

Nationalism

# THE RECONFIGURATION OF SWEDISH NATIONALISM AFTER THE SYRIAN REFUGEE 'CRISIS'



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Tysklandspodden

Nya former av nationalism

Freiraum

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Bibliotek

**Welfare as a key component of Swedishness has been underpinned by pride over and legitimacy of the country's social contract and an underlying trust towards the state.**

In his 2015 Christmas address, prime minister Stefan Löfven sketched his understanding of Swedishness based on the values of solidarity, equality and trust, guaranteed by the Swedish welfare state often packaged under the shorthand term 'welfare nationalism'. Sweden has been a society, its structural inequalities notwithstanding, marked by a spirit of informality and a culture of rights conducive to a feeling of equality at the workplace, in social interactions and in public space. The state has acted as an equalizer, providing a basic degree of freedom for all, supported by generous benefits. Welfare as a key component of Swedishness has been underpinned by pride over and legitimacy of the country's social contract and an underlying trust towards the state. This coupling of national identity and social state by the *Socialdemokraterna* was not dramatically challenged by the brief period of market driven reforms in the welfare state by the center-right *Moderaterna*-led coalition.

Interestingly, this narrative was reproduced by the populist radical right *Sverigedemokraterna* (SD), product of a merger of neo-Nazi and extreme nationalist fringe parties (Jungar and Jupskås, 2014). Its chauvinist and racist discourse notwithstanding, the party tried to position itself in the mainstream as far as its commitment to the welfare state was concerned. Yet, the SD have been redefining the welfare state through a systematic slippage whereby entitlements were understood in nativist and exclusivist terms. By redefining the corporatist political concept of the *folkhem* (people's home – Norocel, 2013: 5), central in the history of the Swedish Social Democratic Party and the welfare state, the SD deployed a highly divisive notion of solidarity and entitlement reserved only for 'true' Swedes. This appropriation and reinterpretation of *folkhem* served as a springboard for advocating immigration restrictions and welfare entitlement reductions for immigrants. In his Christmas address Löfven had warned of the danger of Sweden "losing itself" and this is exactly what the SD hijacking of the welfare state agenda achieved. Whereas the 2015 refugee 'crisis' was met by many Swedes with compassion and solidarity, the mood changed within months. Malmö rail station, the first port of call for refugees who had traversed Europe, were herded by national authorities and prayed upon by entrepreneurs thriving on human misery, witnessed a change of fortunes from an initially welcoming hub where police provided leaflets in Arabic welcoming the hundreds of new daily arrivals,

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children were donating toys to a makeshift toy bank for children that had endured the arduous journey to Sweden, volunteers organizing resting places, food, medication and information to the weary newcomers to a control zone as the Swedish Government decided to introduce border controls, going against the grain of the commitment of government partner *Miljöpartiet* to “a more humane and open policy ... not making it harder for people to seek refuge to Sweden”.

To be sure, the reasons for the policy reversal are complex. The EU response to the Syrian conflict and the ensued migration flows have been a shambles with Sweden and Germany eventually ending up being the main refugee recipients putting their resources under strain. But an important domestic factor was the successful challenge of the Government's asylum and refugee policies by the SD that spread panic, undermined trust in the state and tapped on nativist resentment towards extending welfare provision to migrants and redefining their own stance as defending the interests of native Swedes. This ‘welfare chauvinism’ (Derks, 2006; Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2006), not only was not confronted by other parties but made inroads to mainstream political debate. As early as in 2014, the SD had become the third largest force in terms of representation in *Sveriges riksdag* in 2014, with a recent YouGov poll placing them at second position with 22.4% of voter preference. Against this gloomy backdrop, not only did the governing coalition close Sweden's borders but also gave in to calls for a reduction of refugee entitlements, scrapping in 2016 a monthly cash and housing benefit for unsuccessful asylum seekers and limiting paid parental leave for refugees from 2017.

This “nativisation” of welfare provision implicitly accepts the SD's redefinition of refugees as undeserving others and gives credence to its chauvinistic welfare policies. Not only does the restriction of entitlements to non-native Swedes effectively constitute a symbolic bordering practice that circumscribes a restrictive and nativistic understanding of national identity, where solidarity is reserved, not for the needy, but for the ‘true Swedes’, but also it is represented as ‘not quite enough’ by the SD who are intent to capitalize from the transformation of a symbolic binary us v them logic to an antagonism over scarce resources.

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