

WHAT CHANGED IN SWEDEN ? THE TRANSFORMATION OF ITS REFUGEE POLICY

December 15th, 2024

In September 2022, a political party created the surprise during the Swedish legislative elections by arriving second and joining the government coalition: the Sweden Democrats. Since its creation in 1988, the party is based on an ideological opposition to multiculturalism. However the Sweden Democrats did not manage to go beyond their status of micro-party until the mid 2010s and were badly perceived by the overall Swedish population.



The leaders of the new coalition
Jonas Ekströmer, TT News Agency

This can be explained by their high political radicalism and by their opposition to the Swedish immigration policy. Their rise since is an example of the Swedish public opinion's shift about immigration matters.

Although Sweden welcomed different type of immigration since the 70s, this entry will focus on the treatment of the refugees and forcibly displaced people, considering that they are the most exposed immigrant group to immigration policy changes.

PRIOR TO MULTICULTURALISM

According to the scholar Karin Borevi in her article "The political dynamics of multiculturalism in Sweden", at the end of the World War II, the Swedish immigration policy was only designed to welcome a low volume of workers from neighboring countries. This policy did not include any concerns about allowing or helping immigrants to preserve their culture and identity. On the contrary, the Swedish State favored assimilation. (Borevi, 2013, p141) This policy paradigm implied the ethnic minorities living in Sweden giving up most aspects of their way of life to fit in the Swedish dominant culture.



A TRANSITION TO A MORE COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

In the 70s, the Swedish paradigm on cultural diversity and the immigration policy evolved from assimilation to multiculturalism. This concept, newly embraced by Sweden in the 70s, can be defined as "the acceptance of different cultures in a society and the active support of these culture differences by both the majority members and minority group members", according to the scholars Schalk-Soekar, Van de Vijver and Hoogsteder. The first step to multiculturalism is achieved in 1968 by the Social Democratic government voting a bill "to cater for the wish of immigrants to maintain contact with their original country's language and culture" (Borevi, 2013, p143).

THE NEW APPROACH OF THE SWEDISH STATE

A second important evolution occurred in 1975, when the Swedish government based its new approach toward immigrants and refugees in three axes: equality, freedom of choice and partnership. (Rosenberg, 1995, p214, Borevi, 2013). Following the first one, the government has to ensure immigrants the same living conditions as those enjoyed by the Swedish citizens. Liberty to keep home culture was ensured by the second "freedom of choice" axis. Finally, the State's active role in the preservation of immigrants' home culture, is planned the third "partnership" axis.

THE OPENING OF THE SWEDISH SOCIAL MODEL: SWEDEN'S NEW HUMANITARIAN ROLE

These three axes provided the guiding principles for the integration of refugees into the Swedish social model. From the 70s, Sweden started to welcome several immigration waves of forcibly displaced people seeking asylum. These immigrants were mostly coming from Middle East, former Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Asia and Latin America. It was the time to apply effectively the policy updates adopted since 1968. Integration had two sides: economic and cultural (Borevi, 2013).

Firstly, it relied on the welfare state. New programs were set up to provide basic services to the newly welcomed refugees. Access to the labour market and inclusion through work was also the goal of these programs.

Secondly, on the cultural side the Swedish State played a direct role in enabling refugees to maintain their home culture, for example by providing home tongue classes in schools for the children.

FIRST BACKLASHES

The multicultural approach and the welcoming policies of refugees of the 70s face are challenged since the 80s by a growing part of the political scene of the country and by an increasingly negative media treatment.

In 1984, a financial incentive of nearly 3500 current euros was adopted to encourage refugees to go back in their home country. In 1986, the Social democratic government decided to stop the home-tongue classes provided to refugees children in schools (Borevi, 2013, p147). In 1997, a still Social democratic government officially rejected the multicultural paradigm and declared that "Immigrant policy, along with the particular administration that has been established to implement it, has unfortunately come to reinforce a division of the population" (Borevi, 2013, p147).

By challenging the former welcoming policies, these first backlashes started to see refugees as a burden and a threat to national unity.

THE SHIFT OF PUBLIC OPINION

While multiculturalism started to be challenged in the political scene, media framing of refugees also evolved, which worsened the perception of refugees in the country. According to the Swedish scholar Viktoria Yantseva, media framing is structured of three orientations (political, economic and social) and has a huge role especially on social medias (Yantseva, 2020, p10), where refugees got increasingly related to as a burden for the welfare state, and as a threat to security and to the country's unity.

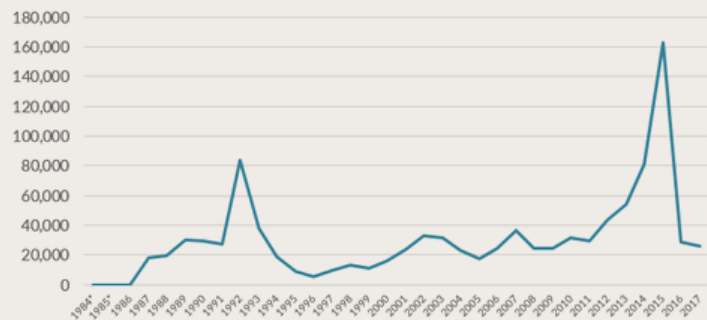
NEW RESTRICTIVE POLICIES

In this context, the call for restrictive policies on refugee welcoming has achieved consensus between the largest political parties in Sweden, especially after the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis.

In 2015, 150000 asylum seekers were welcomed in the country and most of the public reaction focused on the inability of Sweden to welcome refugees.

In 2016 the "temporary asylum and family reunification law" was voted as a reaction. It introduced restrictions to permanent residence, restriction to social rights (free housing and a daily allowance have been eliminated for failed asylum seekers). This laws also led detention and deportation of failed asylum seekers and refugees to increase.

Since 2016, the number of welcomed asylum seekers also knew a large decrease as seen in the chart.



First-time asylum applications received by year, Sweden
Swedish Migration Agency



Magdalena Andersson
Jessica Wow, TT News Agency

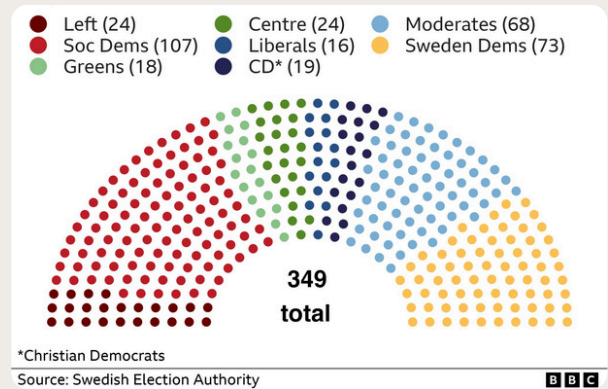
Apart from concrete changes, the shift on immigration can also be noticed in the political leaders speeches. For example in 2022, the former Social Democratic prime minister Magdalena Andersson stated that "Integration has been too poor at the same time as we have had a large immigration. Society has been too weak, resources for the police and social services have been too weak".

THE RIGHT WING COALITION SINCE 2022

In 2022, a right wing coalition, including the key Sweden Democrats party, won the country's general elections. Their rise can therefore be understood in a double context of media-framing and challenging of multiculturalism. Indeed, this context legitimized the party's positions on immigration matters, these positions appearing less radical and more coherent each time the governments were turning back on migration policy.

The goal of this coalition has since been to implement harder policies on asylum and welcoming.

For exemple, the 1984 financial incentive has been increased and now reaches approximately 30.000 euros. According to the government, in 2023, the country welcomed the lowest number of asylum seekers since 1997 and registered net emigration for the first time since 50 years, which means that more people left the country than came-in.



Any opportunity is seized to reduce the volume of welcomed people. The government proposed on December 10th for exemple to suspend asylum procedures for any Syrians, only one day after the fall of Bashar Al Assad.

These new policies are accompanied by a more brutal speech. In 2023, the new prime minister Ulf Kristersson stated that "Over a ten-year period, gun violence has increased threefold. Political naivety and cluelessness have brought us to this point. Irresponsible immigration policy and failed integration have brought us to this point. Exclusion and parallel societies feed the criminal gangs".

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