

Why Once-Welcoming Countries in Scandinavia Closed Their Borders to Refugees

Rik Rutten | Wednesday, Jan. 4, 2017

STOCKHOLM, Sweden—For decades, Swedes have taken pride in providing a safe haven to the world’s huddled masses. Their country took in 163,000 refugees in 2015 alone. That equaled about 1.6 percent of Sweden’s population, an intake of refugees far higher than most of Europe, both in absolute terms and per capita. But times have changed.

Unlike new arrivals who were often previously awarded permanent residency, the vast majority of asylum-seekers who have arrived since November 2015 are only eligible for a temporary permit to stay in Sweden. The government stated at the time of this policy shift

(<http://www.government.se/articles/2015/11/government-proposes-measures-to-create-respite-for-swedish-refugee-reception/>) that it aimed “to temporarily adjust the asylum regulations to the minimum level in the EU so that more people choose to seek asylum in other EU countries.” As a result, bringing families of migrants and refugees into Sweden has become much harder. With its tougher laws, Sweden now finds itself at the bottom of the European Union when it comes to welcoming refugees.

Putting this new policy in practice has brought back measures that were thought to be a thing of the past. Jan. 4 marks a year since the government shut the Swedish-Danish border. Crossing the bridge over the Oresund Strait between both countries, a daily commute for many, is now subject to passport checks. For the first time in half a century, photo identification is required for all entrants from Denmark.

Part of the story behind this sea change is pure logistics. Like Canada, Sweden has long had a friendly immigration attitude because of its place on the map. Even with generous permits and benefits, limited numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers would make their way up to this cold, northern country, far away from the hotspots of migration. That was true until the exodus of refugees from Syria’s civil war. Those who made their way to Europe often headed directly for Sweden, attracted by the generous permit policy and the presence of friends and relatives who had come before them. At its peak, so many refugees arrived in the southern city of Malmo that some were left to sleep outside.



Syrian refugees seeking asylum hold banners outside the Swedish Embassy in Copenhagen, Denmark, Sept. 26, 2012 (AP Photo by Jens Dresling).

Even in generous Sweden, pragmatism quickly overtook idealism. “The government now repeats that while it wants to take its responsibility [toward refugees] seriously, it never wants to go back to the situation of the autumn of 2015,” says Lisa Pelling, chief analyst and migration expert at Arena Ide, a progressive Swedish think tank, referring to the height of refugee arrivals in the country.

The challenges go beyond the short-term concerns of registration and finding temporary accommodation. The Swedish labor market is hard to access (<http://www.economist.com/news/finance-economics/21709511-too-few-refugees-not-too-many-are-working-europe-refugees-sweden-are>), particularly for low-skilled workers, and finding a place to live is notoriously difficult—over 80 percent of municipalities face housing shortages (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-sweden-housing-idUSKCN0ZJ08B>).

Logistics matter, but Sweden’s U-turn on refugees is as much a political story as a practical one. As the scope of the refugee crisis became visible, the governing coalition of Social Democrats and Greens saw its popularity rapidly decline. Benefiting from all this were the Sweden Democrats, an anti-establishment and far-right nationalist party that at the height of the crisis in 2015 vied for first place in public opinion polls. If diverting refugees was the official motive behind the asylum policy overhaul, diverting support for the Sweden Democrats was the subtext.

“The government has tried playing the cards of the Sweden Democrats and racing them to the bottom,” says Pelling. “But it discovered that there is no bottom.” Indeed, the Sweden Democrats have argued that the new law still does not go far enough. But the policy change did bring the government what it had hoped for: popular support. An opinion poll in March 2016 found that two-thirds of Swedes supported (<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=6393857>) the new, tightened asylum policy. Meanwhile, public support for the Sweden Democrats has declined.

“The government has tried playing the cards of the Sweden Democrats and racing them to the bottom. But it discovered that there is no bottom.”

Whereas Sweden was caught by surprise by the refugee crisis, neighboring Denmark was more prepared to adopt a harsh new position on immigration. “The Danish political establishment has pointed to Sweden as an example of what happens if you do not have restrictive policies,” says Zachary Whyte, a migration and integration researcher at the University of Aalborg. Already in 2002, the Danish government had introduced laws (<http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/europe/05/30/denmark.asylum/index.html>) that made partner

migration subject to strict rules and denied full access to citizenship and benefits to foreigners for their first seven years in the country; laws were further tightened in 2011. Still, Denmark's newer asylum policies have been blunt enough to cause international controversy, especially when a law was approved in January 2016 to seize assets, including jewelry

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/12/17/denmark-wants-to-seize-jewelry-from-refugees/>), from refugees entering the country. But in generating such attention, the laws worked exactly as intended.

As the Danish government talked up the nation's generosity in media interviews, Whyte recalls, it placed advertisements in Lebanese newspapers to discourage refugees from making the journey to Denmark.

The jewelry law illustrated the same attitude: There has been only one report of its use

(<http://cphpost.dk/news/five-months-on-from-controversial-law-danish-police-finally-seize-valuables-from-asylum-seekers.html>), but it likely generated enough bad press to deter would-be newcomers.

Like in Sweden, Danish politics have been the driving force behind these restrictive measures. In elections in June 2015, the anti-immigration Danish People's Party (DPP) doubled its share of votes to become the second-largest party in parliament. Having campaigned on a platform of limiting migration and preserving the welfare state, it gained a following outside the big cities, where economic growth has been slow and where government assistance has receded. Since the parliamentary elections, the DPP has given crucial backing to a center-right minority government led by Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen. For the DPP, which has backed Cabinets before—including the one that drastically tightened asylum laws in 2002—but never delivered a single minister, this mode of government allows it to yield influence while keeping up its anti-establishment image.

For Denmark's traditional parties, that may yet turn out to be a blessing in disguise. With no rivals from the DPP in executive positions, hardliners within Rasmussen's Venstre Party, like Inger Stojberg, the immigration and integration minister, have been able to steal the spotlight. "Why vote for the People's Party if you can get what you want done through Venstre?" asks Whyte. Most damaging for the DPP, however, was a scandal over the party's misuse of EU funds (<http://www.politico.eu/article/scandal-over-misuse-of-eu-funds-worsens-for-danish-peoples-party-european-parliament/>) that embodied all the establishment politics that the party claims it is fighting against.

Denmark and Sweden reflect a trend of far-right and nationalist parties in and around Scandinavia. Norway's Progress Party and Finland's True Finns joined governments following their countries' most recent elections, in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Both parties took advantage of public backlash over immigration, although both parties have lost popularity since then. Like the DPP and the Sweden Democrats, they face the dilemma of taking on the establishment without becoming part of it.

In turn, the region's traditional parties are torn between ignoring their more radical rivals at the risk of

losing elections and fending them off by accepting their anti-immigrant narrative. Whatever political choice prevails, the prospect for refugees seems clear: Scandinavia's days of generosity are over.

Rik Rutten is a Dutch journalist based in Sweden. His work has appeared in Dutch and Belgian publications such as De Correspondent, De Groene Amsterdammer and MO.*

© 2017, World Politics Review LLC. All rights reserved.