

New York Times, February 26, 2011

Swedes Begin to Question Liberal Migration Tenets

By *SUZANNE DALEY*

MALMO, Sweden — Nick Nilsson, 46, decided to vote for [Sweden](#)'s far-right party last fall because of a growing sense that his country had gone too far in letting so many immigrants settle here.

A truck driver, Mr. Nilsson lives a half mile from the Rosengard section of this city, where dreary apartment buildings are jammed with refugees from virtually all the world's recent conflicts: Iranians, Bosnians, [Palestinians](#), Somalis, Iraqis.

"No one has a job over there," Mr. Nilsson said recently. "They are shooting at each other. There are drugs. They burn cars. Enough is enough."

For a time, Sweden seemed immune to the kind of anti-immigrant sentiment blossoming elsewhere on the European continent. Its generous welfare and asylum policies have allowed hundreds of thousands of refugees to settle here, many in recent years from Muslim countries. Nearly a quarter of Sweden's population is now foreign born or has a foreign-born parent.

But increasingly, Swedes are questioning these policies. [Last fall, the far-right party](#) — campaigning largely on an anti-[immigration](#) theme — won 6 percent of the vote and, for the first time, enough support to be seated in the Swedish Parliament.

Six months later, many Swedes are still in shock. The country — proud of its reputation for tolerance — can no longer say it stands apart from the growing anti-immigrant sentiment that has changed European parliaments elsewhere, leading to the banning of [burqas in France](#) and [minarets in Switzerland](#).

In Malmo, a rapidly gentrifying port city in Sweden's south, support for the far-right Sweden Democrats was particularly strong, about 10 percent of the vote. It is a place where tensions over immigration are on full display.

The city's mayor, [Ilmar Reepalu](#), a Social Democrat, ran his hands over a city map in his office, pointing out working-class neighborhoods like Mr. Nilsson's that voted heavily for the Sweden Democrats, as might be expected, he said. But he could point to wealthier neighborhoods, too, that produced support for the far right as never before.

"We must dig deeper to understand that," he said quietly.

Some experts say you do not have to dig that far. Sweden's liberal policies have become costly. In the 1950s, '60s and '70s, Sweden, which had more manufacturing jobs than citizens to fill them, invited immigrants in. Most came from other European countries. They worked and paid taxes. Those were good years for Malmo, which had shipyards and a textile industry.

When those jobs disappeared, Sweden stopped the flow of immigrant labor, but not the flow of refugees, many of whom clustered in Malmo and other former industrial centers. Jobs were still scarce, but housing was available, apartments built long ago for laborers.

In some of those apartment blocks, the unemployment rate among immigrants stands at 80 percent. Still, their children need schooling, and they have elderly parents who need health care. Some are damaged by the violence they have lived through. They suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and drug and alcohol addictions.

Prof. Jan Ekberg, an economist at Linnaeus University, questions the policies that allowed so many refugees to settle far from jobs. "They are depending on the public sector now as never before," he said. "That was a policy mistake."

Rosengard hardly has the look of a troubled ghetto. Lawns and playgrounds abound. But the area does not look like traditional Sweden, either. Satellite dishes hang from every balcony. The bakery sells Middle Eastern confections. [Al Jazeera](#) plays on the televisions. And young men huddle on street corners casually bragging about doing battle with the police.

A few years ago, the fire and ambulance brigades would not even enter Rosengard without a police escort. Youths there threw rocks and set cars on fire. Police officials say things are much better now. Fires were down 40 percent last year compared with 2009. But last month, two police vehicles parked at the station were set on fire with small homemade explosives.

All this does not sit well with Mr. Nilsson and his wife, Ann-Christine, 51, who say that immigrants are not only failing to pay their way, but that they also are refusing to learn the ways of their host country.

“They do not respect Swedish people,” Mrs. Nilsson said. “As long as they learn the language and behave like Swedes, they are welcome. But they do not. Immigration as it is now needs to stop.”

But resentment runs both ways. Residents of Rosengard feel that they are isolated and looked down on. They scoff at the notion that Swedes are somehow special — less racist and xenophobic than other Europeans. They believe the country has been generous with financial support, but little else.

Young immigrants like Behrang Miri, 26, whose family came from Iran, say Islamophobia is a growing issue. “If a Swedish guy hits a woman, it’s alcoholism,” he said. “If someone hits a lady in my neighborhood, it’s due to culture.”

He added: “And all this talk about outlawing [burqas](#) for teachers. No teachers wear burqas. Why are they talking about that?”

Mr. Miri, a rapper who has started a nonprofit agency to encourage multiculturalism, says he loves Sweden and is grateful he was taken in. But, he says, the Swedes have not gone far enough in accepting immigrants. “O.K., they’ve opened up the first door,” he said. “But I want doors four, five and six. I want to be able to become president.”

Even older immigrants who have made lives here say they have little contact with Swedes. A refugee from Bosnia, Ask Gasi, says he can understand that Swedes are reluctant to embrace the diverse and needy refugee population. He wonders himself whether the government made a mistake in letting so many come in.

Mr. Gasi was able to earn a doctorate degree here, and he has a job as a teaching assistant. But he still does not feel welcome. He points to the swastikas and the Serbian crosses etched in the hall outside the mosque he attends.

“It’s hard to watch the news,” he said. “It’s Muslim this, Muslim that. Everything is about how bad we are. The Swedish won’t say anything to your face. But they say things.”

Some experts believe the support for the far right has already reached its limits in Sweden. They say the increase in votes last fall was more the product of deft campaigning by the far right, which has avoided inflammatory language, than a deepening of racist or xenophobic sentiments.

[Ulf Bjereld](#), a political science professor at the University of Gothenburg, says that a vast majority of Swedes rank immigration very low on their list of concerns. He says they are, in fact, less racist and xenophobic than they used to be, according to surveys conducted regularly since the 1990s.

But researchers have found that immigrants do face discrimination in jobs and housing. Malmo’s mayor, Mr. Reepalu, believes jobs and schooling are critical, though he notes with disappointment that as soon as a school has more than about 20 percent immigrants, Swedish parents take their children out.