5 The Swedish U-turn on Asylum and its Consequences
Bernd Parusel1

1 Introduction: Sweden – a safe haven for refugees?

For several years now, Sweden has been one of the main countries of immigration in Europe, and especially one that has provided protection to tens of thousands of refugees and people fleeing from wars and conflict zones, especially in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and the Horn of Africa. Latest population statistics show that in 2015, about 16.5% of the Swedish population of 9.8 million people was born in another country.2 According to estimates, about half of the foreign-born population originally came as refugees or as family members of refugees.3

In 2015, amidst what has become known as the “refugee crisis”, Sweden had the third highest number of asylum seekers (roughly 163,000) that were registered in a Member State of the EU that year – fewer than Germany and Hungary, but many more than larger Member States such as France or the United Kingdom. The protection rate for asylum seekers in Sweden has long been relatively high, too, which means that a majority of those applying for protection were eventually allowed to stay and become part of the Swedish population. In 2015, 72% of all asylum decisions taken at first instance were positive.4 This was one of the highest protection rates in Europe.

Not only for its protection rate but also for other reasons, Sweden has had a good reputation among asylum seekers for a long time. For example, refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection were long granted permanent residence, asylum seekers had access to the labour market directly after lodging

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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.

However, 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 heads. 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 and November, the central government announced a number of rather draconian restrictions to make Sweden less popular as a destination, and ease the burden on the Swedish asylum reception system.

These changes to the earlier Swedish asylum policy, which I will elaborate on in this paper, shed a new light on Sweden’s allegedly “generous” approach to immigration, the granting of protection, and integration. A central hypothesis of this article is that Sweden is to a great degree aligning itself to the more restrictive policies of its direct neighbours Finland, Denmark, and Norway, and other EU-members. Despite the fact that Sweden has used its membership in the EU to press, among other issues, for more openness to immigrants and refugees, it now supports and perhaps even promotes – at least indirectly – the “fortress” thinking that has been dominating national and European asylum policies for years, and that is now – also thanks to the Swedish policy shift – growing even stronger.

A “before-and-after perspective” is applied to this analysis of Sweden’s reaction to the refugee crisis, clarifying the Swedish government’s approach to migration and asylum before, during, and after the drastic policy changes in late 2015 and 2016, which included the introduction of temporary residence-permits (instead of permanent ones), border and ID checks, restricted family reunification rights, and a tougher approach to rejected asylum seekers. The article argues that the Swedish “U-turn on asylum” of 2015-2016 is in sharp contrast with the earlier, much more open approach to migration and protection, and also counteracts the Swedish government’s ambitions and initiatives on the integration policy side. Finally, the article also points out some possible consequences of the Swedish “turnaround” on asylum for the further development of the Common European Asylum System.
2 Before the refugee crisis

As mentioned before, the number of asylum seekers coming to Sweden has been rising strongly throughout recent years (see Figure 1 for details). At least in part, this development is certainly a result of intensified refugee flows globally, and wars and conflicts in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia. There have also been a number of significant policy relaxations in Sweden, which may have made the country more popular as a safe haven for people in need of protection.

Figure 1: Asylum applications in Sweden, 2006-2015

As Figure 2 shows, most asylum seekers in 2014 and 2015 came from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Stateless people, often Palestinians, also represented a significant group, as did people from Eritrea and Somalia.

Swedish migration and integration policies are often regarded as progressive and ambitious, and the Swedish government has subscribed to a positive view on migration, highlighting potential gains instead of risks. On its official website, the current government (a minority coalition of Social democrats and the Green party) states its goal to

“ensure a long-term sustainable migration policy that safeguards the right of asylum and, within the framework of managed immigration, facilitates mobility across borders, promotes needs-based labour migration, harnesses and takes into account the effects of migration on development, and deepens European and international cooperation”.

This open and affirmative approach to immigration and the granting of asylum is reflected in concrete policy measures undertaken during the past ten years or so. In 2008, for example, Sweden introduced an extraordinarily liberal system for the immigration of foreign workers. Employers may since, in principle, hire anyone from any part of the world, and there are neither any quotas nor requirements as regards to the labour immigrants’ skills or qualifications.

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6 Source: Ibid.
9 For more information, see Parusel, B. & Tamas, K.: The most open system for labour immigration – has it worked?, in: Migration Policy Practice, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2016, pp.
it comes to asylum und protection, Sweden has high recognition rates and a well-established reception system for incoming asylum seekers.

Until recently, those asylum seekers who were granted protection normally received a permanent residence permit. But even those who are rejected may sometimes stay; since 2008, asylum seekers who have been working while their application was processed may under certain conditions stay in the country as foreign workers. In international comparison, this is a rather unique possibility for failed asylum seekers to change their status and become legal immigrants. Furthermore, Sweden liberalized previous restrictions to asylum seekers’ rights to work in 2010. When asylum seekers disclose their identities to the authorities, they usually get full access to the Swedish job market from the beginning of their stay in the country.

In July 2014, Sweden facilitated the granting of protection for children and youths entering the country without any parents or legal guardians. So-called “unaccompanied minors” can since not only be granted refugee status or subsidiary protection, but if needed also an alternative protection status for humanitarian reasons due to “particularly distressing circumstances”. Children and young people’s opportunities to obtain Swedish citizenship were also facilitated through shorter minimum requirements for domicile and permanent residency in Sweden. Last but not least, as late as in 2015, the practices for determining the age of unaccompanied minors without identity documents

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were relaxed. Normally, the Migration Agency now accepts the age that a young asylum seeker states when applying for asylum. Only when case-workers find it obvious that the person is in fact an adult, he or she may undergo a medical age assessment, to prove that he/she is of minor age.

Following these relaxations, the number of unaccompanied minors coming to Sweden increased extraordinarily in 2014, and especially in 2015. While about 7,000 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum in Sweden in 2014, over 35,000 came in 2015, see Figure 3 below. Thus, Sweden received about 40% of all unaccompanied minors that applied for asylum in a Member State of the EU that year.15

**Figure 3: Asylum applications by unaccompanied minors, 2018-2015**16

For people who came to Sweden for protection reasons and who later applied to be reunited with family members, Sweden was an attractive destination as well, at least until 2016. Refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection normally received permanent residence permits, which included a right to be joined by married partners, unmarried partners and any children below the age of 18. No particular conditions were attached to this right, such as language

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proficiency or any maintenance requirements. And only four years after protection was granted, recognised refugees can become Swedish citizens.\textsuperscript{17}

Last but not least, part of the bigger picture is also that Sweden is one of rather few countries in Europe that, in addition to accepting asylum seekers, also receives refugees via official state-managed resettlement. The government sets an annual quota and on this basis the Migration Agency, in cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), selects displaced persons or refugees in countries of origin or transit countries for protection and residence in Sweden. In recent years, the quota has been 1,900 refugees per year. In 2015, most of these refugees were Syrians, Somalis, Afghans, Congolese, and stateless persons.\textsuperscript{18}

While there has been a certain level of domestic scepticism towards the Swedish openness to immigrants and refugees, with the right-wing “Sweden Democrats” gradually increasing their popularity among voters, the mainstream Swedish society has had an overall compassionate approach to migrants and refugees. Despite rising trends, immigration was, until recently, not a particularly controversial issue in Sweden, and among the bigger political parties from the left to the right, there was a consensus about a generous approach to immigration and asylum, based on humanitarian principles.\textsuperscript{19}

Between 1992 and 2014, the share of the Swedish population that were in favour of reducing the number of refugees coming to Sweden, decreased steadily, from 65 to 43\%. When the number of refugees increased, openness towards them even improved rather than deteriorated.\textsuperscript{20} Other surveys also confirmed that Swedes had a positive attitude towards immigrants and refugees.\textsuperscript{21} According to a Eurobarometer survey from autumn 2015, 70\% of the Swedish

\textsuperscript{17} Please note that stateless persons with refugee status can acquire citizenship already after three years. For more information on citizenship policies in Sweden, see Spång, M.: Svenskt medborgarskap – Reglering och förändring i ett skandinaviskt perspektiv, Deligationen för Migrationstudier (Delmi Rapport 5), Stockholm, 2015.


\textsuperscript{20} See Andersson/Bendz, 2015, pp. 249, 253.

population felt positive about the immigration of people from outside the EU. Of all Member States, this represented the highest positive share.22

As far as the integration of new arrivals is concerned, this is mostly evaluated and discussed in terms of concrete, measurable successes and failures, such as labour market participation (employment rates among foreign-born residents, compared to Swedish-born persons), migrants’ access to housing, problems related to segregation, language acquisition, or the uptake of social benefits. Symbolic or value-related matters, such as migrants’ adaptation to the host country’s society and traditions, as they manifest themselves in other countries in, for example, integration contracts or symbolic confessions to become part of a national community, is of much less importance in Sweden.23

While the Scandinavian welfare state is today an eager advocate of free trade and a liberal market economy, also accepting growing income inequality, it still boasts a relatively large public sector offering comprehensive social security systems. These are available to all registered inhabitants, irrespective of their nationality. Equality, solidarity, cooperation and consensus are core aspects of this system. A basic access principle regarding welfare is that anyone who stays, or is expected to stay, in Sweden for one year or longer, will enjoy the same social rights and claims as all other residents. This means that only migrants with short-term residency are excluded from the welfare community, such as visitors with short-term visas, foreign students, seasonal workers or asylum seekers, as long as their application for international protection is still under examination. This inclusive approach may also have contributed to Sweden’s popularity among people seeking protection.

Last but not least, it can also be observed that the economic and labour market conditions in Sweden are more favourable for integrating a large number of beneficiaries of protection than in many other countries. Overall, the economy is performing well, unemployment is low, and there is a strong integration system.24 In addition, Sweden also offers state-subsidised employment for new arrivals.

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3 Autumn 2015: a drastic turning point

Symptomatic for the open attitudes of Swedes towards refugees, former Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt from the conservative Moderate Party in 2014 described his country as a “humanitarian super-power” with a population willing to open their hearts to people in need of protection.25 Before the refugee crisis in autumn 2015, also other politicians, journalists, academics and other public figures often took pride in emphasizing the fact that Sweden had received, in relation to the size of the country’s population, more asylum seekers than any other country in the EU, and that there were no refugee crisis if other countries acted like Sweden. Even Reinfeldts successor, the Social Democrat Stefan Löfven, declared at a pro-refugee demonstration in Stockholm on 6 September 2015: “My Europe takes in refugees. My Europe doesn’t build walls.”26

While Sweden may not have literally built walls, it started sealing itself off just a few months after this statement was made. The exceptionally high numbers of asylum seekers that arrived in Sweden in 2013, 2014 and in the course of 2015 had already created congestion in the reception system and various challenges with regard to integration. What happened since September 2015 finally exceeded Sweden’s capacities, while at the same time public opinion became increasingly sceptical: During the month of October 2015, almost 40,000 people applied for asylum in Sweden, and for some weeks in October and November, up to 2,000 arrived to claim asylum on a single day. Figure 4 visualizes this rather dramatic development. In November, the Swedish Migration Agency announced that it could no longer provide accommodation for all new arrivals. Despite quick recruitment of new case officers and the use of municipal emergency facilities for temporary accommodation, the Agency barely managed to register all arriving refugees.27 The Swedish Minister of

Finance, Magdalena Andersson, called on refugees to stay in Germany instead of travelling on to Sweden.\(^{28}\)

*Figure 4: Asylum applications, monthly, 2015-2016*\(^{29}\)

Shortly thereafter, the minority government reached an agreement with the centre-right opposition parties, which included, among other measures, shorter processing times for asylum requests, a harsher approach to rejected asylum seekers and the granting of temporary residence permits, instead of permanent ones, to single adult refugees and couples without children. Claiming that the pressure on the Swedish asylum system was disproportionately high, the government also issued a plea to the EU to relocate people in need of protection from Sweden to other Member States. As these announcements did not immediately show any tangible effects on the number of incoming asylum seekers, Sweden then also introduced border controls at its Schengen borders, primarily towards Denmark, and since January 2016, bus, train and ferry companies are no longer allowed to carry passengers without identity documents from Denmark into Sweden. Even the approach towards unaccompanied minors was soon to become tougher, according to the government.\(^{30}\)

\(^{28}\) See Finansministern om flyktingar: ‘Stanna i Tyskland’, Sveriges Radio, 6 November 2015.


\(^{30}\) See Government Offices of Sweden: Measures to tackle the refugee crisis, Stockholm, 23 October 2015, available at: http://www.government.se/content-assets/f8ef9a03946941c5987f7ae76b356a02/agreement-measures-to-tackle-the-refugee-crisis.pdf (13 April 2017); see also Government Offices of Sweden: “Government proposes measures to create respite for Swedish refugee reception”, Stockholm, 24
After these announcements and especially after introducing border controls and extra-territorial ID-checks on travellers, but probably also as a result of seasonal variations and the closure of the irregular migration routes via Turkey across the Western Balkans, the number of asylum seekers rapidly decreased. In March 2016, for example, weekly arrivals were only about 5% of those recorded in early November 2015, and until December 2016, they had not risen again.\footnote{See Swedish Migration Agency: Official statistics, available at: http://www.migrationsverket.se/English/About-the-Migration-Agency/Facts-and-statistics/Statistics.html (13 April 2017).} Sweden now contemplates, for 2016, the lowest asylum figures in six years.

Throughout 2016, government ministries worked to transform the announcements of October and November into concrete legislative proposals that were eventually adopted by Parliament. As a consequence, since the beginning of June 2016, rejected asylum applicants are no longer entitled to accommodation provided by the Migration Agency, and they also lose their daily allowance once the deadline for voluntary return expires. This measure is intended to encourage more failed asylum seekers to return to their home countries voluntarily.\footnote{The new rule does not apply to adults living with children under 18 years who maintain the right to assistance until they leave Sweden.} Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the proposal on temporary residence permits and restricted family reunification came into force on 20 July 2016, after much controversy and final adoption by Parliament one month earlier. Refugees are now granted a residence permit for three years and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection a permit for 13 months.\footnote{As an exception from this rule, resettled refugees will continue to receive permanent permits, see Migrationsverket: Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Programs in Europe – what works? Country report Sweden. Report from EMN Sweden 2016:2, Norrköping, 2016, p. 17, available at: http://www.emnsweeden.se/download/18.2d998fe151ac387159171b6/1484748710524/Resettlement+and+Humanitarian+Admission+Programmes+in+Europe_web.pdf (13 April 2017).} While people with refugee status still have a right to be joined by family members, this will be allowed for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection only in exceptional cases. As a majority of all persons who are granted asylum receive subsidiary protection (more than 60% during the first eight months of 2016), this legal change will affect most asylum seekers that still come to Sweden.\footnote{Temporary permits can be extended, if the reasons for granting them still apply. They can only be permanent, however, if the holders can prove that they can support themselves (e.g. by employment).}
At several occasions the border controls at Sweden’s Schengen borders, originally intended as a temporary measure, were prolonged, despite the fact that the number of incoming asylum seekers was at a much lower level in 2016 than in 2015 and the years before. New procedures for medical age determinations for unaccompanied asylum seekers claiming to be underage were also developed. Supposedly, they will be implemented at some point in spring 2017, putting an end to the earlier practice according to which such examinations were only carried out when a person that the Migration Agency considered to be an adult wanted to prove their minority.  

On top of these measures, and perhaps sending a more positive signal, efforts to integrate new arrivals more quickly into Swedish society were considerably stepped up during the year 2016 as well. In early March, a new act for an “effective and solidarity-based refugee reception system” entered into force, providing that all municipalities within Sweden can be required to receive newly-arrived refugees and other beneficiaries of protection, as well as their family members, for settlement. The assignment of such persons to municipalities is now to the greatest extent possible based on each municipality’s respective socio-economic situation and capacities, the local labour market, characteristics of the population and integration/reception services provided. Previously, the settlement of beneficiaries of protection was based on voluntary agreements between municipalities and the Swedish Migration Agency. This system had however created an unequal distribution of new arrivals across Sweden. The new approach is also designed to encourage municipalities to construct additional housing.

4 What perspectives for integration?

The large number of new refugee arrivals throughout recent years is certainly a major challenge for Sweden. There have been serious capacity problems in the reception system for asylum seekers, and with regard to the capacity to quickly process their applications. In the longer run, as regards the integration of the many new arrivals, there are problems, too. One of them is a dramatic shortage of affordable housing, which no longer only affects Sweden’s bigger cities, but even remoter regions of the country. This has resulted in long delays in the...
settlement process and immigrants’ integration activities, such as language learning, education and job-searching. The ability of the labour market to absorb beneficiaries of protection has also been quite limited. According to a recent OECD study, one year following the end of the introduction programme (which usually takes two years), only 22% of low-educated men were in employment. For women, the employment rate was as little as eight percent on average. A report by the Swedish Migration Studies Delegation recently showed that only 30% of all immigrants that arrived in Sweden as refugees in 1997-1999 had a job after two years of stay. But even ten years after their arrival, only 65% were working. Other challenges concern a lack of staff at schools, in the health care system, and in municipalities’ social services, which all have to cope with higher workloads due to the many new arrivals.

For the Swedish government, the goal of its integration policy is to ensure equal rights, obligations and opportunities for all, irrespective of their ethnic and cultural background. On its website, it states that “work is the most important means for a person to become part of society”. Working provides an “opportunity to find a new sense of community and belonging, the power to shape your life and future, and opportunities to support yourself.” The government's main priority is therefore that every step of the reception process of newly arrived immigrants is to focus on them finding a job. 

The central element of integration policies today is the „Introduction Act” of 2010, which provides integration measures for all new arrivals of working age (20-64 years) who have been granted a residence permit as beneficiaries of protection (refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, and people entitled to protection for humanitarian reasons). In addition, young unaccompanied migrants who are 18 or 19 years old, as well as family members of beneficiaries

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of protection who have applied for family reunification within two years, are also included.

Once an asylum seeker is granted a permit, he or she will have an appointment at the employment agency, which is responsible for finding him or her a municipality for permanent settlement, and for developing an individual integration plan.\textsuperscript{41} This plan usually consists of integration activities of 40 hours per week over two years. The central element of the integration plan is always a language course, which is arranged by the respective municipality, and civic integration courses, internships, or job training. If relevant, the employment agency can also refer the person to institutions that can validate the applicant’s foreign qualifications. For each day an immigrant participates in the measures listed in the integration plan, they receive a daily allowance. Apart from a reduction or a loss of the allowance, there are no sanctions in case of non-compliance with the integration plan.

In 2015, the government started opening up “fast-tracks” into the labour market for newly arrived immigrants with education or skills in shortage occupations. To pave the way, the social partners could apply for funds for promotion and development measures. At this writing, fast tracks have been established for chefs (cooks), butchers, teachers, preschool teachers and several regulated professions within the health-care sector (e.g. doctors, nurses and dentists), construction engineers, social scientists and social workers, among others. The initiative is intended to boost labour market integration while at the same time alleviating skills shortages. As of June 2016, over 1,700 new arrivals have enrolled in the fast-track initiative.\textsuperscript{42}

Additional funding was also made available in 2016 for the reception of newly arrived immigrants in the Swedish municipalities, to increase the Public Employment Service’s administrative capacities, and for offering asylum-seekers meaningful activities while they wait for a decision on their application. This is intended to speed up labour market integration once an individual is allowed to stay. Examples of such activities are early skills identification measures, internships or studies of the Swedish language.

As regards the validation of skills obtained abroad, the Public Employment Service is planning to include brief supplementary education measures into

\textsuperscript{41} The responsibility to find recognized beneficiaries of protection a municipality where to settle will be taken over by the Migration Agency in early 2017.

refugees’ individual integration plans, where appropriate. This is thought to speed up labour market participation and to address the problem of immigrants working below their qualification levels (brain waste). Furthermore, the government has established the “100 club”, an initiative that foresees that the Public Employment Service offers special package solutions to bigger companies that have a labour demand and want to contribute to the introduction of new arrivals. When a company commits to employing at least 100 newly arrived refugees within three years, they can make use of special placement services and receive wage subsidies from the State.\textsuperscript{43}

While it is too early to judge the effectiveness of these new measures, it is clear that their success will, to a large degree, depend on whether the settlement process can be improved. The government has declared that new arrivals should be brought closer to the more dynamic regions of Sweden, where it is easier for them to find jobs. It also expects that a new settlement policy will boost the construction of new, affordable rental apartments, thus addressing the lack of housing for people with limited financial means, which affects not only immigrants but also economically weaker parts of the Swedish-born population.\textsuperscript{44}

Among the political parties, labour market partners and civil society organizations, there has recently been an intensive debate about an alleged lack of “simple” jobs for immigrants in Sweden and about lowering salaries for unskilled work in order to speed up labour market participation. For a society that is still characterized by social democratic thinking, however, such a policy, which would inevitably mean widened income inequality and the emergence of an immigrant underclass, would be a drastic and controversial step to take.

5 \hspace{1cm} \textbf{The European dimension of Sweden’s problems}

While this article has so far focused on national policies on asylum and integration in Sweden, those policies, and the changes that have occurred, also have a European dimension. The fact that Sweden had become such an attractive destination for people seeking protection over recent years is also a result of other countries following rather different approaches. While there are many different factors that can explain why a refugee chooses a specific country


and not another one, it is clear that other potential destinations within the EU have tried to wall themselves off, or to be as unattractive as possible for people seeking protection. Figure 5 below shows just how unequal the distribution of asylum seekers between the various Member States was in 2015. Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Austria and Italy together received almost three quarters of all asylum seekers that came to a Member State of the EU in 2015. The remaining 23 Member States together received 25%. Not surprisingly, such imbalances were recently discussed a lot in policy circles and among the general public in Sweden.

Figure 5: Asylum applications in EU Member States, 2015

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Asylum Applications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>476 510</td>
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<td>Hungary</td>
<td>177 135</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>162 450</td>
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<td>Austria</td>
<td>88 160</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>84 085</td>
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<td>France</td>
<td>75 750</td>
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<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>44 970</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>44 660</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>38 800</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>32 345</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>20 935</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>20 365</td>
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<td>Spain</td>
<td>14 780</td>
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<td>Greece</td>
<td>13 205</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>12 190</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>3 275</td>
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<td>Luxembourg</td>
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<td>Cyprus</td>
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<td>Malta</td>
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<td>Czech Republic</td>
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<td>Romania</td>
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<td>Portugal</td>
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<td>Estonia</td>
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<td>Croatia</td>
<td>210</td>
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Consequently, it is understandable that the establishment of a redistribution mechanism for asylum seekers is a priority for the Swedish government. Despite the fact that many asylum seekers who arrive in Sweden have applied for asylum in another Member State before and can therefore be sent back there in accordance with the Dublin regulation, the number of those who remain is Sweden has been disproportionately high over several years. Hence, one reason for the restrictive turnaround in Sweden in 2015 and 2016 is that Swedish politicians felt deceived by their EU partners.

In a statement released in September 2015, the government identified a number of policy priorities for the EU and its Common European Asylum System, apart from the introduction of an intra-EU redistribution mechanism. While the “saving of lives” needed to be a priority, the EU should also secure its external borders, combat trafficking and the smuggling of migrants, and ensure that rejected asylum seekers were returned in an efficient and humane manner, the Swedish government argued. A European returnee programme should be developed, and the EU should also agree on a system of safe countries of origin. Further to this, the government also stated that the European asylum and border agencies (EASO and Frontex) needed to be further strengthened, and that the EU had to develop a more active foreign policy and provide aid to help people on the ground in third countries. Sweden also lobbies for more active resettlement. According to the government, the EU should resettle no less than 100,000 refugees each year. Last but not least, the European Commission should propose more legal routes into the EU.46

While Sweden has had a resettlement program for a long time, the EU as a whole only admitted 8,155 refugees via resettlement programs in 2015, according to Eurostat.47 The Swedish demand therefore appears ambitious, if not to say unrealistic. To proceed as a good example, however, the government

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declared that it intended to gradually increase its own national resettlement quota from 1,900 to 5,000 people by the year 2018.48

Also with regard to the call for more legal routes into the EU, Sweden tries to go ahead as a role model. In January 2016, the government appointed a special commissioner to analyse and investigate the preconditions for establishing legal routes to the EU for applicants for international protection. According to the government, legal routes could be opened by making it possible for EU Member States to issue humanitarian visas or other types of entry permissions for people who intend to apply for asylum.49

Whether the Swedish approach to the further development of the common European policies on asylum and protection will have any of the desired effects still remains to be seen. Quite likely, Sweden’s negotiating power will also depend on how Sweden’s EU partners make sense of the domestic policy changes on asylum that happened in Sweden, as described in this paper. Prime Minister Löfven has publicly stated 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. Yet measures introduced by neighbouring Denmark, Norway and other EU Member States nearby have been even more hostile towards those seeking protection. Denmark even announced in 2016 that it would suspend its resettlement scheme.50 Hence, the fact that even magnanimous Sweden now follows a very restrictive approach to asylum could also be understood elsewhere as a sign that openness towards refugees has no future.

Observers also note that, while the number of asylum seekers coming to Sweden during the first nine months of 2016 has been much smaller than during the same period of time in earlier years, Sweden has not been willing to admit asylum seekers from Italy or Greece under the EU’s relocation scheme. According to the European Emergency Relocation Mechanism, which was


adopted by the Council of the European Union in September 2015, and according to which 160,000 asylum seekers were to be relocated to other Member States from Italy and Greece, Sweden had to make around 3,700 places available. One year later, Sweden had only made 300 places available and 39 asylum seekers had in fact been taken over from Italy under the common framework. Other countries, such as France, the Netherlands, Finland or Portugal were much more active than Sweden. Against this background, the question might arise whether Sweden really still deserves other EU countries’ solidarity, given the fact that it is no longer exposed to massively increasing numbers of asylum seekers.

6 Conclusions and outlook

As a consequence of the dramatic asylum situation of 2014 and 2015, Swedish society in general, and key public institutions such as the Migration Agency, the Employment Service, the police and the municipalities, have exhibited clear signs of overburdening. The Government’s recent restrictive turnaround on asylum aims at making it possible for them to catch up with their tasks. And indeed, as the number of incoming applicants decreased drastically in early 2016, one may argue that the time seems right for improving existing systems and testing new ideas.

An obvious risk, however, is that the new policy to grant beneficiaries of protection temporary residence permits instead of permanent ones, and to limit their right to family reunification, will make integration more difficult, thus counteracting any positive action on the integration policy side. A refugee who is uncertain about his or her longer-term perspective to remain, and who worries about family members left behind, is certainly less likely to wholeheartedly focus on establishing himself or herself in a new country than one that feels safe. The new Swedish policy is ambiguous in this regard; there is an obvious tension between immigration control objectives and integration policy targets.


As recently confirmed by the OECD, Sweden is in principle well-prepared to address the challenges associated with high levels of protection-related immigration. This is true both regarding the availability of state funding, including wage subsidies, overall economic performance, and the integration and welfare structures already in place. Despite this, the public debate about immigration and integration is likely to intensify. In autumn 2015, the EU’s Eurobarometer survey showed that 53% of the Swedish population regarded immigration as the most pressing policy issue in their country, as compared with only 24% during the year before. Given the salience of immigration and integration issues, related topics will remain high on policymakers’ agendas for quite some time, and the exact future course of action in Sweden is difficult to predict.

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 100,000 cases as of 1st December 2016). Many observers have doubted that Sweden’s new restrictive policies will really be abandoned again, and the former approach reinstalled.

In conclusion, what can be learned from the Swedish example? 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 have failed to establish systems that could absorb a rapid and substantial increase in numbers. There is also widespread anxiety among Swedes that the largely deregulated welfare state is no longer strong enough to absorb such large numbers of migrants and refugees, and that the country is in danger of losing its cultural identity.


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, and when calls for solidarity fall on deaf ears, even more open societies will start closing their doors.

The situation has changed, however, and in 2016, Sweden was no longer one of those EU countries that were exposed to disproportionately high migratory pressures. As migration flows have proven to be hard to predict, this can quickly change again, of course. But Sweden’s vocal calls for solidarity in 2015 should be reassessed every once in a while. It could very soon be time for Sweden to demonstrate more solidarity again.