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Sweden's U-turn on asylum

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Sweden's recent turnaround on asylum was triggered by various factors, including insufficient domestic preparedness and the humanitarian failures of other EU countries.

Sweden has long been one of the main destination countries within the European Union (EU) for people seeking protection, and almost 163,000 people – mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq – applied for asylum in Sweden in 2015. The country's good reputation among asylum seekers is not without foundation. Sweden has had one of the highest protection rates in Europe for many years; refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection were granted permanent residence; asylum seekers had access to the labour market directly after lodging their application; and the standards of accommodation and of legal and social assistance during the asylum procedure were comparatively fair. Many new arrivals had heard from relatives, friends or smugglers that Sweden was a good place to start a new life in safety, and that – regardless of whether refugee status or subsidiary protection was granted – beneficiaries of protection had a right to reunite with their families in Sweden. After four years, recognised refugees could become Swedish citizens.

By the end of 2015, much of this had radically and suddenly changed. While in 2014 there had already been serious bottlenecks in the reception and accommodation provision for asylum seekers, when asylum seeker numbers climbed to record highs during the late summer and autumn of 2015 Sweden could no longer guarantee new arrivals

a roof over their head. Municipalities were unable to provide social services and schooling as required by law, and the processing times for asylum applications stretched longer and longer.

In October, the central government suddenly started reacting. A plethora of draconian restrictions was announced to provide 'respite' for the Swedish asylum reception system. The number of asylum seekers had to be drastically reduced, it was argued. Beneficiaries of protection would in the future only be granted temporary stay, and their right to family reunification would be limited to the minimum required by international and EU law.¹ At Sweden's Schengen borders, border checks were temporarily reintroduced and, since January 2016, bus, train and ferry companies are no longer allowed to carry passengers without identity documents from neighbouring Denmark or Germany to Sweden. Even the approach towards



Öresund Bridge, which links Denmark and Sweden and serves as the main entry route for refugees into Sweden.

unaccompanied minors was soon to become tougher, according to the government.

After these announcements, and probably also as a result of seasonal variations and the closure of the irregular migration routes across the Western Balkans, the number of asylum seekers decreased almost at once. In March 2016, weekly arrivals were only about 5% of those recorded in early November 2015. And while many Swedes probably felt relieved at reduced immigration pressure, others were taken aback by Sweden's new restrictive stance.

The government continues to state that its turnaround on asylum is temporary, and that Sweden will return to openness as soon as the reception situation is under control again. Yet any normalisation of the situation will inevitably take a long time: many thousands of affordable rental apartments will need to be built, steps will need to be taken to improve the ability of new arrivals to integrate into the labour market, and a large number of teachers and medical staff will need to be recruited to keep the education and welfare systems functioning. Moreover, the Migration Agency has a backlog of pending asylum applications (more than 157,000 cases as of 1st April 2016).

Prime Minister Stefan Löfven and Minister of Justice Morgan Johansson have said that Sweden's new restrictive approach is intended not only to mitigate domestic problems but also to encourage other EU Member States to accept more refugees, thus easing the burden on Sweden. Yet measures introduced by Denmark, Norway and others have been even more hostile towards those seeking protection.

So, what can be learned from this?

First of all, a majority of the Swedish people, and their political representatives (except those on the extreme right), have long held a positive view of migration and the need to grant protection yet they failed to establish systems that could absorb a rapid and substantial increase in numbers. Most strikingly, there has been a grave lack of affordable housing for quite some time, aggravated by the fact that the Migration Agency normally rents ordinary apartments

as accommodation for asylum seekers. Those who are then granted protection are required to move out of these facilities but in practice they will most often need the same type of housing even after the asylum procedure, while other groups with below-average financial means – such as pensioners, students and young people – compete in the same market segment.²

More generally speaking, there is widespread anxiety that the largely deregulated Swedish welfare state is no longer strong enough to integrate a greatly increased number of beneficiaries of protection and subsequent family-related immigration. Thus, even if the mainstream discourse about immigration and asylum is essentially compassionate and many people understand why Syrians, Eritreans or Afghans are not safe in their home countries, this does not guarantee a welcoming and inclusive attitude to protection seekers in the longer run.

Another point is a lack of solidarity within the EU and the inability of its member states to adequately deal with what has been described as the worst refugee situation in modern history. Politicians and commentators have sometimes argued that if all EU countries had welcomed refugees to the same extent as Sweden (in relative numbers), Europe would not even have had a refugee 'crisis'. In a common market and political union such as the EU, when a few countries accept large numbers of asylum seekers while others do not, people inevitably question the imbalances and inequities. When calls for solidarity fall on deaf ears, more societies will start closing their doors.

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1. People with refugee status will still have a right to family reunification (spouses, partners and children under the age of 18) but not people with subsidiary protection.

2. Parusel B (2015) Focus Migration country profile Sweden, Osnabruck/Bonn: Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies/Federal Agency for Civic Education www.bpb.de/system/files/dokument_pdf/Country%20Profile%20Sweden_2015_0.pdf