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Jun 15, 2020

Theme: Reopening the borders



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Has the Corona crisis damaged the Nordic cooperation?

Will the Nordics emerge strong after the Corona crisis, or has their cooperation been weakened by different forces triggered by the pandemic? The answer is, as so often is the case, complicated.

EDITORIAL

14.06.2020

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR IN CHIEF

In an unusually crass statement, the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde has said she is worried the Nordic cooperation will be damaged because of the Corona crisis, and because the other Nordic countries still do not allow their citizens to visit Sweden.

"I am worried about how long we will carry these wounds," she told Dagens Nyheter.

The Norden Association in Sweden has followed her up by appealing to the Nordic governments and parliaments to establish "a joint commission to study Nordic cooperation during the Covid-19 crisis".

The Corona pandemic has closed borders with severe consequences for people who work, shop or travel for leisure in neighbouring countries. Many also make their living from border trade and tourism.

In this edition of the Nordic Labour Journal, we have therefore decided to look at borders and remember two anniversaries which have been overshadowed by the pandemic.

Denmark and Germany celebrate that the border between the two countries has remained unchanged since 1920. 100 years ago, a referendum divided Schleswig-Holstein into two parts. There are still people on the German side who feel Danish – and the other way around.

Old grudges have turned into new love, symbolised by that between pensioners Inga and Karsten who met every day while the border remained closed, to drink coffee on either side of it.

There is massive cross-border commuting per capita across the Danish-German border; 15,000 people, which is approximately the same number who commute across Öresund. The Bridge is 20 years old this summer and has become a main artery linking Sweden and Denmark. But in recent weeks the

traffic has largely consisted of Danes travelling to Sweden, while the Swedes are not allowed into Denmark.

The situation is the same on the Swedish border to Norway and Finland. People were very upset in Årjäng and Strömstad when Norway's Prime Minister decided to allow Norwegians to visit one single Swedish county from 15 June – Gotland.

Locals at the same times describe what is happening in Northern Sweden and Finland as "a Berlin wall between Härjedalen and Tornio".

Researchers are debating whether a future Europe will be one **with** regions or one **made up by** regions. The pandemic has shown that regions have little power when central governments make decisions.

"Since the [Öresund] region is a political construction and has no real regional independence, it falls flat when something like this happens – like the introduction of border controls – and things then often end up in Stockholm or Copenhagen," says Jesper Falkheimer, professor of strategic communication.

The Nordic Council of Ministers wants the Nordic region to be the world's most integrated by 2030. Today, that goal seems harder to reach. But we must not forget that much of the Nordic cooperation still works well, albeit in a more digital form.

Christer Holmlund, the new Secretary-General of the Nordic Teachers' Union NLS, praises the Nordic model:

"We are prepared and used to talking to each other. That dialogue moves us forwards and brings better ways of dealing with the challenges which the Corona crisis has brought," he says.

Christer Holmlund considers teachers' psychological strain as the most important issue for Nordic teachers' unions in the coming months.

There is little Nordic cooperation on how to deal with the platform economy, however, according to a report commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The taxi operator Uber started operating in the four largest Nordic countries simultaneously and quickly managed to change legislation which benefited their business model.

The report's authors conclude that no major effort has been made to organise Uber drivers, partly because it was considered to be an illegal operation before the deregulation, and partly because it was a difficult group to organise.

Small societies facing a Corona crisis might, to a certain extent, function better because there is greater unity and decisions can be made quicker. This can be seen in the Faroe Islands, where tools to find salmon parasites turned out to work as well for identifying the Coronavirus in humans. Infected people got to hospital quickly, and no Faroese have died as a result of the pandemic.

Iceland quickly got control of the disease too. But with the biggest tourism industry in the Nordics, based on GDP, it is hard to see how the Icelanders can keep it alive with domestic tourists only.



The Öresund Bridge is 20, and gets a sub-sea equivalent

The bridge linking two Nordic countries is 20 years old this summer. The link has been important for the Öresund region's development. It is also important for the massive project of securing a permanent link between Zealand and Germany.

THEME

13.06.2020

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO:



The Öresund Bridge was inaugurated on 1 July 2000. It was a time of cross-border optimism, increased mobility and borderless economic and technological development, says Professor of Strategic Communication Jesper Falkheimer in the new anthology *Checkpoint 2020 – People, borders and vision in the time of the Öresund Bridge*, published by the Centre for Öresund Region Studies together with Öresundsintitutet.

Falkheimer describes the Øresund Bridge as “both a physical entity and a symbol for the transnational regionalisation in Europe”.

A region reflecting its surroundings

Commuting by ferry, hovercraft or catamaran had long been the norm for many cross-border commuters. Yet the Öresund Region only became a well-known term among many Danes and Swedes when the bridge arrived in the Nordics’ southernmost border area. Then, as now, the region mirrors its surroundings, Jesper Falkheimer tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

“The Öresund Region is a microcosmos for what is happening in society as a whole. Take the introduction of border controls on both the Danish and Swedish sides. This shows how global events impact those of us who move around in the region.

“But since the region is a political construction and has no real regional independence, it falls flat when something like

this happens – like the introduction of border controls – and things then often end up in Stockholm or Copenhagen.”

Falkheimer has documented media coverage of the Öresund Region and considers the birth of the region to be a communication issue in many ways.

“Media coverage has been and continues to be crucial, but the hype around the inauguration of the Bridge 20 years ago has faded.”

Which does not mean the Danish-Swedish coverage will disappear, he thinks.

“It will ebb and flow like it has been doing for another 100 years. Right now we are at a low ebb with national currents. Journalism remains very national – the Öresund Bridge has not managed to change that. But who knows what will happen in the future,” says Falkheimer.



There were great expectations to the Öresund Bridge when it was being constructed 20 years ago. Photo: The Öresund Bridge.

A bridge that pays for itself

The link consists of more than the bridge itself. There are onshore constructions on both sides – the artificial island of Pepparholmen and a tunnel on the Danish side because of traffic to and from Copenhagen Airport, Scandinavia’s largest airport – and convenient direct train connections to Stockholm, Gothenburg, Karlskrona and Kalmar.

The whole thing was financed through loans on open financial markets, with Denmark and Sweden as guarantors. This infrastructure project model is common in Denmark but not in Sweden.

“Our income is from road traffic and railway fees, which allows us to pay back any loans taken out. Along with developing the region, this is our core task,” Caroline Ullman-Hammer, the Öresund Bridge Consortium CEO, tells the Nordic Labour Journal.



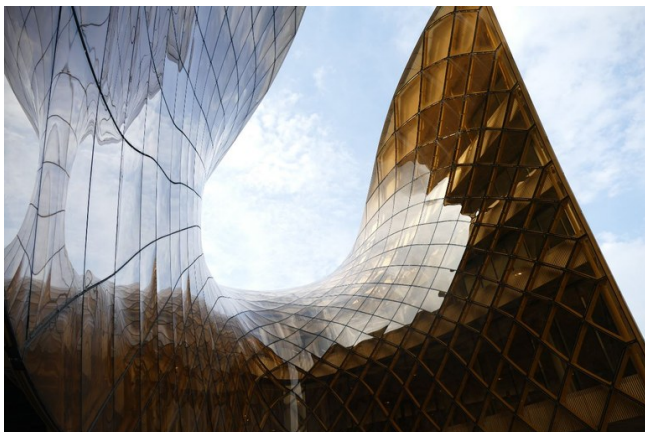
Caroline Ullman-Hammer has been CEO for the Öresund Bridge Consortium for 14 years. Photo: Louise Houmøller/The Öresund Bridge.

As she steps down from that position after 14 years this autumn, some 600,000 customers have a BroPass tollroad contract. An average of 20,400 vehicles crossed the Bridge every day in 2019 – around 5,500 were single journeys with a BroPass commuter agreement. Nearly two thirds of the 30 billion Danish kroner construction costs (2000 money) have already been recouped.

A great lift for the cities

Numerous surveys have shown that customers are very happy, and paying for the Bridge has gone according to plan – bar for a major fall in traffic due to Danish Coronavirus restrictions. Caroline Ullman-Hammer is also happy that it is possible to see the effects the Öresund Bridge is having on a physical level.

“The Bridge is a success story both for rail and road, and it still has a lot of space and capacity. It is also a shining example of how Copenhagen and Malmö have been brought together, as seen in comprehensive city developments near the Bridge on both sides over the past 15 years.”



The roof of the Emporium shopping centre in Hyllie, where many Danes travel to shop. Photo: Björn Lindahl

Ullman-Hammer mentions the two new neighbourhoods that have grown in the wake of the Öresund Bridge – Ørestad and Hyllie – both constructed nearer the Öresund link than to Copenhagen's and Malmö's city centres. They have their own train stations and a lot of new housing and offices for businesses of all sizes – and many new jobs. Many visitors from near and far have been interested in seeing the innovative architecture and clever climate solutions applied to the new neighbourhoods.

Most important of all, in a labour market perspective, is the fact that many companies – new and old – have chosen to set up headquarters or branches near the Öresund link.

New traffic solutions

Public transport has also increased considerably after the Öresund Bridge was constructed. On the Danish side, Copenhagen Metro is being expanded beyond the underground system's current four lines. On the Swedish side, the Citytunnel has constructed two new train stations in Malmö and turned the central station from a terminus into a station where trains can pass through.

This year, decisions will also be made on two further Öresund links: A tunnel between Helsingör and Helsingborg called the HH link, and an expansion of the Copenhagen Metro to Malmö.

The next step

The Fehmarn Belt Link is part of the EU's plans to link the Nordic capitals as well as Scandinavia to the Mediterranean with a rail network called the ScanMed Corridor. This is part of the Central European TEN-T transport network.

Construction work on the Danish side should have started already, but the Corona pandemic postponed this until 1 January 2021. The Leipzig federal constitutional court in Germany is due to make a decision in October.

“We do not expect the German court to reject the application, only perhaps to make some adjustments in response to some local concerns,” says Thomas Becker, the Managing Director of String – Southbaltic Transport Regions Implementing New Geography.



A sub-sea tunnel is to be constructed between Puttgarden in Germany and Rødbyhavn in Denmark. This would allow for uninterrupted travel a straight line from Oslo to Germany without using a ferry. Illustration: femern.com

String is a political organisation with members in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Germany, working to promote a sustainable infrastructure in and between the countries, while creating a common green industry hub.

“The level of industrialisation is far greater in Northern Europe than in the rest of Europe. We also have a much higher GDP, a higher educated workforce, a politically peaceful situation and comprehensive polytechnic knowledge. According to the OECD, we are also leaders in green industry, energy, water, waste, sun and wind power,” says Thomas Becker.

Regional drive with potential

Thomas Becker welcomes a green transport link with electrified trains, but also wants to highlight the benefits of the 18 kilometres long sub-sea tunnel between Denmark and Germany.



Thomas Becker is Managing Director of String – South-baltic Transport Regions Implementing New Geography – a political organisation with members in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Germany. Photo: Johan Wessman/News Öresund.

“The Fehmarn Belt Link is Northern Europe’s largest infrastructure project ever, and a great chance to turn Northern Germany, Denmark, Norway and Sweden into a mega-region for green industry with plenty of new jobs,” he says.

For this to happen, the countries involved need to agree on a joint strategy and gather under one common brand, he thinks.

“Right now the plans are far too fragmented, but if we really coordinate and market ourselves as a leading green hub we can become an attractive muscle for growth, just like Silicon Valley has been for the tech industry,” says Thomas Becker.

He sees the Fehmarn Belt Link as an integration project and an opportunity to compete internationally within B2B.

“Green industries offer green solutions to other industries. Here we can compete with China when it comes to finding solutions that will make their production of for instance electric bikes more efficient. In Northern Europe we are world leaders in this,” says Thomas Becker.

The Fehmarn Belt Link is positive for the Öresund Region

Both Jesper Falkheimer and Caroline Ullman-Hammer are very positive to the Fehmarn Belt Link. The professor of strategic communication says:

“I believe the link will be enormously important to economic development, also in the Öresund Region. I am less sure whether the views, community and identity among our region’s citizens will change, but in terms of the economy and sustainability it is absolutely right to build the Fehmarn Belt Link.”

And the Bridge CEO puts it like this:

“We have made certain long-term calculations, but believe developments linked to the Fehmarn Belt Link will outmatch these, as the Öresund Region will get a completely different lift when Hamburg comes so close. This will spill over into both Denmark and Sweden.

“In Sweden I believe it will become possible to set up several clusters if the state handles it well. Around Stockholm, on the west coast and in Skåne, and allow such a development to create synergies and new perspectives.”

She is particularly keen to create new perspectives based on her Swedish background. She lives in Sweden and works with both Swedish and Danish colleagues in Denmark.

“For me it has been beneficial to see issues from a broader perspective when it comes to security, personnel, market and media issues, as both Danes and Swedes are quite dissimilar here. Our mindset has also been never to speak English to each other. Everyone should understand Danish and Swedish, and you do that even if you cannot speak the language. If you want to understand, you do.”

"Like a Berlin Wall between Haparanda and Tornio"

When the border between Finland and Sweden closed, the entire common market for the whole of Tornedalen disappeared – goods, services, labour and culture. The hospitality and retail sectors are seriously affected. Those who have been furloughed or served notices are starting to fall into unemployment.

THEME

13.06.2020

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN

Since Finland closed its border with Sweden, Haparanda municipality has actively worked to limit the effects of the sudden disappearance of the natural market area. Haparanda municipality and Finnish Tornio are separated only by the Torne river and there are close links between many sectors. Haparanda has fewer than 10,000 inhabitants and Tornio has 20,000. Together they form a common market.

“The border is an administrative idea and its closure became an obstacle to the natural flow between our countries. We live across the border through families, houses, outdoor activities, trade and culture. Usually, we travel across the border several times a day,” says Sven Tornberg, chairman of the Haparanda city council (Centre Party).

Like a Berlin Wall

He quotes one MP from Haparanda who described the closed border like a local Berlin Wall. The closure happened suddenly and meant a dramatic change to people's everyday lives. What it would mean in real terms was unclear from the start. Who could cross? What was valid? Which certificates were needed? Little by little the rules for travelling to Finland were made clearer and stricter.

Anyone crossing the border would need a certificate showing where they would stay during their visit. Now, Finnish citizens can go to Sweden, but Swedes have a harder time crossing over into Finland.

“You might as well do that in Sweden’ is a usual argument when a Swede is stopped at the border,” says Sven Tornberg.

Creativity and helpfulness

Many work on both sides of the border. 10% of the municipality's employees, especially within the health and care sectors, live in Finland for instance. An exception was made for them, as their work was considered to be critical for society.

The hospitality sector, as well as retail, have been hit hard. Retail companies along the whole of Tornedalen lost two-thirds of their business, while the hospitality sector lost more or less everything. They started furloughing staff short term fairly early on, and some of these are now facing unemployment.

To lessen the impact, the municipality has removed or postponed municipal fees. It has also made it easier for young people to find summer jobs, by paying some of the wages for companies that will hire them. Businesses have also been offered training in marketing and free support for those who want to set up an online shop.

“Businesses have shown a lot of creativity and have supported and helped each other. It is also good to see the efforts made by civil society,” says Sven Tornberg.

So far he is grateful that restrictions have been eased. A two-hour drive does not take you far between the Norrbotten cities. He is now hoping the border will be reopened on 14 June, at least regionally. Soon he will be discussing this with his Finnish colleague.

“We view the border closure differently up here, compared to those in the far south where decisions are made. And in Haparanda we have not had more than five confirmed cases of Covid-19.”



The border between Sweden and Norway

Closed borders trigger unemployment in Sweden

Sweden's biggest cities have been the worst hit by the pandemic, and in particular Stockholm. Infection rates have remained low in Sweden's border areas, but municipalities there are struggling economically because the borders have closed.

THEME

12.06.2020

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN, PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

In Strömstad, one of the most attractive cities along the Swedish west coast, large shops and streets are empty.

"This is like a Greek island in November," says Kent Hansson, chairman of the municipal council (Social Democrats).

He is deeply worried about how the city is affected by the pandemic and the closed border with Norway. The place is usually crammed with shoppers and overnight tourists from Easter to autumn, and most of them come from Norway.

The big supermarkets' usual annual turnover is 7.5 to 8 billion Swedish kronor (€700m - €760m). Now they are empty and their takings are down by more than 95%. Hotels and campsites are hit too. In a normal year, Strömstad's hotels and campsites host 800,000 travellers each year, but so far this year they have been largely empty.



Everyone in Strömstad – from the shrimp fisher to the hotel receptionist – is hit by the fact that the border between Norway and Sweden remains closed. Photo: Strömstad municipality.

“We are among those who have been the hardest hit by the closed borders. Trade and tourism are our most important income streams, and they are now both blocked,” he says.

This has had a severe impact on the labour market. Between 30% and 35% of the city’s working-age people have been furloughed or let go.

“Businesses are desperate and if the border remains closed all summer many will fail. Many of them rely on the summer for their entire annual income,” says Kent Hansson.

Cooperation between border municipalities

When the Scandinavian and Finnish borders were closed, the border municipalities lost in an instant what had for decades been a common market for both goods and labour. One of these areas is Årjäng in Värmland County.

“Much of our labour market is hit by the fact that cross-border trade has ceased to exist. This is like a town losing a major company, like the Stora Enso sawmill in Gruvön,” says Daniel Schützer, the Social Democrat chairman of the Årjäng municipal council.



Daniel Schützer, chairman of the Årjäng municipal council, has got attention from the other side of the border – he wants to take Norway to court for maintaining its quarantine rules for Norwegians who have visited Sweden.

Politicians in the worst hit municipalities have different ways of helping businesses. Municipalities have eased, or postponed, municipal fees. They have lobbied their governors to bring the issue of closed borders up to a higher level in the Nordic cooperation.

They have worked with political colleagues on the other side of the closed borders and with each other. The chairs of municipalities in Eda, Strömstad and Årjäng, for instance, wrote to the government coordinator in late April to ask for cash support for struggling businesses. They also appealed for the reopening of the borders.

“I hope we at least can get a regional reopening. After all, there is no more Covid-19 here than on the other side of the border,” says Daniel Schützer.

Årjäng is in western Värmland and has seen people and goods flow across the border for centuries. 18.7% of workers in Årjäng municipality commute to Norway. Many of them work in the health and care sectors and in construction, and many have been able to continue their work on the other side of the border thanks to special work permits. They are, however, under strict instruction to go directly to their workplace and not stop anywhere during their commute.

The border is a line on the map

The large shops near the border, which usually see many thousands of Norwegians travel to Sweden to shop, are now closed like those in Strömstad. Many employees have been furloughed. Many of the municipality’s other businesses are also aimed at and dependent on Norwegian customers, for instance car garages.



“Sweets” was one of the answers Norwegian radio P4 got when asking people what they associated with Sweden. Above, a sweet shop in the Töcksfors shopping centre.

Årjäng is not far from Karlstad and also close to the Oslo region. Along with other municipalities along the border, it usually has access to a multi-million people market. Daniel Schützer calls the area culturally united and says the border is no more than a line on the map.

This all changed when the pandemic closed the border between Norway and Sweden. In an instance, the conditions for work, trade and business completely changed. The Swedish Trade Association says many of the shops along the 1,600 kilometres long border between Sweden and Norway have lost 80% to 95% of their turnover.

“The closing of the border became a border obstacle of gigantic proportions, especially for the shopping centres near the border, which emptied out from day one. The larger shop owners will probably manage to recoup their losses somewhere else. It is harder for the smaller companies that are also dependent on Norwegians. Their life’s work is at risk,” he says.

Critical to the closure of job centre

Unemployment has risen, but so far not dramatically in Årjäng due to a diversified business community. Unemployment there has risen by 1.3% to 6.3% on last year, yet Daniel Schützer is worried about the figures for the month of May. The fact that the local job centre has been closed does not help matters.

“I am very critical of the politicians who made that decision. In the long run, this will have consequences for those who are furthest from the labour market and for those who struggle to travel to places that still have an open job centre.”

Årjäng municipality has, like many other border municipalities, introduced a range of measures to support local businesses. They have suspended water and waste payments, scrapped planning permission fees to stimulate construction and have given local companies advantages during procurement processes. Money has also been set aside to create summer jobs for students.

A Strömstad that is safe to visit

Measures are also introduced to make Strömstad a safe place to visit. "Corona guards" are being employed to make sure safe distances are kept in all areas where people gather. Extra cleaning and hygiene measures are being introduced as well.

“We want to show that we take the fear of infection very seriously, even though we hardly have any infection here,” says Kent Hansson.



Old recipes and new crises

An economic crisis from 1992, a salmon test from 2000 and an idea for a restaurant from 2013. These are some of the ingredients in the Faroese recipe for how the island society in the North Atlantic and its 52,000 inhabitants would come out of the Corona crisis better than anyone. So far it has been a rather good recipe.

THEME

12.06.2020

TEXT AND PHOTO: RÓLANT WAAG DAM

In a 200-year-old farmhouse lies the Michelin-starred restaurant KOKS, completely isolated among mountains, sheep and birds some 30 minutes' drive from Tórshavn. If you opened the doors into the historic building a few months ago, you would first have heard the bustle of guests. Then you would be welcomed by head waiter Karin Visth, who won the 2019 White Guide's award for service experience of the year. She would be dressed in a black shirt and designer trousers from Guðrun & Guðrun.

Visth is also a sommelier and makes sure you get wines that should not exist in the Faroes. Sake Biden 1999 from Inoue Gōmei in Japan? She's got it. Essencia 2008 from Royal

Tokaji? Even that she has managed to get from Hungary to the Faroes.

While you are sat at the table, you will notice that the other guests speak English, Danish, German, French and Chinese. 90% of them are foreign, and there is an international atmosphere in the most Faroese of restaurants you could ever imagine.

And then there is the food. Head chef Poul Andrias Ziska creates 20 dishes with everything from lobster to puffin and wind-dried mutton.

In 2017, Ziska and KOKS were awarded the first Michelin star in Faroes' history. In 2018 came star number two and the

Michelin Guide made Poul Andrias Young Chef of the Year in the Nordics. In 2019, KOKS got the Michelin Guide's Sustainability Gastronomy mark for their sustainable business.



In 2020, Visth and Ziska were going to expand their string of awards and acknowledgements which they have gathered in recent years, but – well, you know the story.

A seven-year-old idea

Restaurant KOKS had been empty for a month. 24 hours later and all the tables were booked. The idea was old, the situation new and the problem large. How do you fill a restaurant where nearly all guests fly in to the Faroes only to eat there, when nearly all international air travel has been suspended? The only solution was to get the Faroese themselves to book. But how?

We will come back to the answer to that question, but the story about Koks is one of several examples of how a small society like that in the Faore Island find local solutions to big crises.

The 1992 finance crisis

In 1992 the Faroes were hit by a deep economic crisis. Unemployment reached 25%, 15% of the population moved away. A large chapter in Faroese history. 28 years later a new crisis hits. Not only in the Faroes this time, but globally.

The Faroese feared the consequences of Corona. For a while, the situation for the labour market looked even grimmer than in 1992, when 5,000 Faroese moved away and found work elsewhere. This is not possible in 2020, as the whole world is hit by the same crisis.

But even if things looked grim, it never got really bad in the Faroes. The North Atlantic islands quickly found their footing again. An aid package was agreed on relatively quickly which made sure those who could not work because of Corona got most of their wages paid.

The money came from the Faroese Employment Service, ALS, which all employers and wage earners have paid into

since it was established in 1992 to secure that unemployed people got support.

“ALS is an example of how crises can lead to innovation of the kind that politicians during good times are unable to implement,” concludes Hans Andrias Sølvará, who teaches history at Fróðskaparsetur Føroya, the University of the Faroe Islands, a few days after the aid package was passed.

Since then there has been a debate about whether it was correct to dip into the big bag of money which ALS had built up. Should the money not be used for something else? Would it not be better if the Faroese provincial treasury covered those costs for instance? This is a political debate which started a long time before the Corona pandemic took off. Back in January, the ALS leadership said they were so well positioned economically that they could handle 12 years of 8% unemployment.

“That is why we have decided to lower deposits from 1.25% to 1% and to increase payments with 1,000 kroner a month, with the caveat that if times suddenly get worse, we adjust this again,” said Eyðfinnur Jacobsen, chairman of the board at ALS, on Faroese public service radio on 8 January.

It turned out to be a good thing for ALS that their chairman proposed that caveat. The January proposal is now duly parked. The same board is now calculating what the pandemic is going to cost them.

Regardless of the result they reach, it is an undeniable fact that the unemployment insurance provided the Faroese with a bulwark worth nearly one billion Danish kroner (€134m). Money that Faroese employers and wage earners had saved up. This turned an otherwise fragile economy into a robust one.

The old salmon test

While the board at ALS wondered what they should do with the bulging money bag, a man by the name of Debes Hammershaime Christiansen was also wondering – but he was wondering about something completely different.



Debes Hammershaimb Christiansen figured out how Faroese authorities could apply an offensive strategy. Photo: Jens Kristian Vang, EPA

Christiansen is a geneticist working for the Faroese Food and Veterinary Authority, and he was thinking about a catastrophe that struck Faroese salmon farms 20 years ago. At the time, the entire industry collapsed.

The authorities decided that all fish farms should be screened monthly in the years to come. Equipment was bought, the Food and Veterinary Authority's laboratory was changed and people were hired to do nothing but screening salmon.

What Christiansen was wondering about at the beginning of January was whether the decades-old testing tool from the old catastrophe could be of use in the fight of a new one. It turned out it could.

"Whether it is a test from a salmon or a human, in terms of methodology it doesn't matter," he concluded.

This meant that Faroese authorities could plan an offensive strategy right away. People with mild symptoms were efficiently tested, the virus was isolated and the authorities got control with its spread early on.

This solution has now proven to be far cheaper than the alternative. A test made by the Danish Statens Serum Institut costs 1,545 kroner (€207), Faroese public radio reported on 11 June. A test made by the Food and Veterinary Authority's costs 240 kroner (€32). The 20 years old salmon test has saved the Faroese taxpayers 12 million kroner.

An old recipe in a new restaurant

Which brings us back to the restaurant. On 21 May 2020, Karin Visth is once more on the door. KOKS has opened the sister restaurant Roks, a pop-up restaurant in downtown Tórshavn.

Visth is wearing a short-sleeved white T-shirt, Sunday trousers and casual shoes.

"It is fantastic to be able to open the doors again and to welcome guests," she says. Inside is the same bustling gathering of people as at KOKS, but they now all speak Faroese. The borders are still closed, no tourists are coming to the Faroes, but Poul Andrias Ziska's pots and pans are bubbling away.

"We were tired of doing nothing," says Ziska, who therefore brushed the dust off a seven-year-old idea.

"In 2013 we began talking about a restaurant that would supplement KOKS. It would be a more casual restaurant which would help make KOKS more sustainable. We wanted to use some of the same raw materials, treat them differently and present them in a more relaxed way. We have just not had the chance to make this happen until now," Ziska says.

Ziska, Visth and the rest of the team have now seized this opportunity. And the Faroese have also seized the opportunity to visit them. One day after the opening of Roks, all tables were booked. All of the 900 spaces went at lightning speed.

Roks did not remain just an idea. It became a success which means that KOKS can reopen on 8 July.

Picture of Christer Holmlund

Christer Holmlund: Teachers' psychological strain a theme for NLS

With the reopening of Nordic schools post-Corona, there needs to be more focus on teachers' working conditions. They made a big digital leap with distance learning and this has been tiring, says Christer Holmlund, the new Secretary-General for NLS, the Nordic Teachers' Union.

PORTRAIT

11.06.2020

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING, PHOTO: FINLAND-SWEDISH TEACHING UNION

Teachers and students will remember the strange lessons of 2020 for a long time. Now they are preparing for how the autumn might become. As everything changes so rapidly, things are going to be tricky whatever happens. The teachers' "long" holidays – or non-teaching time – is particularly well-earned. This year it might be students who long to meet up after the break.

Home schooling has been difficult for some children, notes Christer Holmlund. The Coronavirus forced many teachers to move in just a few days from normal classroom teaching to a completely new way of teaching – online, at a distance.

This had never been tested, but it has gone largely well. A majority of Finland-Swedish teachers told a survey that moving to distance teaching went surprisingly well. It even surpassed the teachers' own expectations. But working hours have increased a lot for most of them.

Work environment issues important post-Corona

The Nordic Teachers' Union considers work environment issues to be important for the future of work. Christer Holmlund hopes that discussion can now be part of teachers' strategic work going forward.

"There are expectations both from society and from parents. Education institutions have been given an increasing mandate, beyond only passing on knowledge. This is part of a necessary social development, and schools cannot just stand still while the rest of society develops around them," according to Holmlund.

Meanwhile, all countries are struggling economically. Schools lack the funding that is necessary to live up to the demands of society. Nordic teachers have spoken up and drawn

a line. The issue of psychological strain has been highlighted. But speaking up does not always lead to the necessary action.

A worrying lack of teachers

Holmlund sees that the teaching profession is not as popular as it used to be in the Nordics. He fears the decline could increase without government action.

There is a great risk of a lack of teachers, and it is already a major problem in Sweden. Some teachers are abandoning the profession, and it is then too late to compensate by improving working conditions. It is good to highlight psychological strain within the profession, but teachers should also get paid according to their education and the amount of work they do.

The situation is better in Finland. Many still apply for teacher training, although numbers have fallen in Finland too.

Nordic differences?

Feelings of inadequacy and psychological strain seem to be the same across the Nordics. Working hours are roughly the same, and so is the education system.

Holmlund is in doubt whether there is enough focus on support services in the Nordics.

"Are the teachers really in a position to focus on their core task – to create a safe social space in the classroom and being a teacher? Or are they also doing the job of a psychologist, curator, police and social worker, wonders Holmlund.

Controversial privatisation

So the systems are quite similar across the Nordic countries. School starters' ages can vary, but most have nine years of elementary school. The upper secondary system differs slightly

more, as does vocational training. The biggest difference is in the debate surrounding the privatisation of education, which is happening mainly in Sweden.

“Our view is that school should not be a for-profit enterprise in the Nordic region, especially as they are funded by taxpayers’ money. This is debated in Sweden and it would be good to know which negative impact private schools might have. It can lead to segregation and schools with different status,” thinks Holmlund.

Schools reopened in the end, there was no choice

All the Nordic countries reopened their schools towards the end of the spring semester. Sweden’s recommendation for distance learning is removed from 15 June in secondary schools. Primary schools never closed. Sweden has also returned to normal teaching in upper secondary schools. Denmark’s schools also reopened at the end of May.

Christer Holmlund thinks things are moving back to the normal way of teaching in the Nordics, even though changes will be made. Schools and trade unions will be spending the summer preparing for a possible second wave of Covid-19. NLS will debate this during its summer meetings. The union is very worried about a second wave and how teaching would then be organised.

Norway has been following a green, amber and red traffic light model. The system has been amber since 2 June, similar to the Finnish system. People are asked not to come to school if they feel unwell. Schools also clean more, increase hygiene measures and limit the physical contact between students and teachers.

All countries face challenges when it comes to kindergartens and the first years of primary school. These must be open since it is not possible to completely close schools down. That would paralyse the country.

Key workers like those in the health service, police and other emergency services must get their children to kindergarten. Therefore, it has been possible in all the Nordic countries for small children to be looked after, although the main recommendation has been to stay at home.

Vulnerable teachers

The challenge from school teachers’ point of view is how to manage the risks they face – how can they avoid physical contact with students?

Holmlund feels this is being respected in the Nordic countries. Member organisations have raised the issue, and nothing alarming has emerged. Vulnerable teachers should not have to enter classrooms and carry out face-to-face teaching, but can perform other duties during the Corona crisis.

Many schools only have one teacher in one classroom. The rooms are not big enough to create a larger space around each student, if all students are present.

All the countries are now proposing outdoor teaching. At this time of the year, it is possible to stay outside as much as possible, which will help.

There has been a lot of talk about the students who have managed the transition to home schooling well. Parents have also been praised a lot for taking on the teaching role on top of their own home office work. But it is important to remember that teachers too had to make great changes in a short space of time.

Teachers have also had different starting points in view of which digital tools their employers have been able to offer them. Hopefully research will be done into what schools should be able to offer. In many Finnish schools teachers have been using their own mobile telephones to get work done, for instance.

The Nordic model works in the school sector too

Christer Holmlund has noticed that government ministers and trade union leaders have been discussing the Corona crisis both in the Nordics and the rest of Europe.

In the Nordic countries, of course, the close cooperation between governments, trade unions and educational authorities is a positive thing. Also in difficult times the Nordic model has proven to have the capacity to gather people around a table to negotiate which measures are possible to realise. This has also worked for schools, says Holmlund.

He believes the Nordic model has been a strength and a cause for progress which has allowed the countries to face tough times.

This year’s holidays particularly important for teachers

The school systems are similar in many ways, also when it comes to what is sometimes called the too long summer holiday for teachers.

The number of days teachers work is actually fairly similar across the Nordics, says Christer Holmlund. But the holidays are laid out in different ways in the different countries, and even between municipalities.

Finland might have the longest summer holiday out of all the countries. But Sweden has considerably fewer inset days for teachers – 178 compared to Finland’s 190. The summer holiday has actually been shortened in Finland. The sports holiday in winter is a tradition, and now there are calls for a week’s autumn holiday too. The total number of weeks with no teaching in Finland is between eight and nine.

Holmlund is exasperated with the critics’ of teachers and their short working days. In the world of schooling you can-

not postpone answering a parent's question, the contact hours for teachers is considerably shorter than in other sectors. That is why it is good to be able to switch off and recharge the batteries for next year.

It is particularly important for teachers to rest after this stressful winter and spring, says Holmlund. This year he is not certain that students would benefit from a longer break. In Finland, the number of child protection cases increased after schools reopened. Perhaps students should receive the support that school can offer this summer.

Schools, alongside parents, are responsible for looking after students. Right now, parents are having to take a particularly big share of that responsibility, and sometimes certain issues are better identified and dealt with by schools, according to Christer Holmlund.

“From the students’ perspective, there will be challenges if they have to wait right until the autumn before schools reopen,” says Christer Holmlund.

Future unemployment development still hard to predict

Countries tackling the Corona crisis have been trying to bridge a few months while society closes down, allowing as many companies as possible to survive with employees and knowledge intact. This has been the case especially in the Nordics. Politicians have shown willing to spend money in unprecedented ways.

ANALYSIS

11.06.2020

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

New ways of fighting the economic consequences have been developed very rapidly. Most importantly, the state has temporarily taken on the costs which businesses or individuals would normally have had to deal with. Sweden has been estimated to spend 240 billion kronor (€22.7bn) of public money on emergency measures.

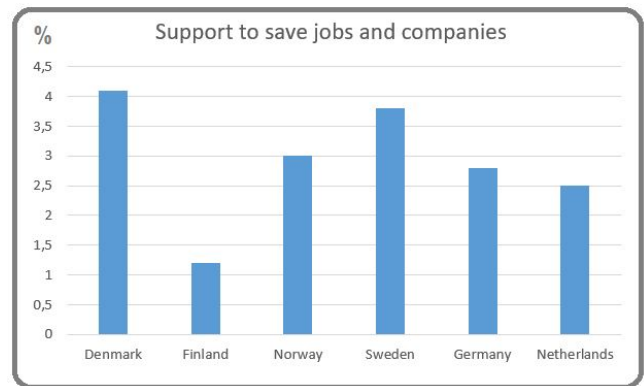
The recently established furlough scheme is the most costly, at around 95 billion kronor (€9bn).

“If we look back to the last crisis in 2008-2009, no such measure was introduced and Sweden lost many industry jobs forever,” said Minister for Finance Magdalena Andersson on 14 May.

As she said this, the furlough scheme comprised 420,000 people, and 22 billion kronor (€2bn) had already been paid out.

Furloughing means that employers can cut workers' hours while the state covers the loss of earnings so that people make nearly what they used to. All the Nordic countries have introduced similar support.

The Swedish Ministry for Finance has calculated how much the crisis measures cost as a percentage of GDP in the four largest Nordic countries plus Germany and the Netherlands.

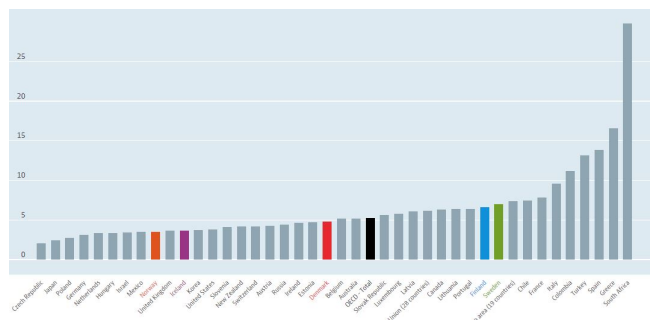


Source: Swedish government. The diagram shows support with a direct effect on the budget, and includes direct support, furlough costs, reduced employers' fees and costs related to sick pay.

There are great differences between Denmark and Finland – according to these figures, the Danish measures cost nearly 3.5 times more. But it is too early to see what the final cost will be by the end of the year. In Denmark, the “temporary furlough scheme” will be gradually phased out and ends on 29 August.

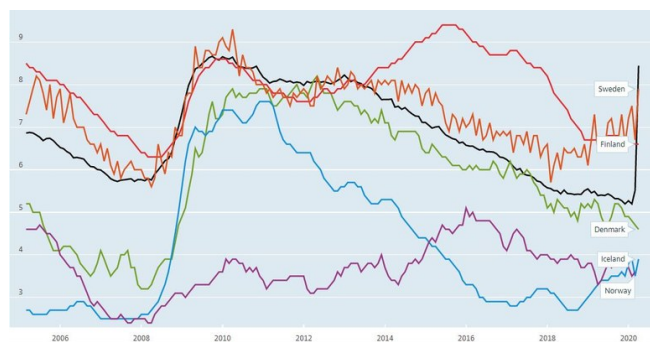
In order to judge how the Nordic labour markets are managing, you need to look at more than unemployment figures. Using comparable economic statistics, like the OECD's, the latest figures available are, however, from March.

But these unemployment figures can be used as a basis to show the starting point before countries imposed lockdown. Figures were below the OECD average in Denmark, Iceland and Norway, and slightly above in Finland and Sweden:



The graph shows seasonally adjusted unemployment in OECD countries during Q1 2020. The Nordic countries and the OECD average are marked in separate colours. Source: OECD.

This is how things have developed in the Nordic countries since the 2008 financial crisis:



The black line is the OECD average and reflects the fact that unemployment in the USA increased in March by 15.9 million newly unemployed people.

Unlike the Nordics and most European countries, there is no furlough scheme in the States. The country is using what is known as “helicopter money” – writing a cheque to all Americans who earn less than a certain amount.

When the Corona pandemic hit, none of the Nordic countries, except for Norway, had yet reached the pre-financial crisis level of low unemployment.

To assess how the Nordic labour markets have developed you need two figures – how many are unemployed judged by traditional criteria and how many workers have been furloughed.

Two countries, Iceland and Norway, have collated such statistics. These are relatively comparable:

Unemployment April 2020

	Ordinary unemployment	Because of compensation	Total	Period
Denmark	5.4%			April

Finland **8.1%**

Iceland **7.5%** **10.3%**

Norway **6.5%** **5.5%**

Sweden **8.2%**

We cannot find any similar statistics for the other countries. But they probably also end up some way north of 10% when some of the people on furlough schemes are added to the normal unemployment figures.

420,000 people were registered as furloughed on 14 May. In Denmark, the “temporary wage compensation measure” has been crucial to 200,000 Danish workers.

Finnish statistics show 217,000 Finns were unemployed in April, which is 8.1%. This is slightly less than one year ago. The number of “hidden unemployed” has increased by 81%, however, and counts 196,000 people. These are people who should be able to apply for work but who for various reasons do not. The increase from last year is 88,000 people.

There is reason to believe that the number of Nordic workers who are benefiting from the extraordinary Corona measures will fall sharply when societies gradually go back to normal. Yet many companies – especially in the hospitality and tourism industry – will not survive. The traditional unemployment figures will probably begin to grow until they reach post-2008 financial crisis levels.

NMR announces funding for research on corona measures

The Nordic Council of Ministers has set aside DKK 1 million for a research project to look at the effects of the measures in connection with the covid-19 pandemic.

NEWS

11.06.2020

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The pandemic led to infection control measures throughout the Nordic region. The measures have varied somewhat from country to country. Several countries used measures to restrict or limit social functions, workplaces, industries, schools, national borders and geographical areas.

The project will benefit the Nordic countries through analysis and mapping of how the countries' measures have worked to limit unemployment, redundancies, and worked to contribute to a return to a labour market as it was before the pandemic.

The deadline to apply for funds expires July 7.

The survey should result in a final report, which describes the extent the challenges, and which gives the Nordic Council of Ministers for Labour (MR-A) recommendations for measures and procedures. The final report must be submitted to the Nordic Council of Ministers by December 15, 2020

At the same time, NMR is also announcing funds to carry out an analysis of industry-regulated barriers to mobility in the Nordic region. The amount is DKK 400,000 and the deadlines are the same.



Iceland reopens tourism – carefully

Iceland is beginning to open up for tourism after the severe effects of Covid-19 this spring. The virus meant most of the tourism industry had no customers and many companies had to close down. Today, most have reopened and try to attract domestic travellers while waiting for foreign tourists to return to Iceland.

THEME

10.06.2020

TEXT: GUÐRÚN HELGA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR, PHOTO: INSPIRED BY ICELAND

“Iceland is the great tourism country in the Nordic region. Tourism has seen rapid growth and I think the country has dealt with this increase very well. Tourists can expect good experiences. But the crisis means changes for Iceland, of course. Last Easter, Keflavik airport had 90,000 travellers. This year there were 90. That number illustrates how deep the crisis is for Iceland,” says Sweden’s ambassador to Iceland, Håkan Juholt.



The Covid-19 pandemic has had serious consequences for Iceland, and especially for tourism. Companies have furloughed most of their staff. The Blue Lagoon has let around 550 of 760 employees go. Icelandair earlier in the spring said they would have to furlough nearly 90% of their staff.

The unemployment rate among tourist guides has for several months been near 100%, according to Pétur Gauti Valgeirsson, leader of the Iceland Tourist Guide Association.

Unfair unemployment benefit rules

Summer is the main tourism season, while the fewer winter visitors to Iceland come to see the northern lights. Pétur Gauti says Chinese northern lights tourists stopped coming already in January. By the second half of March, all tourists had disappeared. In April and May, Iceland had no foreign visitors at all.

Icelandic guides are usually hired for individual trips. As a result, nearly all became immediately unemployed as tourists disappeared. They usually work very long hours during the summer season and less in the winter.

The Icelandic Directorate of Labour Vinnumálastofnun uses the last months' income as a guide for how much unemployment benefit someone might claim. Someone who was in full-time employment would get all their salary covered. The guides point out that despite long working days in summer, the Directorate of Labour has only used their short winter working days to calculate their benefits, which as a result are

lower than they would otherwise be, according to Pétur Gauti.

“Vinnumálastofnun presumes that everyone has full-time contracts and that they get a letter from their employer if they lose their job. This is not the case for guides. As soon as the last group of tourists leave, guides no longer have an income. The benefits system does not work for guides,” says Pétur Gauti.

He has now discussed this with the authorities and promises to talk to the employers too when wage negotiations begin in 2022.

European tourists

Around six airlines will fly to Iceland this summer compared to last year's 20. The Icelandic company Icelandair flies to 10 destinations in Europe and one in the USA. Wizz, Atlantic Airways, Czech Airlines, Transavia and SAS also fly to Iceland. The tourists expected to come to Iceland now are from elsewhere in Europe. Iceland is a part of Schengen, so Schengen rules apply.



Keflavik airport had 90 000 travellers the Easter of 2019. This year there were 90. Photo: Björn Lindahl

All tourists are tested for the Coronavirus as they arrive at the airport, and no more than 2,000 people are allowed in per day. The testing will be paid by the Icelandic state until the beginning of July. After that, tourists must pay 15,000 Icelandic kronor (€99) per person themselves. Or they could choose two weeks' quarantine in Iceland instead.

The fee is controversial. Danish and German tourists have already cancelled their trips to Iceland because 15,000 kronor feels too expensive, says Icelandair's CCO Birna Ósk Einarsdóttir according to the mbl.is news site.

Hallgrímur Lárusson, the owner of bus company and travel agency Snæland Grímsson, agrees. He says that travel agencies plan one year ahead. He doubts whether a group of 30 people who paid for their Iceland trip last year are now prepared to pay an extra 450,000 Icelandic kronor (€2,970) for Covid tests.

Hallgrímur does not think there will be many tourists in Iceland this season, at most 2,000 people per day. He believes there is still very limited interest among people to travel, and proposes that airlines should demand a health certificate from people before allowing them to check in.

“If not, you risk that one sick person on the plane will ruin the holiday for a large group,” says Hallgrímur Lárusson.

Iceland is being responsible

Ambassador Håkan Juholt believes the testing shows that Iceland is being responsible. He does not think the fee will frighten tourists away. On the contrary, the fee shows that Iceland takes the virus seriously and puts the country and its visitors first. The money should be seen as part of the air ticket, he thinks.

“I would be very worried if the authorities did not keep the virus in check by testing for it. Iceland is an island and the government has control over who is in the country, so I don’t think this will frighten people away. Iceland has been an expensive destination. People who travel there are not too concerned about the price. They are not looking for the cheapest flight or hotel,” says Juholt.

He thinks many people worry about travelling to densely populated countries. Iceland quickly managed to stem the spread of Covid-19 and also has large nature areas devoid of people. You can discover the country while being very isolated.

“Perhaps Iceland can recover quicker than countries with large populations, for instance countries with beaches near the Mediterranean,” says Juholt.



Inga Rasmussen, 85, from Denmark and Karsten Tüchsen Hansen, 89, from Germany

Schleswig-Holstein – from conflict to peaceful border commute

Some 15,000 people commute to jobs across the border between Denmark and Germany, which is 100 years old this year. That makes the border region one joint labour market, yet one with widely differing legislation and workplace cultures on either side.

THEME

08.06.2020

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: CARSTEN REHDER, DPA

The Danish-German border has been where it is since a referendum in 1920. Border disputes of old have made way for cooperation, not least on how to create a joint Danish-German labour market with easy cross-border commuting. The cooperation has been fruitful – the number of cross-border commuters has increased manyfold in the past 20 years.



So says Peter Hansen, the head of a regional office and information centre in Region Sønderjylland-Schleswig. The centre works to remove obstacles to the free movement of labour both ways across the Danish-German border.

“There has always been some border commuting between Denmark and Germany, but the EU common market made things much easier. Today we can really talk about a joint labour market with some 15,000 border commuters in the region.”

Around 12,000 out of the 15,000 commuters are Germans working in Denmark. Around 600 live on the Danish side and work in Germany. The third type of border commuters are Danish citizens living on the south side of the border – often called the Danish minority – and an estimated 1,000 of them work for Danish companies on the north side of the border.

Commuting across the Danish-German border has risen and fallen in step with the economy, but the general tendency is that it has increased considerably since 2000 when there were between 2,000 and 4,000 border commuters.

The commuting follows a pattern similar to that of the Øresund region, explains Peter Hansen.

“There are far more Germans working in Denmark than the other way around. Similarly, in the Øresund region, there are far more Swedes working in the Copenhagen area than Danes working in Sweden.”

Border commuters who live in Denmark and work in Schleswig are generally highly educated people in leadership positions, while the Germans commuting to Southern Jutland count both skilled and unskilled workers representing all trades.

Love in coronavirus times: Couple meets for dates on closed Danish-German border

Inga lives in Denmark. Karsten lives in Germany. Despite the coronavirus pandemic, they have not been deterred from meeting each other every day at the border – keeping a safe distance, of course.



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The border between Germany and Denmark has been closed during the Corona pandemic for everything but commuting and freight, and therefore also for Inga, who lives in Denmark, and her boyfriend Karsten, who lives in Germany. This has not lessened the couple's love for each other, however. Every day, 85-year-old Inga Rasmussen and 89-year-old Karsten Tüchsen Hansen have met on the actual border to talk over breakfast, a coffee or a small glass off Geele Köm – a popular regional schnaps. The border has now reopened for lovers, and the couple has been reunited.

Source: Deutsche Welle

Border commuters have to be patient

Border commuting jobs are far more common between Southern Jutland and Schleswig than in the Øresund region.

“This might come as a surprise to some people, but we are a remote area with far fewer inhabitants than the Øresund region, so our 15,000 border commuters make up a relatively large part of the region’s total workforce. Around 1% of the workforce are cross-border commuters.”

EU membership means that Danish and German social insurance systems are pretty much in line with each other, so it is for instant not too difficult to file a tax return. Nevertheless, being a cross-border commuter does throw up some problems, points out Peter Hansen.

“You have to be patient as a cross-border commuter, and always get your head around the two countries’ systems which do differ a lot on many points. Sadly, cross-border commuters might still experience a slow-moving bureaucracy when they need to settle issues related to living in one country and working in another.”

Denmark and Germany have for instance completely different rules when it comes to how child and youth support is calculated. In Germany, it is means tested, and also higher. Moreover, it can be difficult for cross-border commuters to get compensation for work injuries.

A common cross-border region – Region Sønderjylland-Schleswig – was created back in 1997, and counts politicians from both sides of the border. In 2004 they established a joint region office and information centre to look after a range of issues – most importantly how to remove obstacles for a smooth, joint labour market, which is a reality in the region, says Peter Hansen.

“We provide advice to cross-border commuters and businesses in the border area on how to deal with the different labour market policies, workplace cultures and public management structures of the labour market areas in Denmark and Germany.”

Big cultural differences

Peter Hansen and his colleagues also cooperate with both Danish and German institutions and authorities to reduce national differences that make it difficult for workers to live in one country and work in the other, or for businesses to hire workers who live in the neighbouring country.

The hardest thing to align is workplace culture, as this differs a lot between the north and the south of the border, says Peter Hansen.

“There are big differences when it comes to what is expected from employees in companies in Sønderjylland and in Schleswig. Even if a Danish and a German business perhaps are just a few kilometres apart, they have a completely different tone, dress code, traditions for documentation and autonomy.”

According to Peter Hansen, the dress code is more formal in office settings south of the border. On the German side, there are also often higher expectations for decisions to be documented compared to what is the case in Danish businesses. On the Danish side workers generally given more autonomy.



When Uber met the Nordics

The taxi platform company Uber spent little time getting four Nordic countries to change their legislation to better suit the company's business model. Despite this, the number of people working for Uber remains low, according to a report on the platform economy commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

NEWS

02.06.2020

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: UBER

The American company Uber, founded in 2009, has now expanded to more than 800 cities across the globe. In the autumn of 2014, Uber set up shop in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland. Apart from in Sweden, the company faced regulated markets everywhere that only allowed a certain number of licensed taxi companies to operate, with strict regulations for drivers and for the cars.

According to researchers Sigurd M. N. Oppegaard, Tiina Saari and Antti Saloniemi, Uber operated just like it does in

the USA. The company simply did not care about existing legislation:

"After initiating its services, without concern for their illegality, Uber gained a foothold by building a coalition with its consumers – who enjoyed the cheaper rides – and presenting itself as the future of transportation, thus prompting politicians to create a taxi market regulation adjusted to the company's business model," the three researchers write.

Uber faced serious opposition from trade unions and some political parties, but the company also enjoyed support from other parties and business organisations.

Several business models

Uber uses several business models and have also started food and goods delivery services. The five most common models for personal transport are:

Uber Pop is the largest model, open for private individuals who have signed up themselves and their car to Uber's booking system and apps. The company calls it a car-sharing service, and drivers and cars are unlicensed.

Uber X: Drivers hold a taxi license but are considered to be self-employed, own their own cars and pay taxes, fuel, insurance and road tax themselves.

Uber Black is a more expensive variation, where drivers can be employed by an intermediary – often a limousine company.

Uber Lux is a more expensive version of Black, using more exclusive cars.

Uber XXL operates 16-seater minibuses.

In three of the four countries, Uber started up in the capital cities. In Sweden, they started up in the three largest cities all at once. Sweden had already deregulated its taxi market in the early 1990s, and the researchers write that Uber might have seen the Swedish market as the one where they were most likely to succeed.

Uber was sued quickly

So how did the American company do, pushing a business model which goes against the grain of the Nordic labour market model in so many ways? Things soon came to a head, and Uber drivers, as well as the company itself, were sued in several countries.

DENMARK

Uber had only just launched in Denmark in November 2014 when the Danish Transport, Building and Housing Authority reported the company to the police for being in breach of legislation preventing the transport of passengers without a license. Uber lost in court.

Meanwhile, 1,500 Uber drivers were reported for similar violations of the rules. They were also told to pay outstanding taxes. This created a debate which led to Denmark deregulating its taxi market in January 2018. The deregulation did not, however, go as far as Uber had wanted. Both drivers and cars would still have to be licensed. As a result, Uber pulled out of the Danish market in April 2017, as the conditions for the deregulation became known. At its peak, Uber had 2,000 drivers and 300,000 customers in Denmark.

FINLAND

Uber was taken to court in Finland too. Drivers were forced to pay back income considered to have been earned illegally. Here too a debate led to deregulation. And this time it was more in line with what Uber had wanted. Metres were no longer required in cars, unlike in Denmark, as long as there was alternative technology which served the same purpose. Uber is now running a relatively small operation in Finland, with 500 drivers linked to the company.

NORWAY

Norwegian courts also reacted quickly to Uber's operations. Drivers were fined, some lost their driving licences and many had earnings withdrawn. Uber's Dutch daughter company was also fined five million Norwegian kroner (€470,000). The debate around deregulation took longer in Norway. It will not happen until 1 July this year. Uber keeps running some of its more expensive versions, like Uber Lux. The company has not said when it might resume some of its other business models in Norway.

SWEDEN

When Uber entered Sweden in September 2014, the country had a taxi market which was more deregulated than the one in the USA at that time. Limits on the numbers of taxi licenses had for instance been removed as early as in 1990.

Despite this, the launch in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö was not unproblematic for Uber –, especially for the metre-free Uber Pop. In 2018 new rules came into force which allows a new type of taxis to be operated if the distance driven can be measured by other means.

Some of the changes will come into force in September 2020, others not until January 2021. Uber says that is too far into the future and has therefore closed down its Pop business. The tax issue has been more central in Sweden. Controls show that 83% of Uber drivers have not been using their metres or recorded payments that were lower than the actual ones. Only 68 % of earnings were reported to the tax authorities.

The researchers conclude that there are no major attempts to organise Uber drivers, partly because the business was considered to be illegal before deregulation happened, and partly because it was a group that was difficult to organise.

Attempts to organise drivers have been made in other countries, however. The report does not look at this, only Nordic conditions. But just before the Corona crisis hit, Yaseen Aslam – the most prominent trade union activist within Uber in the UK – was invited to Oslo to talk about his experiences.

He has recently called for the creation of an international organisation for platform workers, called the International Alliance of App-based Transport Workers.

Dawn Gearhart, an American trade union activist who was among the first to try to organise American Uber drivers, has been living in Oslo for a few years.



Dawn Gearhart was one of the first to try to organise Uber drivers in Seattle, USA. Here she is talking at the Nordic Work Life Conference, Photo: Björn Lindahl

She was one of three employees at the Teamsters 117 trade union in Seattle who in October 2015 succeeded in getting state-wide regulation forcing Uber to disclose information about the drivers working for the company – needed so that the trade union could contact them.

At the Nordic Work Life Conference, held at the Oslo Metropolitan University a couple of years ago, she said Uber's strategy is to first tempt as many as possible to sign up as Uber drivers. In the end, some 15,000 people had done so over a five year period in Seattle – 2% of the city's population!

"They were tempting people with 90,000 dollar annual salaries and 35 dollars hourly pay. Those without their own car, or who had credit to borrow money, could get a car on the day. But what many drivers failed to understand was that the interest on that Uber loan was 23%," said Dawn Gearhart.

"One of the people we spoke to had a job at the airport where he made 9.50 dollars an hour. He quit and started driving for Uber instead. When he got an accountant to calculate how much tax he needed to pay, he learned that he was making 2.64 dollars an hour."

According to Dawn Gearhart, 20% of Uber drivers were behind 80% of trips in Seattle. While she and her two colleagues and the local Teamster office managed to increase the number of drivers they were in touch with from 139 to 3251 between 2012 and 2017, the trade union faced some less than traditional methods from Uber.

"One of the things they did was to launch a podcast with 36 episodes interviewing 'drivers' about how bad things would get if they were organised. It was easy to hear that the inter-

viewees were reading from a script they had been given," she says.

While Teamsters is the oldest trade union in the USA, none of the major UK trade unions showed an interest in Uber.



Despite having only some 3,000 members, Yaseen Aslam's trade union has become a major threat to Uber's UK operations. Here at the Kulturhuset in Oslo where he addressed a meeting of Norsk arbeidslivsforum (Norwegian working life forum). Photo: Björn Lindahl.

When Yaseen Aslam started the first trade union for Uber drivers, he got help from the larger Independent Workers Union. Since he was not totally satisfied with the help he got from them, he set up an independent union, United Private Hire Drivers (UPDH), for which he is now the secretary-general. The trade union has 1,300 members who work for Uber, Lyft and other platform-based taxi companies. That is only a small fraction of the 250,000 platform drivers who operate in the UK today.

Yaseen Aslam and UPDH took Uber to court to force the company to recognise their members as employees and not contractors. Assan and UPDH have won three times against Uber in various courts. In July, the UK Supreme Court will hear Uber's appeal of the case now known as Uber BV vs Aslam. If the Supreme Court follows the lower courts, Uber would have to pay minimum wages, holiday and sickness pay for all of their drivers. Or close down Uber Pop in the UK.