1) Amendment of an injustice as a reason for why Elfdalian deserves recognition.
2) Access to funding as a reason for why Elfdalian deserves recognition.
3) Elfdalian language is a celebration of culture (or cultural heritage) and identity.
4) Classical Elfdalian needs to be revitalised.
5) Local perception of Elfdalian's value has improved.
6) Political discussion is important in the recognition process.
7) Local sentiments are more important than the political discussion.
8) Recognition feels close.
9) Recognition is closer, but it will take more time.
10) Project *Wilum og Bellum* as ground-breaking.
11) Visit by the Committee on the Constitution as ground-breaking.

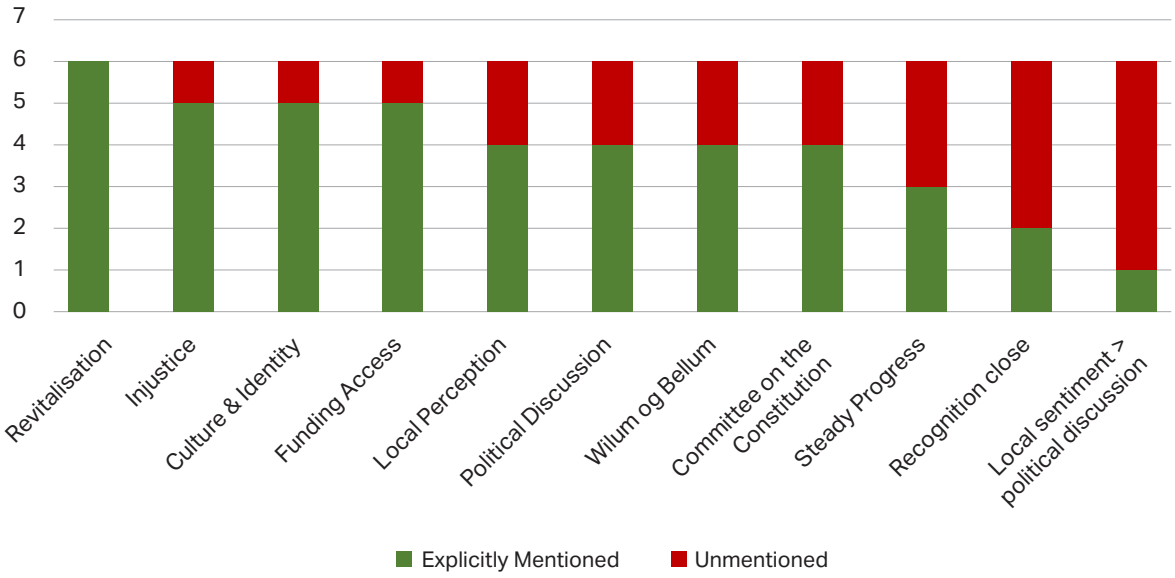

Figure 4. Common themes amongst the six participants of the semi-structured interviews and written consultation as identified by inductive thematic analysis. Y-axis: Number of interviewees. The themes are described on the x-axis and were divided into whether the participant mentioned the theme (green) or not (red). Graph by the author.

Figure 4 depicts the overall prevalence of the common themes. It is important to bear in mind that though one participant may not have explicitly mentioned one of the selected themes, they might well agree with it or its importance.

Universally important was the need for the revitalisation of 'Classical Elfdalian', as defined by Sapir (2017, pp. 50-51). For context, the rapid approximation of Elfdalian with standard Swedish in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation has birthed a new form of Elfdalian, which shows a distinct generational and linguistic break to the way it was spoken before state policies started to heavily contribute to dialectal levelling. This version is most prevalent amongst younger speakers (Sapir & Lundgren, 2024).

In light of this, all participants argued for the revitalisation of Classical Elfdalian. In spite of existing friction within the speaker community about the extent of standardisation (see Helgander, 2008), recent efforts to revitalise the version of Elfdalian spoken by the older generation and documented by Levander in the early 20th century reflects this desire. It is necessary to note that all local participants refrained from using the term 'Classical Elfdalian', instead citing the need and local desire to counteract the 'Swedification' and 'watering-down' that Elfdalian has seen and to 'give back' or revitalise the 'standardised' and 'rules-bound' original. The interviewees see recent approximation less as a natural development and more as a product of inadequate – or even deliberate – policymaking on behalf of the state.

Three themes stood out when asked for the main reasons and sources of motivation to work with Elfdalian and strive for its recognition. The need for amending the historic maltreatment of Elfdalian-speaking pupils in schools and systemic stigmatisation is most prevalent. One interviewee even half-jokingly described it as a way of the older generation getting "revenge because they were told their language was worthless".[17] A sense of injustice is widespread amongst the interviewees and is central to the drive for recognition.

Such a sense of injustice and the metaphorical 'revenge' that recognition would entail touches upon further factors surrounding this theme. Interviewees speak of 'giving back' the language to the people of Älvdalen. The crux of the injustice surfaces here. After the Swedish policies "disparaged [Elfdalian] to a dialect of Swedish", recognition would concede that "Elfdalian is a language worth protection and not a Swedish dialect".[18] Illustrations of this disparagement also include vivid descriptions of the maltreatments that Elfdalian-speaking schoolchildren faced from their teachers, such as beatings and shaming. Notably, a comparison to the Sámi is given wherein the injustices caused Sámi people to "deny their own identity" and that "this has also occurred in Älvdalen"[19].

Here, the theme of identity enters the picture. When asked what motivates working with Elfdalian, language is equated to identity. As one interviewee put it: "language is culture and language is identity. These two [points-of-view], in my opinion, are motivating."[20] All in-person participants shared this sentiment. Elfdalian is described as a peculiarity of Älvdalen that is worth celebrating. The normality of this sense of uniqueness shows in the answer of one participant: "Because it is what you use every day, it is just so natural, and it [Elfdalian] is just a part of oneself, like one's identity. And therefore we would like that something so unique for Älvdalen, like Elfdalian, [...] lives on".[21] Others refer to the language as a source of motivation because of the pride associated with Elfdalian, especially in reference to the changing linguistic landscape in Älvdalen.

All in-person participants also touched upon the increased accessibility to funding sourced for language projects that recognition would entail. Here, the dependence on funding from domestic sources is seen as a liability: "It is impossible to just live on project money and hope to receive inheritance funding or wherever we apply for money. But [with recognition] we could receive more continuous funding to work with the language."[22] Another participant reiterates this point while alluding to the financial burden on the municipality's budget. This financial onus, unique to the Municipality of Älvdalen in Sweden, is also "to some extent questioned every year when determining the budget",[23] in a further reference to the current fragility of funding for Elfdalian-related work. A general need to be able to reach further sources for language projects, like the European Union (EU), is cited by the participants, as one respondent highlights: " because we are not recognised, there are many dead-ends".[24] The EU is often given as one such potential source of funding. One interviewee remarks in this regard that "if today we would apply for funding from the EU, for example, we would not get a penny. We cannot receive any money because they [do not support] dialects."[25]

Further themes include the more positive attitude that people have towards Elfdalian. This improvement is noticed especially amongst younger people, where it is now a source of pride, rather than shame. A number of interviewees emphasise the importance that *Wilum og Bellum* has had on this development in particular. The political position is indirectly seen as an important stage for the future of Elfdalian, but the attitude that local sentiment remains central, if not the most influential, is widely shared. When discussing language politics, the visit by the Committee on the Constitution is referred to as a ground-breaking development

by nearly all of the participants. Finally, hopes for recognition in the near future are universal, but the participants were evenly split in whether they saw this as realistic or not.

4.3 Part III: Government Responses

Since 2005, the government has rejected all parliamentary initiatives. Nevertheless, all responses and explanations see "great value in that Elfdalian is preserved as part of the common cultural heritage"[26] and applaud "the interest to preserve and develop Elfdalian as something very positive"[27] (Lind, 2021a, p. 57).

Government responses consist of the interpellations in which former Culture Minister Amanda Lind discussed with MP Stenkvist and MP Brunegård about Elfdalian, written responses, and the yearly reports by the Committee on the Constitution about all of the motions in parliament. These reports retrace the parliamentary discussion on Elfdalian, the CoE's role and recommendations, local initiatives, and the government's stance, before concluding with their own judgement of the situation. In the transcripts of the interpellations and the Committee on the Constitution's reports, the government's core argumentative patterns revolve around three talking points.

The first argumentative talking point addresses adherence to the ECRML and the CoE's rulings and recommendations. Underlined is the fact that these are not legally binding, and that the definition of what constitutes a language or a dialect within the scope of the ECRML is left for the ratifying party to determine. In these circumstances, Elfdalian is referred to interchangeably as a *folkmål* or as a dialect.

One important difference from the other two sources is that governmental discourse makes use of the term *folkmål* when describing Elfdalian instead of the language-dialect dichotomy. The term lacks any legal definition, which explains its irregular usage. Lind (2021b, p. 59) equates a *folkmål* to a dialect as follows: "Irrespective of Elfdalian's status, it is a *folkmål*, a dialect spoken by many [...]".[28] However, the Committee on the Constitution, citing the specialist committee on minority language from 1997, distinguishes the two and defines the former:

> The [specialist minority language] committee noted that it is complicated to assess what is a dialect, a *folkmål* or a language. Examples of Swedish *folkmål* mentioned were Elfdalian, Gutnish and Scanian. These *folkmål* were previously spoken to a fairly large extent in different parts of the country but, as a result of greater mobility of the population, urbanisation and the influence of the mass media, they are now spoken and understood by fewer and fewer people. Linguistically, *folkmål* can be very different from contemporary Swedish. *Folkmål* are associated with the locality in which they are spoken and are part of the culture and history of that locality. It can therefore, in the committee's view, be argued that there is an interest in preserving *folkmål* as an important part of Swedish rural and cultural history.[29] (Konstitutionsutskottet, 2022 p. 40)

The second core argument is based on the conclusions of the specialist committee on minority languages from 1997 and its recommendations vis-à-vis *folkmål*, as quoted in

section 1.1. In short, the committee concluded that *folkmål* are not to be included in Sweden's adoption of the ECRML because this would go against the purpose of the Charter, which is to further the status of regional or minority languages in official and public spheres. The findings of the report, titled SOU1997:192, form the bedrock of the government's responses and the Committee on the Constitution's judgement to this day.

In light of this observation, the ongoing work with Elfdalian within the municipality – with assistance of the Inheritance Fund – is deemed to suffice and taken as proof that recognition is not a prerequisite for the transmission and preservation of Elfdalian (Lind, 2021b, p. 61). The third main topic of discussion arises from this line of reasoning. Based on the 2017 findings by the Swedish Institute for Language and Folklore (Isof), a neutral government agency, "many measures to promote Elfdalian should be possible within the framework of existing legislation"[30] (Konstitutionsutskottet, 2022 p. 43).

The three argumentative talking points make out the official government position in relation to the legal dimensions of recognition. When it comes to the theoretical discussion as to whether or not Elfdalian constitutes a language or not, Lind's (2021a, p. 56) argumentation bases itself on an otherwise scantly-defined "prevailing disagreement [...] amongst linguists about this".[31] The Committee on the Constitution elaborates upon this by referencing a previously-ordered Isof report, which concluded that the issue of determining what "variations of Swedish" to recognise would present a problem in determining where to draw lines (Konstitutionsutskottet, 2022, p. 43). This also touches upon the uncertainty what the recognition of Elfdalian would entail, and if other *folkmål* would demand recognition. For the government, this uncertainty remains a persistent discouragement to move forward (Lind, 2021b, p. 62).

In summary, the official stance of the government bases itself upon the legal realities of the ratification of the ECRML and the non-binding nature of the CoE expert committee's findings or recommendations, the conclusions of SOU1997:192 regarding *folkmål*, and the unique nature of this term. In essence, the entire ongoing discussion about what constitutes a language is obscured by the inclusion of the term *folkmål*.

4.4 Part IV: Conflict between Discourses and Possible Ways Forward

This article has discussed the discourse and framing in the parliamentary initiatives, the main themes in the expectations, standpoints, and wishes of leading members within the speaker community, and the argumentative patterns of the government when it comes to the recognition of Elfdalian. There are areas of conflict within this triangular dynamic between discourses. This section identifies these, elaborates their effects and proposes possible ways forward.

Parliamentary initiatives are, for the most part, based on individual interest and the framing of the issue is split evenly along party lines. There is no unity among the MPs. Despite the versatility of frame usage, roughly three-quarters lean into the theoretical discussion about what qualifies as a language. This discussion is inevitably bogged down in its subjective nature in general, as well as the government's use of the term *folkmål*. Initiatives in parliament and direct communications from the local community do not use this term, whereas it is strongly

prevalent in governmental communications. The legal and social ambiguity of this term makes constructive dialogue impossible, and is the main area of conflict between the discourses. The different parties in this dialogue fail to use uniform terminology. Clarity on what the government understands by *folkmål* and a shift away from the subjectivity of what constitutes a language – and whether Elfdalian qualifies as one – are therefore crucial to better dialogue. In this regard, a more facts-based approach that makes use of the central themes important to local language promoters might prove constructive for future discourse in parliament. The framing in KD's latest initiatives suggests that such a shift is underway; in her motion, Brunegård (2023) highlights the practical needs and demands of the speaker community.

These practical needs and demands form the largest discursive discrepancy between the different parties. This relates to the core purpose of advocates for language recognition. With only few exceptions, 'recognition' forms the core demand, but remains otherwise ill-defined in terms of legislative repercussions. Respondents gave inconsistent answers when asked about this. The differences between a minority language, a regional language, and other forms of recognition remain unclear and are often left unaddressed in the discussion as a whole. The framing in the initiatives and the overarching themes amongst the local community suggest that advocates for recognition are striving for the protection, revitalisation, and recognition of Elfdalian in order to address historical injustices, to officially include Elfdalian as a subject in school curricula, to broaden funding opportunities, and to celebrate its unique linguistic and cultural heritage within the framework of the ECRML. Crucially, however, the local advocates for recognition do not insist on the right to communicate with state authorities in Elfdalian, which the Swedish government sees as a prerequisite to minority language status. The current law on minorities provides the only pre-existing legal framework applicable to a new language acquiring official status in Sweden. According to SOU1997:192's interpretation of the ECRML whereupon Sweden's national legislation on minority languages is based, the lack of this insistence is at variance with the stated purpose of recognition and of minority language status (Lind, 2021b, p. 61).

This leaves the government's standpoint tenable, in spite of growing pressure from the CoE and the increase in parliamentary initiatives. MP Brunegård regularly mentions the need to review and potentially revise existing legislation (Brunegård & Bengtsson, 2023). While an independent study into Elfdalian is certainly necessary before any recognition scenario, the notion that Elfdalian needs different treatment – or a lesser extent of recognition – than the other territorial minority languages in Sweden confirms the middle-ground status hinted at by the illusive term *folkmål*. What is relevant here is that while the argument is for the government to recognise that Elfdalian is a language like any other, proponents of its recognition do not insist on demanding all the legal protections that such recognition and status would entail under existing laws.

Minority policies are shaped nationally. The territoriality of Elfdalian and its linguistic history in the nation-state of Sweden allow for constructive comparison with existing minority languages in Sweden. One such example is Meänkieli, the recognition of which is frequently

used as an argument for the recognition of Elfdalian[32] (Sonck, 2016; Williams, 2007). Protected under Part II and seven chapters of Part III (such as education, media and interactions with judicial and administrative authorities) under the ECRML, Meänkieli functions as a regional co-official language in five municipalities. The Sámi languages, themselves spanning a vast dialectal continuum, enjoy similar rights in 17 municipalities. Elfdalian shares a legacy of linguistic discrimination with Meänkieli and the Sámi languages. The models of either Meänkieli or the Sámi languages can function as helpful examples for Elfdalian (spoken in one municipality) or indeed for the Dalecarlian vernaculars (as a wider dialectal continuum) in terms of a path to recognition if so desired. The existing makeshift infrastructure within the municipal administration of Älvdalen that deals with matters regarding Elfdalian forms a sound foundation for expansion and augmentation in line with existing minority language policies. The *Ausbau* of Elfdalian gives it all the fundamental structures necessary for existing territorial minority languages in Sweden, and in many regards, it already functions as one. Nevertheless, the equal protection that Sámi and Meänkieli enjoy are not what the local advocates for recognition are arguing for.

Therefore, the following alternative presents itself. The legal formalisation of *folkmål*, the creation of appropriate legislation aimed for their protection, as well as determining which vernaculars are to be included in the list, would instead pave a literal path out of the discursive deadlock. This middle-ground solution would be in line with *Ulum Dalska*'s insistence on not needing the right to communicate with the authorities in Elfdalian, often cited due to the absence for monolingual speakers. However, the absence of this right would go against the call for full recognition of Elfdalian as a regional language separate to Swedish as defined by the working legal definitions.

Conclusion

The *Ausbau* project which Elfdalian has embarked upon forms an interesting case study of how local language activism and the political exchange between parliamentary initiatives and government resistance interplays, and sparks a discussion ripe for discursive analysis. Kindled by the CoE, MPs make use of a broad range of framing techniques in their parliamentary initiatives. Although framing tendencies vary along the ideological lines drawn by party affiliation, a plurality of frames invoke the arbitrary discussion of what a language is by accentuating an array of factors that invoke Elfdalian's qualities as a separate language. Activists within the local language organisation, in contrast, argue for Elfdalian recognition through a set of themes that provide revitalisation efforts for Elfdalian with a level of continuity.

The government's line of argumentation is placed in discursive juxtaposition, where the ambiguous term *folkmål* beclouds the discussion as a whole. Moreover, conflict between discourses arises in the government's judicial interpretation of existing minority or regional language legislature, as well as pro-recognition advocates' holistic view on what official recognition entails. This conflict concerns the increased presence of the language in the

public and official spheres, which the government sees as the defining feature of language recognition, but the local community does not desire.

Given these findings, the following conclusions can be drawn on how the situation of Elfdalian may develop in the future. Although, in theory, a simple majority of votes in parliament could recognise Elfdalian as a language, parliamentary support is growing slowly (at best) and current discursive developments suggest a deadlock around the interpretations of what language, *folkmål,* and recognition means and entails. Whereas pro-recognition advocates do not demand minority status (as defined by the current legislation on minority languages that apply to other regional languages in the country), for decades governmental representatives have successfully resisted piling pressure (albeit non-binding) on accommodating demands for an independent inquiry into what other forms of recognition might suit Elfdalian. As long as the legal definition of minority status and local advocates' demands remain unaltered, there is no legal clause that would require the government to act. Therefore, as the situation stands, advocates for recognition depend on parliamentary pressure, the effects of which have hitherto proved minimal, but could soon become unpredictable due to the Committee on the Constitution's recent expression of support.

Following the visit by the Committee on the Constitution, this article's analysis suggests two possible ways forward. The first would be continuing current efforts to garner popular – and increasingly official – support, as well as improving the infrastructure to revitalise Elfdalian within the existing legal framework whilst increasing pressure on the Swedish government to find a suitable form of recognition for the language within the framework of the ECRML. This may perhaps be through a formal legal definition of what the term *folkmål* is. This strategy has met success so far; indeed, Elfdalian enjoys a unique allure like no other existing minority language in Sweden and local enthusiasm is strong.

The other possibility would entail working with the existing laws on minority languages and adapt calls for recognition to the current legal reality in Sweden. The example of Meänkieli's path to recognition, already referred to often by advocates for recognition due to the sociolinguistic parallels that exist between the two concerning their shared history of discrimination and the absence of monolingualism, is a case worthy of study for proponents of Elfdalian recognition. Even though this would not be entirely in line with local advocates' wishes, such an approach might shift the discourse of the discussion surrounding recognition and generate leeway on the path to recognition. Either way, the linguistically-beleaguered situation Elfdalian finds itself in would benefit significantly by any form of recognition where the interviewees' calls and needs can be met.

Ultimately, the aims of recognition remain to be determined by the speaker community. Furthermore, a government-mandated inquiry into the form of recognition will also play an important role in any hypothetical recognition scenario. This article sketches two possible ways forward. It concludes that Elfdalian fulfils all the criteria for a minority or regional language and, if demands were altered as proposed here, it can be legally recognised in accordance with the government's definitions as it stands.

Endnotes

1 Blogpost on this topic in the ECMI Minorities Blog

2 Lit. 'folk-speech' or 'folk-vernacular'. The report defines these as being closely connected to traditional regions and leaves the difference with dialects opaque, despite distinguishing between the two (Minoritetspråkskommittén, 1997). In practice, dialects and *folkmål* are usually treated identically. The paper develops this in section 4.3. This article opts to italicise the term *folkmål* because of the unsuitable English translation and the important role it plays in the discussion.

3 Lit. 'Let's speak Elfdalian'.

4 Elaborated in section 3.

5 "*Det finns enligt vår uppfattning inte någon anledning att stödja de gamla och lokalt färgade uttrycksformer som folkmålen är, genom en ökad användning av dem i offentliga sammanhang. Vi tror inte heller att en sådan användning av folkmålen i det offentliga livet skulle stödja folkmålens bevarande. Vid en samlad bedömning anser vi därför att en tillämpning av konventionen i Sverige inte kan omfatta folkmålen.*" (Translations of Swedish source material into English by the author)

6 Lit. 'let us confer' in Elfdalian. A further two language conferences with *Råðdjärum* were held in 2011 and 2015.

7 Lit. 'we can and we want' in Elfdalian.

8 Derived from German (lit. out-build) and translated as 'language by development' (Kloss, 1967, p. 29)

9 "[...] *enligt Europarådets fördrag*".

10 "*Älvdalskan är alltså i praktiken redan ett fungerande språk*".

11 "*Det är ett urgammalt spr*åk [...] *och har anor från järnåldern*" and "[ä]*lvdalskans grammatik är vikingatida*".

12 "[Älvdalskan] *utmärker sig genom en rad arkaismer och novationer*".

13 "*de personer som viger sina liv åt att bevare olika delar av vår svenska kultur och identitet är hjältar*".

14 The Swedish for 'Elfdalian'

15 "*överlevnad och utvekling av alla våra lokala språk/dialekter*".

16 The limited number of interviewees and the need for anonymity make it impossible to give separate interviewees identification tabs, hence the lack of in-text citations.

17 "*de här äldra människorna ska få typ revansch för att de fick veta att deras språk var inte värd något*".

18 "*Från myndigheternas sida har man ju nedvärderat det till att det är en svensk dialekt och det har ingen betydelse att språket får finnas kvar. Men om vi skulle få det erkänt så har man ju faktiskt sagt att älvdalska är ett språk värt att bevara och inte en svensk dialekt*".

19 "*Hon* [samen] *förnekade sin egen identitet och så har man också gjort här i Älvdalen*".

20 "*Språk är kultur och språk är identitet. De två* [åsikterna] *- tycker jag, motiverar*".

21 "*Eftersom det är det man använder dagligen så är det ju så naturlgt och det* [*älvdalskan*] *är liksom en del av en själv, ens liksom identitet. Och därför så vill man ju att någonting som är så unikt för Älvdalen, alltså just älvdalskan, att det* [...] *lev*[er] *vidare*".

22 "*Man kan ju inte bara leva på projektpengar och hoppas på att få arvsfondsmedel eller vad det nu kan vara där vi söker pengar. Utan då skulle man ju kunna få en mer kontinuerlig finansiering för att jobba med språket*".

23 "*det* [att lägga x antal hundratusen per år på älvdalska] *ifrågasätts till viss del varje år i budgetarbete*".

24 "*eftersom vi inte är erkända tar det stopp på ganska många ställen*".

25 "[...] *om vi idag skulle söka pengar ifrån EU till exempel, då får vi inte ett öre. Vi kan inte få någ*[ra] *pengar för* [...] *de* [stödjer] *inte dialekter*".

26 "*Det finns ett stort värde i att älvdalskan bevaras som en del av det gemensamma kulturarvet*" (Lind, 2021a p. 4).

27 "[...] *jag ser intresset för att bevara och utveckla älvdalskan som något mycket positivt*" (Lind, 2021a p. 4).

28 "*Oavsett älvdalskans status är det ett folkmål, en dialekt som talas av många* [...]" (Lind, 2021b p. 7).

29 ”*Kommittén konstaterade att det är komplicerat att bedöma vad som är en dialekt, ett folkmål respektive ett språk. Som exempel på svenska folkmål nämndes älvdalsmål, gutniska och skånska. Dessa folkmål talades tidigare i ganska stor utsträckning i olika delar av landet men har till följd av bl.a. större rörlighet i befolkningen, inflyttningen till städerna och massmediernas inflytande kommit att talas och förstås av allt färre personer. Rent lingvistiskt kan folkmålen vara mycket olika nutida rikssvenska. Folkmålen är förknippade med den bygd där de har talats och är en del av bygdens kultur och historia. Det kan därför, enligt kommittén, hävdas att det finns ett intresse av att folkmålen bevaras som en viktig del av den svenska landsbygds- och kulturhistorien.*” (Konstitutionsutskottet, 2022 p. 40).

30 ”[...] *många åtgärder för att främja älvdalskan borde vara möjliga inom ramarna för den existerande lagstiftningen*” (Konstitutionsutskottet, 2022 p. 43).

31 ”[...] *det råder oenighet också bland språkforskare om det här*” (Lind, 2021a p. 9).

32 Similarly to how Elfdalian is thought as a dialect of Swedish, Meänkieli was long considered to be a dialect of Finnish.

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Annex I. Interview Guide in Swedish

Del I: Erfarenhet med älvdalska

1) (Sälvintroduktion +) berätta lite om dig själv och din relation till älvdalskan

   Hur länge har du sysslat med språket?

   Hur använder du språket i din vardag?

2) Kan du berätta lite om din motivation för att fortsätta jobba med älvdalskan?

3) På vilka sätt har språket och frågan king dess erkännande utvecklats under tiden du har sysslat med det?

   Varför är det viktigt för dig att man fortsätter använda språket och att det erkänns som minoritetsspråk i Sverige? (några av de viktigaste argumenten)

   Älvdalska har undergått en avsevärd förändring und relativt kort tid. Vilken form av språket bör erkännas och varför?

   Med tanke på hur det ser ut med redan erkända minoritetsspråk som samiska, hur tror du att ett formellt erkännande av älvdalska som språk skulle kunna främja revitaliseringsprocessen?

Del II: Riksdagen

4) Under senaste tid har det funnits en enorm ökning av uppmärksamhet på älvdalskas status i riksdagen i form av motioner och interpellationer i alla politiska färger. Hur ser du på denna pågående politiska diskussion (och möjligtvis argumenteringsmönstren i den)?

5) Hur har en hel rad regeringar ställt upp sig gentemot älvdalskan i din erfarenhet? Och finns det ändring?

6) Med tanke på Europarådets rekommendationer och regeringens ställning, hur ser språkets framtid ut nu i din åsikt?