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Theme: A socially sustainable Nordic region



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Social sustainability under pressure from many sides

Street battles in Sweden between people from disadvantaged areas and the police have less to do with a Danish politician wanting to burn the Koran and more to do with a lack of social glue between different groups.

EDITORIAL

25.04.2022

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The Nordic region's vision of becoming the world's most socially sustainable region by 2030 has got a serious dent. The riots in Sweden have been covered by the CNN and the BBC, despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine being the dominating story these days.

But what can be done to make the young people in these areas see that they too have opportunities? The organisation NU – Nolla Utanförskapet (End Exclusion) works to engage businesses. NU offers tutoring, outreach activities and training, all aimed at getting more young people into the labour market.

Compared with refugees from elsewhere, the relatively few Ukrainians who have arrived in the Nordics are met with enormous goodwill. The war has consequences, even here. Especially in the Finnish city of Lappeenranta near the Russian border. Before the pandemic, 2.8 million Russians visited every year. Our reporting team Bengt Östling and Cata Portin travelled there to test the mood in a city with 3,330 Russian permanent residents.

"It is important to remember that even if you speak Russian – or Ukrainian – you are not to blame for what is now happening in Ukraine," says Mayor Kimmo Jarva.

In all of the Nordic countries, there are those who argue for a fast track system for Ukrainian refugees to allow them to enter the labour market as quickly as possible. But for that to happen, clear rules are needed. If not, what happened in Norway might happen again. The country was inspired by the Swedish fast track programme that was launched in 2015, but the reform went against what Norway's welfare agency NAV saw as a basic rule – to treat everyone the same. A new book looks at this and other reforms.

Getting acceptance for your policies is never easy, but in a system with 27 countries that all take different approaches, it

is even harder. Social Democrat MEP Jytte Guteland is one of those who have succeeded. She explains how to Bengt Rolfer and Gunhild Wallin, who spent some days in Strasbourg:

"Anyone who is interested in politics sees the Parliament as a smorgasbord of opportunities to make a change. In the beginning, you want to have a finger in every pie, but you then risk that no one at all sees what it is you want, which makes it hard to gain any influence," says Jytte Guteland.

We also get an update on the EU minimum wage saga. The French presidential election has slowed down the French EU presidency's work on the directive. The war in Ukraine has also slowed things down.

Languages are crucial for integration. But what happens if your own language does not work when you want to speak to Siri, Alexa or Bixby? Iceland has taken up the fight with the large international IT giants.

"In 12 to 18 months, Siri will understand Icelandic," says Jóhanna Vigdís Guðmundsdóttir who heads the language technology centre Almannarómur – The voice of the public.

Finally, we hear from the Nordic Council of Ministers' Secretary General Paula Lehtomäki who has decided to step down after one term, when her four-year contract runs out in March 2023.

According to tradition, a Danish candidate should be taking the reins. Dare we suggest Birgitte Nyborg from Danish TV series Borgen? After all, towards the end of the series she was (spoiler alert!) heading for a top position in the EU Commission. But it already has a strong Danish woman, namely Margrethe Vestager.



The train to Russia stopped running. Lappeenranta limps on.

The borderless Nordic region turned out to be an illusion during the pandemic. It hit the Øresund region, border trade between Sweden and Norway and the citizens of Haparanda and Tornio. But Finland has an eastern border where traffic has ceased because of the pandemic. Today the war in Ukraine has made the situation even worse for Villmanstrand – or Lappeenranta in Finnish – the city with the closest links with Russia.

THEME

25.04.2022

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING, PHOTO: CATA PORTIN

The Swedish name for Lappeenranta is Villmanstrand and is made up of the words *vildman* (wild man) and (shore). A wild man is pictured on Lappeenranta's coat of arms. These days it is said he symbolises the need for strong men on the border. But he could also be a warrior farmer from the 1596 peasant uprising. Or actually a Nordic Viking who has found his way through the lakes in what was Sweden-Finland.

This has also been Sweden's border with the east. But after the 1741 Russo-Swedish war, Sweden lost this part of Finland to Russia. History can have an impact these days.



Mayor Kimmo Jarva in front of Villmanstrand's municipal crest.

But we have not come to the Lappeenranta city hall to talk history, we are here to talk about current events. How does the proximity to Russia impact daily life these days?

Mayor Kimmo Jarva presents his international city of Lappeenranta in an accustomed manner. He has hosted some 20 international journalists in the past month.

1.8 million Russian visitors a year

3,330 Russians live permanently in the city, and even more visit as tourists every day. Jarva talks about the city's population of 73,000 and its many foreign citizens. They have come because of businesses, the university and the proximity to the Russian border.

In a normal year, before the pandemic, Lappeenranta would have 1.8 million Russian visitors – on average 4,000 Russians a day. Now there are perhaps 600 Russian visitors a day. But the sanctions against Russia have cut the number of professional commuters further.

Tourists come to see the beautiful lakes, some might also want to see the actual border and the border crossings that can appear quite exotic. There are strict rules and warning signs glow yellow along the border, which in some places runs very close to the main road.

Proximity to the border gives special competence

Perhaps the Russian border could be turned into a tourism product, wonders Päivi Pietiläinen who is in charge of Lappeenranta's international relations. The city is Finland's top tourist destination after the capital Helsinki.



Päivi Pietiläinen is responsible for Villmanstrand's international relations.

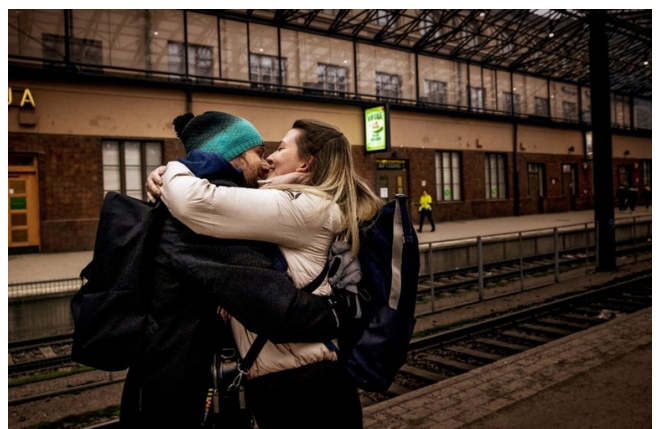
“Our proximity to the border has been a global strength and special competence. But right now we are perhaps not marketing the proximity to Russia like we used to,” says mayor Kimmo Jarva. Today's situation might even scare some tourists away.

The border has given life and heft to the city's commerce, says Jarva. A closed border means a marked drop in tourism and income for businesses. The border is our everyday life, he explains. You can hear Russian spoken everywhere in shops and on the street, and it is easy to be served in Russian too.

Outside the large shopping centre, you could count Russian tourist buses – were there 7 or 17 whose Russian passengers were all shopping in the big shopping centre?

The last train from Russia

Trains running via the Vainikkala border station have stopped. Right now passenger traffic with the Russian Allegro train between St Petersburg and Helsinki is also not running.



The last Allegro train between St Petersburg and Helsinki ran on 31 March. Anastasia (from St Petersburg) and Tom (from Helsinki) embrace on the platform. Will spend a cou-

ple of weeks in Helsinki before returning to St Petersburg by bus.

The route was kept open long enough to allow Finns to return home from Russia. When that need was fulfilled, the train carried a large number of Russians directly to Helsinki Airport from where they flew abroad.

In normal times many Lappeenranta citizens also have long-term Russian visas. Many retired people have been used to driving across the border to buy cheap petrol in Russia, points out Päivi Pietiläinen. Many also spend a weekend in Vyborg, the closest big city, and some go all the way to St Petersburg.

Civil servants also hold visas and travel to Russia to attend various meetings. Lappeenranta had an information centre in St Petersburg which has now been shut.

Fleeing Ukrainians

“The war in Ukraine has shocked us all. Aid work has been organised here in Lappeenranta too,” says Mayor Kimmo Jarva. Many fleeing Ukrainians have arrived. Families have been offered refuge in private homes. Some of the Ukrainian children have already started going to local schools.



Ludmila says train tickets disappeared in minutes when people learned trains would stop running. She no longer lives in Russia, but has been visiting and is going home to the UK.

Keeping the trains running lost its purpose after the Russian train company was hit by EU sanctions. All traffic has been stopped for now. VR Group is also reducing Russian freight.

Canal traffic also stopped

Lappeenranta has contacts with Russia via waterways too. Finnish Lakeland has been linked with Russian lakes and Vyborg in a prestigious project, making it possible to sail from the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea.

Sailing on the Saimaa canal starts in early April, but this year there was thick ice still towards the end of the month and no icebreaker has dared go down it.



Shipping has been important to Lappeenranta. Today it is mainly restaurant boats that operate here. The link to the Baltic Sea via the Saimaa canal and Russia is considered too risky and therefore closed.

Shipping companies have said it is now far too risky to use the canal. It runs through Russian areas, even though the canal area is rented out to Finland. Traffic has also been cut as a result of rising insurance premiums for freight. Visa-free passenger traffic along the canal might also be facing difficulties this summer.

Border trade hard hit

Before the pandemic, Russian visitors would spend an estimated one million euro a day in the South Karelia region. Some 200 kilometres across the border lies St Petersburg with its more than five million citizens – matching Finland's total population.

Trade nearly ceased altogether during the pandemic and did not have time to be reestablished before the war in Ukraine started.



Spring comes late to Lake Saimaa, but here icebreakers have opened a passage. There will be no traffic on the Saimaa canal as long as the international sanctions are in place.

Around 800 people are employed thanks to Russian visitors to Lappeenranta's shops. The missing visitors are now having an impact on unemployment numbers. On the other hand,

there is a labour shortage in the region, especially within the hospitality trade.

Small export figures

Trade between Finland and Russia has long traditions, but in later years some businesses have pulled out because things have become too difficult. And right now most trade has ceased. Trade with Russia has been falling in value for a long time both in South Karelia and nationally in Finland. Since 2014, the fall has been dramatic.

“Only five percent of Finnish exports go to Russia. In the border regions, the number is slightly higher. Export to Ukraine was actually bigger than to Russia,” points out Mika Peltonen. Germany and Sweden are Finland’s top export partners.

“The green gold”

Green is the dominating colour in this region – both on the map and in the landscape. The bio-economy is king; forestry, cellulose, cardboard and paper.

There are large forests on the Russian side and timber from there has been refined in Finland. Päivi Pietiläinen has high hopes for a major Baltic Sea conference to be held in Lappeenranta in September, drawing 600 participants. Energy independence could be a very interesting theme, points out Mayor Kimmo Jarva. The conference will sadly not have a Russian delegation.



Ukraine war “crushes dreams for Russians in Finland”

We meet Russian-born Maria Taina-Parviainen outside the Lappeenranta city hall. She does not really want to talk to journalists. But she is upset and she has a message.

THEME

25.04.2022

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING, PHOTO: CATA PORTIN

“Finland is in danger. Lappeenranta is in danger. Even if Russia doesn’t attack Finland as they did in Ukraine, there is still the risk that they fire some missile,” she warns.

The Russian leadership is erratic and dangerous, she continues. That is why Finland must join Nato. Not this summer, but as soon as possible. Now. Immediately.

Maria Taina-Parviainen is one of many Russians who have moved across the border to Lappeenranta. 20 years ago she

moved from the Sankt Petersburg region to take up an apprenticeship in Finland.

After some gardening jobs and temporary agriculture jobs, she studied at Lappeenranta University. She got a family, a Master of Science degree and worked as project head at a Lappeenranta mechanical engineering company.

Family roots in Ukraine

Only recently she learned that her father’s family has roots in both Ukraine and Belarus. She has been shocked by the mass

graves in Bucha and Mariupol and warns there will be more. She feels for those under attack and in distress in Ukraine, but she has never been there.

She has not been back to Russia for more than two years either, because of the Corona pandemic. Now it is impossible for other reasons. She has no plans to go back to Russia, she is happy in Lappeenranta, but the war in Ukraine ruins all her beautiful dreams.

The war is creating a split in the Russian population, and within families too. But not many Russians living in Finland are fooled by the Russian propaganda, believes Maria Taina-Parviainen. She thinks it depends on who watches Russian TV and who follows Finnish and international TV news.

Racism against Russians

It seems to have become a little more difficult being Russian in Finland, but there was always some underlying racism against Russians among Finnish people. During the Soviet Union, it was simply called Russian-hatred.

Today this is a particularly sore topic. Maria Taina-Parviainen does not want to give Russians any excuse for attacking Finland. The Russian embassy has used its social media to ask Russians in Finland to report any attacks on Russian citizens. But there is racism in Russia too, she points out.

Many Russians have managed to create new lives in Finland and do not think that much about their Russian nationality. Being Russian is no big deal. You only think about it when there is an ice hockey match on, jokes Maria Taina-Parviainen.

Hoping for regime change

Today, nationalism feels particularly dangerous. The war and hostilities are built on a lie, says Maria Taina-Parviainen. The arguments against Ukraine are absolutely false. Claims of denazification and Russian “help” for Ukraine seem unfathomable to her.

“All we can hope for now is regime change in Russia, which would be the best for Russia. It is a big country with a lot of resources and a lot of people,” she points out.

Russia could be the world’s best country. But it needs a leader who cares about it and not only his own interests, says Maria Taina-Parviainen.



MEP Jytte Guteland: another Swedish climate champion

After eight years as an MEP and chief negotiator for EU's climate legislation, Social Democrat Jytte Guteland is ready to leave the European Parliament to run for a seat in the Swedish one.

PORTRAIT

25.04.2022

TEXT: BENGT ROLFER AND GUNHILD WALLIN, PHOTO: ANDERS LÖWDIN/SOCIALDEMOKRATERNA

"It has been a lot of fun to work with climate legislation and emission trading, but I now feel the need to do something else. I want to be closer to my political party and carry on working on climate issues at home. I also want to bring a little bit of the EU back with me and link it to my work there. I gain from both sides," says Jytte Guteland.

Jytte Guteland is 43 and a former leader of the Swedish Social Democratic Youth League. Her Twitter bio says "Environmentally committed, feminist with a weakness for cross-country skiing and animals".

She became an MEP in 2014 with three main issues on her political agenda – the environment and climate, democracy, plus employment and social issues. Just as she prepares to leave the European Parliament, the Swedish broadsheet *Dagens Nyheter* has called her the Social Democrats' most successful MEP.

She has also been nominated for "The MEP 2022 Awards", to be held in Brussels on 29 June. The prize has been awarded 17 times before to MEPs who have been judged to have reached exceptional political goals within the EU. There are

various categories and Jytte Guteland has been nominated for “Energy, science and research”.

She spent the latest parliamentary term as the chief negotiator for the EU’s climate legislation and in 2021 she was named the third most influential climate politician in the EU.

“The ‘MEP 2022 Awards’ nomination is mainly a recognition of my work with the climate legislation,” says Jytte Guteland.

She has worked with a sense of purpose since the start of her first term in order to gain influence on climate legislation.



It can be difficult to find your role in the EU Parliament, where decisions are only made after a winding journey through various committees.

“Anyone who is interested in politics sees the Parliament as a smorgasbord of opportunities to make a change. In the beginning, you want to have a finger in every pie, but you then risk that no one at all sees what it is you want, which makes it hard to gain any influence,” says Jytte Guteland.

Finding a voice in the Parliament

Jytte Guteland decided already during her first term as an MEP not to fall into the trap of exploring all of the possibilities Parliament had to offer and started to prioritise in order to find her voice in climate issues.

She and her colleagues spotted an opportunity to make a change and to provide a voice from a Swedish perspective. During that first term, she and her colleagues sought out every possibility to express their views on the environment committee with the aim of eventually creating legislation for emission trading.

This targeted effort succeeded, and Jytte Guteland was given a mandate to negotiate emission trading for the Socialist and Democrats Group in the EU Parliament.

“After that, we continued prioritising climate issues, seeking out all available reports, and I participated in any climate debate there was. I became the group leader of the environment

committee during my parliamentary term and chose to prioritise the climate legislation.”

A second term strengthens the arguments

In Jytte Guteland’s experience, it can take one term before you as an MEP completely get into your work. You have no influence over when legislation is tabled and since legislation is revised several times, MEPs get the chance to deepen their knowledge.

“You also gain a stronger voice when you can talk about what it was like the last time. It takes one term before you recognise all the cycles, understand what are big and small issues and what the Parliament can and cannot do.”



Working in Strasbourg makes it harder to stay in touch with contacts in Sweden. Here Jytte Guteland is together with former Swedish Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson at the Almedalen political week, the year before she was elected an MEP.

Being politically engaged in Sweden means working closer with her own party while being a politician on an EU level. As an MEP it is hard – near impossible even – to regularly take part in the party’s weekly meeting, and Jytte Guteland has been missing this.

The pandemic has brought some changes, however. Hybrid meetings have become more common, and have stayed in place even as restrictions have been lifted. Today it is easier to participate remotely, and Jytte Guteland is now taking part in many meetings in Sweden that previously would have been impossible to attend.

“This has made it easier to have a voice at home in Sweden. I think the same thing goes for my Nordic colleagues, especially those from Finland and Sweden who live quite far from home. We have always suffered from being geographically distant.”

MEPs from the EU’s outer borders often serve shorter periods in the European Parliament. Jytte Guteland hopes this will change if digital meetings become more common.

“You gain more influence the longer you spend there, so it is good for democracy to serve longer periods – but not too long, of course,” she says.

All conversations start with the war in Ukraine

As we talk over Zoom, it has been nearly three weeks since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. During the EU Parliament’s February session in Strasbourg, there was anger and distress over Russia’s war in Ukraine.

But there was also agreement and pride over being able to make rapid and major decisions, like the temporary protection directive and a range of sanctions against Russia and its oligarchs. Jytte Guteland confirms that atmosphere, even though she was not physically present during that particular session.

“Everyone is shocked and every conversation starts with talking about what the war means. Things have been depressing for a while with the 2015 refugee crisis, Brexit and then the pandemic. We were not prepared for something worse to come along.

“It even felt like things had improved a bit politically when Biden became President in the USA and some of Trump’s populism could be pushed back. Then it turned out that in the shadows, Putin had been preparing for this. It is a horrible and brutal awakening,” says Jytte Guteland.

EU lawmaking continues despite crises

But the EU has also become accustomed to crises and law-making has carried on regardless – even now. Despite Putin spending years trying to destabilise the EU, the block’s reactions have shown that he has failed, points out Jytte Guteland.

“The EU has been very good at coming together during these weeks and has acted forcefully with sanctions, condemnations and setting out the ambition to reduce dependency on Russian fossil energy. And even if it is hard to make Putin back down, it is good that the EU stays determined. When the EU apparatus continues its legislative work and stops pumping money into Russia to cut funding for his war chest, that is also a way of acting against Putin.”

She is a strong proponent of making Europe independent from Russian gas and oil. She sees a clear link between the climate and security policy.

“We know that the climate and security are linked in several ways. We see it clearly now when we know that Russian energy exports and therefore EU imports have financed Russia’s war machine. But we also see that global warming has forced people in developing countries to emigrate. This is because a warmer climate means they can no longer cultivate their land, but rising sea levels and extreme weather are also forcing people to flee,” says Jytte Guteland in a video posted on Twitter.

The safety of a family

When she leaves the EU Parliament, she will bring with her the experiences from her climate work and the knowledge and contacts from her parliamentary work.



I EU-parlamentet sitter inte parlamentarikerna landvis, utan i förhållande till vilken partigrupp de tillhör.

“Despite all the crises – consider the changes to the EU’s role in climate politics during these years. Although I and others want to see more, the EU is one of the largest regional powers in the world for the climate and I am glad I have been able to help drive this issue,” says Jytte Guteland.

She is also happy to have had the chance to learn what EU cooperation entails and that there is an organisation that can solve issues that transcend borders. The symbolism of all the member states’ flags side by side has deepened. It means belonging to a European family. And that is important, believes Jytte Guteland. Now more than ever.

“We look beyond national borders and support each other. Before I started working here, things were more theoretical. But now I see this work up close, from the highest political level down to the association level, and it is great. The EU is better than its reputation, although its reputation has improved in later years.”

She paints an everyday image of the Parliament where the different party groups are spread around, united by their party allegiances, not their nationalities. Colleagues from different countries cooperate on ideas but they also become friends.

“In times of war and geopolitical unrest, it feels safe to belong to a family where we are united in party groups by ideas and a shared sense of direction. This has become very obvious and clear, we stick together and our intentions are peaceful. That is needed when the Russian bear has awoken.”



Nordics split as EU minimum wage proposal delayed

Is time almost up for the proposed European minimum wage? Much is pointing in that direction. The war in Ukraine and the French presidential election has put breaks on the issue. And there is still great disagreement within the EU.

NEWS

25.04.2022

TEXT: BENGT ROLFER AND GUNHILD WALLIN, PHOTO: ANDERS LÖWDIN/SOCIALDEMOKRATERNA

Nordic resistance to the EU Commission's proposed statutory minimum wage was evident back when the Nordic Labour Journal wrote about this over a year ago. It was seen as a threat to the Nordic collective bargaining model. Since then the issue has nevertheless progressed through the EU machine and right now the European Parliament is negotiating with the European Council (the governments) about a compromise.

Over time, it has become evident that there are splits between the Nordic countries too. Before the last leg of negotiations, Finland, Denmark and Sweden have reached different conclusions.

When EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented the proposed minimum wage directive in October 2020, the aim was to give all EU citizens a decent standard of living, increase equality and reduce poverty. It was also hoped this would encourage more people to find work and that it would prevent unfair competition from bad employers.

Von der Leyen pointed out that no country should be forced to adopt statutory minimum wages and added that the proposal even aimed to strengthen the collective bargaining system that forms the basis for the Nordic model.

United Nordic outcry

The reception was, to put it mildly, split. Many EU countries welcomed the initiative, but in the Nordic region, it was met by a near united outcry from politicians, trade unions and employers – at least in Sweden and Denmark. The split within the European Trade Union Congress became so bad that the Swedish LO trade union confederation stopped paying its membership fee.

“You cannot pay someone to kill you,” Torbjörn Johansson, Negotiations Secretary at Swedish LO told the Arbetet newspaper.

Despite the protests from the North, the EU institutions have done their thing. In December last year, a majority in the EU Parliament voted in favour of a far-reaching proposal that included binding rules and a guaranteed minimum wage protection.

Soon after, the Council of Ministers agreed to a compromise with less stringent rules. The Swedish and Finnish governments supported this proposal, while Denmark turned it down out of principle. (Finland has been more positive than its Nordic neighbours throughout).

A large and a small "no"

Danish MEP Marianne Vind is a Social Democrat and member of the employment committee. She plays down the differences between the Danish and Swedish positions.

“Sweden and Denmark share the same position in the EU and our labour ministers agree, but there is a cultural difference between us. We express stronger reservations and say no to what we disagree with, while you in Sweden are more willing to compromise and take what is best out of negotiations.

“But we are still pursuing the same cause. While the Danish LO and Danish employers express a clear no, the Swedish partners express a small no. The difference appears to be bigger than it really is,” she says.



Abir Al-Sahlani is an MEP for the Centre Party. Photo: Bengt Rolfer

Swedish MEP Abir Al-Sahlani is from the Centre Party and also a member of the employment committee. She thinks Sweden should have done what Denmark did.

“I don’t know why Sweden’s government chose this position when it could have taken a much harder line. This is an incredibly important issue for the future, so we must give it all we have and say ‘Stop, this is not OK’. But a softer line was chosen and now we will see where that leads.”

Abir Al-Sahlani was born in Iraq and moved to Sweden in 1991 at 15. She has mainly got involved in labour market issues from an integration perspective. She was a member of the Swedish parliamentary employment committee between 2010 and 2014.

“That taught me a lot about Swedish labour market policies. I am critical to a lot of it, but by learning things you also get involved in different issues,” she explains.

The other Swedish labour committee member is Social Democrat Ilan De Basso. Unlike Al-Sahlani and his Danish party colleague Marianne Vind, he considers the Council of Ministers’ proposal to be “a reliable compromise”.



Ilan De Basso is an MEP for the Social Democrats. Photo: Bengt Rolfer

“It would have been optimal if we had watertight guarantees that there will be no impact on our own wage formation model. But we have not got that, so now the parliament negotiators need to accept the Council’s proposal as it is,” says Ilan De Basso.

Minimum wage in 21 out of 27 countries

The fact remains that 21 out of 27 EU countries already have statutory minimum wages (the exceptions being Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Sweden and Austria). But the levels

vary wildly from 332 euro a month in Bulgaria to 2,202 euro in Luxembourg (Eurostat 2021).

It can be difficult for many politicians and union representatives elsewhere in Europe to understand the Nordics' tough resistance. Many see this as a lack of solidarity and an attempt at self-protection. Nordic MEPs have had a hard time trying to explain the Nordic model.

These are the main points of the Swedish-Danish resistance:

- Politicians should not get involved in wage formation. That is the responsibility of the social partners and should happen through negotiations.
- Leaving this to politicians means they can increase wages, but also lower them.
- A minimum wage might also become a maximum wage that makes further wage increases more difficult to achieve.
- The EU has no mandate to interfere in wage formation.
- If a minimum wage is introduced, the EU court of justice in Luxembourg gets a final say over our agreements.

Countries that are not familiar with the Nordic model also fail to realise that our collective agreements are about more than just wages.

"Our negotiations encompass a range of issues. We negotiate on training, integration, unemployed youths and more. It is a completely different model," says Marianne Vind.

"So much is at stake – our tradition of creating better working conditions, our way of handling change. Yes, this will have an impact on a lot of things," says Abir Al-Sahhani.

The war might postpone the decision

The fact that Ursula von der Leyen during questioning in the EU Parliament repeated that the Nordic model would be respected does not seem to have changed Sweden and Denmark's position.

But there are other things that could make the proposal fail. The Parliament, Council and Commission have met several times to negotiate in the first few months of 2022, as part of the so-called triologue led by the French presidency. President Macron has had a clear vision for landing the minimum wage issue before the French presidential elections. This has failed for various reasons. One important explanation is the war in Ukraine.

"The minimum wage issue might get delayed now," says Marianne Vind.

"Millions are fleeing and I am afraid that those who come to Sweden and Denmark will be paid low wages. Our wages are higher than what they are used to, but it is also more expensive to live in our countries. Many do not know this."

She thinks the EU, rather than pushing through a minimum wage, should work to strengthen trade unions to allow them to spread knowledge about workers' rights.

Carl-Albert Hjelmhorn, head of the office for Swedish trade unions in Brussels, believes the minimum wage issue could drag on.

"It is difficult to see how you can reach a consensus. The European Parliament wants to go considerably further than the current proposal, while the Council says there is no wriggle room at all. If there is no agreement during the French presidency, this could become a never-ending story. I don't think the Czech presidency [which takes over on 1 July] has much of an appetite to drive this forward, particularly not now," says Hjelmhorn.

Norway puts its hope in Sweden and Denmark

So where is non-EU member Norway in all this?

Robert René Hansen at the Norwegian LO's Brussels office points out that there is little experience on a European level to solve issues through agreements and that this will colour the law-making process.

"So much prestige has gone into this issue that only a few countries are against it. The Norwegian position has not changed, but there is not much the Norwegians can do now since we are not sitting around the table. It is, however, important that the EU members Sweden and Denmark take the lead," he says.



Fast track for refugees took opposite directions in Sweden and Norway

“Fast track was imported from Sweden, but came to Norway to die!” That is the subtitle of a chapter in a new book about how Norway’s welfare agency NAV has worked with inclusive workplaces, learning and innovation.

THEME

25.04.2022

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The book’s editors are Aina A Kane and Øystein Spjelkavik, while the chapter on the fast track programme was written by Gunn Elin Fedreheim.

A key to Nordic cooperation, it is often said, is the fact that countries learn from each other. When Sweden launched a fast track programme for refugees in 2015 to get them into the labour market faster, it was no surprise when Norwegian politicians picked up on the idea only one year later. However, the political measures ended up being very different, says Gunn Elin Fedreheim.

“In Sweden, the fast track programme was directly linked to different occupations. By autumn of 2016, refugees in Swe-

den with backgrounds like chef, butcher, machine technician and 11 other occupations could follow ready-made tracks.

“In Norway, fast track was seen as a standardised and universal solution that did not take into account that different occupations might need different tracks.”



Gunn Elin Fedreheim

Gunn Elin Fedreheim and six other researchers interviewed 62 employees and managers at NAV, as well as employers and refugees, in three different municipalities in Troms and Finnmark in Northern Norway, to see how the reform was going.

“The fast track programme was launched very suddenly, and the government agreed on a memorandum of understanding with the social partners in May 2016. When we began planning this study together with NAV, they were very keen that fast track should be part of it.

“We think this was partly because they themselves wanted to know more about what the measure actually entailed. Out of the 62 people we interviewed, only 28 knew about fast track. Only one refugee and one employer had heard of it. Six out of the 28 knew it only as a term but did not know what it meant.

But there were other problems besides a lack of knowledge.

“This measure flew in the face of a very important principle in Norway – that everyone should be treated the same. Socio-economically you could argue that it pays more to target those who are struggling the most to access the labour market,” says Gunn Elin Fedreheim.

Another challenge was the fact that working with refugees is decentralised in Norway, where municipalities hold the responsibility for following them up.

“The fast track programme should have been more systematic from the start. When local offices have to introduce measures that they don’t understand, things don’t go so well.”

When Gunn Elin Fedreheim carried out her interviews, many had an aha moment when they were told that the reform in Sweden had focused on certain occupations.

In a separate comment chapter, Kari Eltvik Hansen from NAV Harstad writes:

“We had several discussions in the office to find out how to understand and interpret fast track, but we felt it was un-

clear and that it was difficult to get to the essence of what the desired outcomes would be. Many of the measures mentioned in the memorandum of understanding were already in place.”

As one of the interviewees put it: The fast track candidates “fast-track themselves”.

“Even though the Swedish fast track programme was referred to, I have yet to find anything that shows any plans to link this measure to particular occupations in Norway. I am not sure whether that would have been executable.”

In today’s system, refugees are first taken to Råde outside of Oslo, explains Gunn Elin Fedreheim. The first two weeks are spent mapping what skills they have.

“But there is no distribution system to secure they are housed near places they can find jobs. If you have a Ukrainian refugee with experience in the fishery industry for instance, you could send the family to Gamvik where there is a large landing facility for professional fishermen. It becomes too difficult to match refugees with jobs.”

Did you see any positive results from the fast track programme?

“No, it became ‘just another category that we need to report’ as one of my interviewees said.”

Fedreheim points out that the fast track programme is not at all mentioned in the government’s latest integration report. At the same time, some now also argue for the need to establish a fast track system for Ukrainian refugees.

“I was positively surprised by the considerable willingness among employers to hire refugees, but they always come back to the issue of language. At the start of the tripartite debate about fast track, it was said that the employers’ organisations should be involved. That never happened,” says Gunn Elin Fedreheim.

Siri starts speaking Icelandic "in 12-18 months"

It is hard making small languages part of a digital environment dominated by a few IT giants. Icelandic authorities have fought to make Icelandic a part of the IT environment, which is increasingly important as more and more things are operated with our voices. Just ask Alexa, Siri and Bixby. Not in Icelandic though, they do not understand it.

NEWS

25.04.2022

TEXT: HALLGRÍMUR INDRÍÐASON

The problems facing smaller Nordic languages like Greenlandic and the Sami languages have been addressed before in the NLJ. Icelandic is in a slightly better position and is at least part of Google Translate now.

Much remains to be done to secure Icelandic in the digital world, but a lot has also been achieved in recent years. In 2017, the Icelandic government introduced a five-year language technology program. The main aim was to make Icelandic part of the digital society.

Almannarómur (Voice of the public), a language technology centre founded in 2014, started working on achieving that aim in 2019. According to Jóhanna Vigdís Guðmundsdóttir, Almannarómur's CEO, this has gone well.



Almannarómur CEO Jóhanna Vigdís Guðmundsdóttir meets two Presidents, the incumbent Guðni Th. Jóhannesson and former President and UNESCO's Goodwill Ambassador for languages Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. Both are protectors of Almannarómur.

“The language technology plan was supposed to last for five years, but we have managed to almost finish it in three years,” she says.

“What we’ve managed to do in these three years is to build Icelandic language technology infrastructure. That was necessary because we must build a road before we can drive on it.”

By infrastructure, she means data collection of words in Icelandic and English so they can be easily translated between the two, and to develop software that can use this data in digital hardware – computers, smartphones and so on.

“This is the basis, and on top of that we make speech analysers, text readers and other programs that enable the equipment to understand Icelandic, and ‘talk’ back to us in Icelandic as well.”

Ongoing discussions with IT giants

Guðmundsdóttir says that the next step is to ensure that the technology is used in the hardware which plays an increasingly big part in people's lives.

“One of the things I’m doing now is communication and discussions with the large IT companies. What we want is to be able to communicate in our own language with the products of these companies, like Google Home, Alexa, and Siri.”

These discussions are extremely important, says Guðmundsdóttir.

“These companies can have such a big influence on the future of languages, and therefore their existence. It is necessary to protect the history and culture connected to these languages. The companies are very aware of this and have a special diversity policy in which the languages are a part. So my aim with communicating with these companies is to make sure they use our solutions.”

There has already been progress. In February it was announced that a deal had been struck with Microsoft about the use of Icelandic language technology solutions. Discussions are ongoing with companies like Meta (owners of Facebook and Instagram), Apple, Amazon and Google. Negotiations with Microsoft are still ongoing, and Guðmundsdóttir hopes a deal can be made with most of the companies this year.

"We have done this differently from other countries with small languages. We have created a good infrastructure based on what these companies need. So we have a product to offer these companies which can be a part of their services and solutions. We ask them what they need from us, instead of asking them what they can do for us," says Guðmundsdóttir.

Making sure Icelandic still exists

Guðmundsdóttir is also in discussions with Icelandic companies that might want to use this technology to build up their services for their clients and other companies.

"The companies that are in direct communication with their clients know what they need in these respects. In the next language technology plan there will be a huge emphasis on encouraging companies to use this, and update and change technology in a way that benefits them."

The next stage will also focus on constantly evolving to meet new technology demands.

"One example is artificial intelligence, which has changed dramatically in the last years. You could say that language technology is for the most part based on AI. We have adapted to the changes as they come but we still have to maintain the basis and even introduce new solutions to keep up with developments. So you could say that this project is endless."

Guðmundsdóttir says that one of the main purposes of this is to make sure that the Icelandic language will still exist and be spoken.

"That will not happen unless we can use it in every area of our daily lives."

Finally, when Guðmundsdóttir is asked when Siri, Alexa and all the others that like to listen to our orders will be able to understand in Iceland, she says:

"I'm optimistic and I think it will happen in the next 12-18 months."

This means that Icelandic iPhone owners can start to look forward to stopping saying "Hey Siri" and instead say: "Komdu sæl, Siri" in Icelandic.

Minister putting pressure on Disney

But Iceland is fighting for its language on several fronts. In February last year, Iceland's Minister of Culture Lilja D. Al-

fredsdóttir sent a letter to Disney criticising the media company for having only some 40 movies on their Disney+ streaming service dubbed in Icelandic. She pointed out that Icelandic voiceovers were available for many more movies.

After some persuasion, Disney replied to Alfredsdóttir in June 2021, announcing that more than 600 titles Disney+ were being prepared to have Icelandic subtitles or dubbing, including classics like Fantasia, Peter Pan and Pinocchio.

When the reply came, Alfredsdóttir wrote on Facebook that it was obvious that Iceland's voice had been heard.

If Guðmundsdóttir's words are anything to go by, we will find out soon whether the IT giants will hear that same voice.



Young, smart and excluded from the Swedish labour market

It is not enough to be smart. For many young people, the door is still shut to large parts of the labour market. The organisation NU – Nolla Utanförskapet (End Exclusion) – works with businesses to open the door to those who are excluded. But is it exclusion or inclusion we should be discussing?

THEME

25.04.2022

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO: ANNA-KARIN NILSSON/EXPRESSEN/TT/NTB

Sanna Wolk is the President of SULF – The Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers – and a law professor. She is also an initiator of NU – Nolla Utanförskapet (End Exclusion) – an organisation providing extra tuition, study visits and training to help people enter the labour market. All NU activities are free for students and schools. The participating businesses sponsor everything.



Sanna Wolk set up NU after participating in extra tuition sessions organised by the Red Cross in Rinkeby, a Stockholm suburb built in the early 1970s that the police have classified as a particularly challenged area.

“I met many smart youths in Rinkeby, but there was a large mix of people at the tuition session, and as a tutor, you did not necessarily take long-term responsibility for the students. I wondered whether I actually made a difference to the youths, whether I motivated them to aim higher both for college and university. I also realised that we need to make use of the many skills that these young people already have,” Wolk told the Nordic Labour Journal.

It worries her that young people might not get the support they need in order to realise how they can aim higher. This leads to a “brain drain” which should not be allowed to happen, believes Sanna Wolk.

“If Sweden is to be a future knowledge nation, we need the power and skills that these youths possess,” she says.

End exclusion

NU wants its activities to build a bridge between those who are excluded and the rest of society. All their activities are based on cooperation with various businesses in different sectors. Marginalised young people often find themselves excluded without any networks, and this can be tough on their self-esteem, believes Sanna Wolk. That is why NU carries out outreach activities to schools and youth centres.

“Young people who end up in these environments somehow get labelled. They often also do not have parents or other family who can show them the part of society that will help them into higher education or attractive jobs. They must be taken out of their environment, be inspired and feel included – feel that they too are welcome” she says.

Young people who live elsewhere and need support are also welcome. Through NU it is possible to get under the surface and turn exclusion into inclusion, as Sanna Wolk puts it.

Stability and structure are key issues

NU operates in Stockholm and Malmö and from next year in Uppsala too. Here, businesses with offices in the city centres offer tuition in their own localities for students in years 8 and 9 and college students.

“The young people come to the tuition sessions to be inspired and to get support, but also to see what it is like behind the business facades. If they want to, they can spend every Wednesday for five years at the business getting help with their school work and also building up personal contacts, learning about the business and its codes and be inspired to take higher education,” says Sanna Wolk.

“Long-term stability is the most important thing when you open the door to higher education and want the young people

to create workplace contacts. There are plenty of initiatives, but they are short-term and do not offer that much. Stability is important for the youths, and that is why our tuition lasts for five years for each of them. It makes them secure,” says Sanna Wolk.

The youths email NU on a Monday to let them know what homework they need help with on the Wednesday. On Tuesday, NU emails businesses that in turn look among their staff to find people with the relevant skills.

“There is a lot of matching and a lot of structure. Quality is important both for the young people and for the businesses that pay for this to be a good service,” says Sanna Wolk.

The door might open to more youths

NU also organises study visits to different businesses for pupils in year 6 and up, and tailors training for young adults who have never been in contact with large companies. During these ten-week-long business training courses, they meet employees and get the chance to learn more, showcase their skills, get insight into various trades and make work-related contacts while the business gets to learn about the young people’s own skills.

“This is a way for businesses to recruit talent while the training motivates and inspires the participants to develop further,” says Sanna Wolk.

An increasing number of businesses want to work with NU to include young people, explains Sanna Wolk.

“We are growing really fast and this means even more young people get to come here and see that they are welcome into all parts of society. That is when the door opens,” says Sanna Wolk.

Neglected skills

Just like Sanna Wolk, Mikael Stigendal points out that young people’s skills are not being appreciated and used. He is a sociology professor at the Malmö University and has worked on several projects looking at young people and exclusion. Youths who live in suburbs and go to college in the city centre make up one such group, he says.



Mikael Stigendal is a sociology professor with an interest in how society works, and has done a lot of research on cities like Malmö, together with young people who live there.

“In cities, we have seen the emergence of borders between being included or excluded. These are a type of social borders that dictate whether you are in or out. College students from deprived areas step across this border twice a day. When they go to school, they enter society. When they go home they leave society.

“So they manage to step across a social border every school-day. This is a special skill which is greater than the one that we usually call intercultural skills, but nobody gets a grade for this,” Mikael Stigendal tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

Good but not enough

He believes measures aimed at reducing exclusion among young people are desirable and good in many ways, but questions why exclusion is taken for granted. He points to the link between how society has developed and a resource he feels is being lost.

“It has become harder to be on the inside since the criteria for participation have become tougher. You need money, a place to live, contacts, language and more. If not you end up on the outside. We should make use of young people’s collective power rather than just focus on them as individuals. That would allow them to help change the reasons why society has become a place only for those who are included.”

Consequences, not reasons

One of Mikael Stigendal’s many projects about young people and exclusion is Citispyce, a European research project with researchers and practitioners from ten European cities. Its mandate was to “uncover the inequality that hits young people and find ways to fight it”.

Despite this aim, businesses that participated in the project told of “an attitude of fighting the symptoms of the problem rather than its causes”, writes Stigendal in *Dreams and voices* – an anthology about children and young people’s conditions in Malmö.

“These businesses approached individual youths to try to include them in a society that had excluded them,” says Mikael Stigendal, and ends with a parable:

“It is just like if a group of people dig trenches. Later another group comes and tries to cover some of the trenches or haul out some of those who have fallen in. Why can’t we make sure the first group stops digging trenches? With no inclusion, there is nothing to be excluded from.”



The Nordic Council of Ministers' Secretary General steps down in 2023

Finnish Paula Lehtomäki, who became Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2019, has decided to step down in March next year at the end of her contract.

NEWS

25.04.2022

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: KRISTIAN SEPTIMIUS KROGH/NORDEN.ORG

There will be changes at the top of the Nordic Council of Ministers in March 2023, and the next leader will be Danish. That became clear as the current Secretary General, Paula Lehtomäki, decided she will step down in March next year for personal reasons. Lehtomäki announced this on Thursday in an interview with the Nordic Labour Journal.

“Professionally the job as Secretary General is very inspiring and exciting, but privately it has been a challenge in several ways not least because of Corona. I have therefore decided to end my term as Secretary General in March next year,” Lehtomäki said.

A good solution

The Nordic Council of Ministers' Secretary General is the Nordic region civil servant with the top responsibility for securing the best possible framework for the eight Nordic governments to cooperate within. The Secretary General is the leader of the secretariat for the official Nordic government cooperation, which is situated in Copenhagen.



Paula Lehtomäki participated when the labour ministers met ILO head Guy Ryder in Reykjavik. Sweden's then minister of employment Ylva Johansson to the left of Paula Lehtomäki. Photo: Björn Lindahl

When Paula Lehtomäki was appointed to the job in 2019, she moved from the Finnish capital Helsinki to Copenhagen with her husband and the couple's three children. Her children are moving back to Finland at the end of the current school year, and Paula Lehtomäki will follow next spring.

"I am really very happy with my job as Secretary General, but I have decided that all in all, moving back to Finland in 2023 after four years in the position is a good solution."

Work on vision carries on apace

In the autumn of 2019, the Nordic prime ministers approved a vision for Nordic cooperation towards 2030. By then, the Nordic region should be the world's most sustainable and integrated region. For Paula Lehtomäki and her team, it has been a high priority to support the Nordic governments in their joint effort to make this vision a reality. This will remain a central task, she explains.

"The job of realising the vision is going ahead at full speed, and I will stay very focused on this until my last day in the office."

One of the things she has focused on as the top leader of the Nordic Council of Ministers' secretariat in Copenhagen is to increase cross-sector cooperation between the Nordic Council of Ministers' staff. This is also a process she will push forward with undiminished vigour, she assures us.

The position of Secretary General is taken in turns by the Nordic countries, and next up it is Denmark's turn to choose the next Secretary General.