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Refugee Policy in Northern Europe

Nordic Countries Grow Closer but Differences Remain

Tobias Etzold

One year after the great refugee influx reached Europe, lasting changes are seen to have occurred in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. All four have tightened their asylum policies, in some cases drastically, and border controls between them have been reinstated for the first time since the 1950s. While differences over joint EU migration policy also remain, the situation has also created awareness of the need to improve coordination of migration and integration policies in Northern Europe. Closer coordination with Germany would also be desirable.

While the Nordic countries share a great deal in common, especially in socio-economic terms, their migration and refugee policies have diverged, sometimes widely. While Denmark, Finland and Norway have pursued restrictive approaches since the 1990s, Sweden has long maintained one of Europe's most generous refugee policies.

The roots of the disparities lie in their different cultures of consensus and debate. The political elite in Sweden – across the political spectrum – implemented humanitarian ideals, but without conducting a public debate over national migration policy. Denmark possesses a stronger culture of debate, and public influence over politics is therefore larger. The Danish conservative and liberal parties have also directed greater attention to the migration question than is the case in Sweden. Denmark is generally a liberal and progressive society, where high wages and generous social policies are seen as the reward for hard work and paying into the expensive system. Widespread Danish reservations towards refugees are based on a belief that many of the new arrivals will be unable to adapt and live up to this principle.

National Reactions to the Refugee Crisis

The numbers of arrivals and asylum applications jumped in 2015 in all the Nordic countries (apart from Iceland). In relation to population size, Sweden, Norway and Finland were among the top five receivers of refugees in Europe. In response to the growing stresses associated with the refugee influx, Nordic governments tightened their asylum policies from autumn 2015 – restricting family reunion, curtailing duration of residence and cutting benefits. These moves occurred under considerable

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pressure from national populist parties, which are strong in all the Nordic countries. In Finland and Norway they are part of the government, while the Danish People's Party tolerates a liberal/conservative minority coalition.

The Danish police have been authorised to confiscate cash and valuables from refugees in order to contribute to the costs of their stay. A government policy document for "A Stronger Denmark" includes migration measures such as setting up police-guarded asylum centres. In emergencies – which would include the situation in summer/autumn 2015 – it would permit the government to turn asylum-seekers away at the borders. Norway already adopted a similar rule in June 2015. In fact, the centre-right government in Oslo has stated its intention to pursue one of the hardest lines on immigration in the whole of Europe. The Finnish government, for its part, has classified Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia as safe countries of origin. Most of the refugees accepted in Finland originated from these three states.

The Swedish parliament adopted a comprehensive package of legislation in June 2016, introducing similar restrictions on benefits, duration of residence and family reunion, and additionally permitting faster deportations. The move by Sweden's red-green government is designed to temporarily align national laws with minimum EU standards, in order to achieve a fairer distribution of refugees within Europe. The upshot of these developments is that the asylum policies and admission practices of the Nordic countries have grown increasingly similar since 2015.

Nordic Border Controls

The most striking change has been Sweden's imposition of temporary controls at its border with Denmark in early 2016. In response Denmark began conducting selective checks at its border with Germany. Prior to this, Norway and Finland had also begun conducting sporadic controls. As a result of these measures, together with stricter border controls elsewhere in Europe, the closure of the "Balkan route" and the EU-Turkey agreements, the number of new arrivals slumped in the course of 2016. By autumn 2016 the number of asylum-seekers in Sweden, Denmark and Norway lay between 69 and 84 percent below the figures for the previous year (total figures for January to October 2016: Sweden 24,670, Denmark 5,625, Finland 4,980, Norway 2,825).

However, border controls between Nordic countries are associated with high political and economic costs. This applies especially in the Danish-Swedish Öresund area, which is characterised by strong cross-border commuting and is held up as a trans-Nordic model region. Here border controls are already eroding the area's economic viability. In June 2016 the controls were extended for six months with the European Commission's approval – as required under the Schengen Agreement – and in November 2016 for a further three months.

These measures were introduced unilaterally, without consultation, and initially generated friction with neighbours. Sweden received sharp criticism, especially from Denmark – first for its generous refugee policies, and then for its unilateral imposition of border controls. The otherwise lauded Nordic solidarity, rooted in shared values and identities, has been severely stretched by the refugee question.

Nordic Migration Cooperation

The governments and parliaments of the five Nordic countries work closely together in the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) and the Nordic Council. One of the greatest successes of this cooperation was the establishment in 1954 of the Nordic Passport Union, which allowed free movement throughout the region long before Schengen.

However, a gap between aspiration and reality has often been apparent in the institutionalised cooperation, with sensitive political questions such as migration largely excluded. In the eyes of many observers the

cooperation lacks political relevance and visibility; at the same time it is seen to be excessively bureaucratic and technical. Most of all, the differences in stances and practices toward refugees and the introduction of temporary border controls have called into question the guiding principles of Nordic cooperation. Controls contradict the prime objective of keeping the region as border-free as possible and reducing other obstacles such as differences in fiscal legislation or the implementation of EU law.

Despite the obvious and growing need for consultation and action, the refugee question only slowly found its way into the organs of Nordic cooperation. While the initial debates were still characterised primarily by accusations and emphasis on national differences, a more constructive tone emerged from early 2016. In the meantime the issue of integrating refugees – which represents a great challenge to all these countries – has been included in the Nordic cooperation agenda. Various classical fields of activity, such as social, health, equality, education and employment policy, have been identified as suitable for closer cooperation in this area.

These fields offer concrete starting points, where the countries involved share a great deal of experience in cooperation and have created similar preconditions and standards. On that basis a refugee integration programme was initiated in autumn 2016, for which – initially until the end of 2017 – funds have been diverted within the current NCM budget. The main objectives of the programme are to coordinate and harmonise integration measures in the individual countries and to learn from one another. This applies especially to the integration of the many unaccompanied minors. A joint clearing house is to be established under the auspices of the NCM, to support coordination of the activities of participating agencies and supply information. The creation of a council of ministers for integration matters is also to be considered (the NCM currently comprises ten councils of ministers each responsible for one or more areas).

The leaders of the Nordic left parties went even further; calling for a Nordic allocation system for refugees, shared minimum criteria for vulnerable groups, and uniform rules for family reunion. Such a degree of cooperation is an unlikely prospect, however, and would be incompatible with EU law. To that extent Nordic cooperation on refugee integration does not threaten broader EU migration policy; it is at best a supplement.

In view of the experiences of 2015/16, the Nordic countries – and the EU as a whole – must make it their goal to avoid national unilateralism and the creation of new divisions. That would include avoiding the uncoordinated reintroduction of border controls. Such steps should be prevented through early communication, far-sighted action and even closer cooperation.

Stances towards EU Migration Policy

As far as a joint EU migration policy is concerned, opinions diverge among the Nordic EU members. One reason for this is differences in their domestic political constellations. Denmark is fundamentally in favour of greater cooperation but opposes permanent binding distribution quotas, citing Denmark's opt-out on home and justice matters. Copenhagen's priorities are to secure the EU's external borders and keep refugees in camps outside the EU. There is also discussion in Denmark about making asylum-seekers apply to a particular member state before they even enter the EU. Denmark, Sweden and Finland acknowledge the importance of the agreements on refugee questions reached between the EU and Turkey. Within that framework and the Joint EU Resettlement Programme, each has taken in several hundred refugees from the camps in Turkey and Lebanon.

Sweden advocates an ambitious and effective EU migration policy, citing inadequate cooperation between member states as one reason for the problems in distributing refugees. The government believes Sweden could have maintained its generous

admissions practice and the EU could have mastered the challenges if only the member states had cooperated more constructively. Sweden argues above all for a permanent, obligatory distribution mechanism, but finds little support within the EU beyond Germany and the Netherlands. Sweden also prioritises securing the EU's external borders, increasing the number of quota refugees and creating more legal access routes to the EU. Finland, likewise, underlines secure external borders as the key to a joint EU migration policy. Helsinki has abstained on the question of binding EU distribution quotas.

Coordination with Germany

Shared interests, values and challenges mean that Germany, as the largest neighbour, plays a special role for the Nordic countries, especially in the EU context. The reintroduction of controls on the Danish-German border has immediate repercussions for contacts, trade and economic and social cross-border activities. This interdependency demands consultation and coordination.

Sweden and Germany in particular sought for a long time to work closely on the refugee question. While the common ground on national refugee policy has shrunk since Sweden's change of course, it continues to exist in the desire for an effective EU migration policy. Denmark, for its part, is sceptical towards both European migration policy and German asylum policy.

Since summer 2015 German Chancellor Angela Merkel has repeatedly met with the prime ministers of the Nordic EU member states in bilateral and multilateral contexts. Despite the regular dialogue, however, persistent differences of opinion in this area will likely make it difficult to achieve close cooperation between Germany and all the Nordic countries, especially in the EU context. However, an exchange of practical experience with refugee integration is possible and desired. Sweden for example has played a pioneering role in social integration, housing refugees as quickly as possible in normal accommodation and offering language courses and vocational programmes right from the outset. Yet it still experiences difficulties with labour market integration, which functions better in Germany. Closer German-Nordic exchange would offer opportunities to improve mechanisms in the respective home country, with the help of experience gathered elsewhere.

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