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# Sweden's never-ending debate on migration

A cross-party consensus on migration was supposed to choke off the right-wing populists. The attempt failed spectacularly

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In August 2020, after a year of hard negotiations between parliamentary parties, the Swedish migration committee was supposed to present a new migration policy. The plan was to provide a new and broadly supported instrument, drawing a line under the endless debates on migration and related issues that benefit only the growing right-wing populist party.

The migration committee, established in 2019, represented an attempt to remove the topic from the political agenda once and for all. A broad compromise between all the political parties could have achieved that. Initial reports – as always – referred to constructive talks and an open attitude. Instead, the outcome seems to be a crisis of government.

Maria Malmer Stenegard, who represented the conservative Moderate party on the committee, said in early August that it was utterly divided. Only the ruling Social Democratic Party (SAP) stood behind all the proposals. Her colleague from the Christian Democrats, Hans Eklind, added that the final draft excluded a number of important issues, such as how to tighten the policy on returning people to their 'home countries'.

When the committee presents its final draft on 15 September, it appears that the only party that will support all 26 proposals will be the SAP. Its junior coalition partner, the Green Party, will only support a handful of the reform proposals. In this context, the SAP will have to rely on changing majorities to get the various components through parliament. This represents significant setback for the red-green coalition.

## The political legacy of 2015

The migration committee's work must be seen against the backdrop of the 2015 refugee crisis, which saw 163,000 refugees arrive in Sweden, mainly from the war in Syria. Sweden took in more refugees per capita than any other European country apart from Germany. Initially, there was huge popular and parliamentary support for a liberal refugee policy. But enthusiasm waned as the numbers grew.

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By November, the SAP-led government was introducing 'temporary' restrictions: issuing only temporary residence permits, restricting the right to family reunification and making residence permits for family members conditional on assurances of financial support. The new policy served its purpose. Only 28,939 people applied for asylum in Sweden in 2016 and the numbers have remained below that level ever since.

The temporary migration law of 2015 cut migrant numbers, but did nothing to stem the debate. Migration has remained the most hotly debated political issue (at least until the Covid-19 pandemic). Support for the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats quickly recovered after a post-2015 dip and the other parties started competing to promise the harshest anti-refugee measures.

## The chances for agreement were slim

But what would have to happen to reach an agreement between such fierce opponents as the Green Party or the Left Party, who both want to return to the policy Sweden had before November 2015, and the Sweden Democrats, who basically want to keep all migrants out of Sweden and instead focus on how to make people from migration backgrounds return to their 'home countries'.

There was little chance for a broad agreement, of course. The political prize for such an agreement would have been too high for everyone.

And so the committee's final draft included:

- A time limit on all residency permits for asylum seekers.
- Initial permit for three years (13 months for certain groups including war refugees), possibility to extend for a further two years.

- Permanent residency for refugees conditional on criteria including speaking Swedish, ability to support oneself and basic knowledge about Swedish society.
- Permanent residency permits for refugees from UN quota system.
- Residency permits possible on humanitarian grounds.
- Family reunification in cases where refugee has reasonable chances of receiving a permanent permit.

Migration has always been key to the success of the Sweden Democrats. When the party formed in the late 1980s, its core members came from the white supremacy movement and the 'Bevara Sverige Svenskt' organisation ('Keep Sweden Swedish').

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The Covid-19 pandemic redirected attention to other topics and the support for the Sweden Democrats declined. The current discussion over a new migration law, however, puts the public debate back in their home territory. Sensing an opportunity to regain their pre-pandemic popularity, the right-wing populists have no interest in compromise with the other parties: in July 2020 they declared that it would be impossible for them to sign any document with them. Instead, they would publish their own conclusions, including a proposal how to step up efforts to encourage immigrants to leave the country.

## The sticking points

The Green Party and the Left Party reject many of the committee's proposals: Annika Hirvonen of the Green Party points out that the proposed rules for family reunification will keep young families apart, while LGBT refugees who were unable to live with their partner in their home country will not be able to in Sweden either. People will be denied healthcare on the basis of time-limited residency permits, she adds. Faced with declining popularity and a leadership crisis, the Greens are appealing to the left-liberal-electorate by criticising the proposals for the new law.

The conservative Moderate Party is also dissatisfied. It wants even tighter restrictions on family reunification and permanent residency permits, as well as a strict limit on the number of refugees admitted each year. Many other parties and migration experts believe that the latter demand contravenes international law and UN conventions signed by Sweden.

It remains to be seen whether the committee's final draft can be turned into a proposal that parliament can vote on. That would require the agreement of the two governing parties, the Green Party and the SAP – which seem to disagree on most of the issues. For the centre-right parties, the stakes are simply too high. If the Moderate Party or the Christian Democrats signed up to such an agreement, they would be permitting the Sweden Democrats to present themselves as the only right-wing opposition on migration.

In short, despite the small numbers actually seeking asylum and Covid-19 dominating public discussion, the migration debate remains as deadlocked as in 2015.

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