

NORDIC COOPERATION AMID PANDEMIC TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

**Katja Creutz, Sofie Berglund, Telli Betül Karacan,
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REPORT

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
DIIS	Danish Institute for International Studies
DK	Denmark
EEA	European Economic Area
EU	European Union
EURES	European Employment Services
FHM	Public health agency of Sweden (Swedish: Folkhälsomyndigheten)
FI	Finland
FIIA	Finnish Institute of International Affairs
GDP	Gross domestic product
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MP	Member of parliament
MR-DIGITAL	the Nordic Council of Ministers for Digitalisation
MSB	Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (Swedish: Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap)
NAV	Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (Norwegian: Arbeids- og velferdsforvaltningen)
NCM	Nordic Council of Ministers
NO	Norway
NOK	Norwegian krone
NUPI	Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
N5	Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PM	Prime minister
SE	Sweden
SEK	Swedish krona
SMES	Small and medium-sized enterprises
UI	Swedish Institute of International Affairs
UK	United Kingdom
WHO	World Health Organization

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1 INTRODUCTION

‘The Nordic family tree has deep roots – and those roots are stronger than the pandemic’.¹

The coronavirus disease, known as Covid-19, has struck the globe hard economically, politically, socially and in terms of human life. Multilateral cooperation and solidarity have been questioned even though the difficult times would call for more collaboration. States have put their own national interests first instead of finding solutions together with other states. The various arrangements of regional cooperation around the globe form no exception, albeit they are often built upon a common history, geography or traits, or a set of shared problems.² The same applies to Nordic cooperation in the fight against the pandemic.

This report explores how Nordic cooperation was affected by the travel restrictions adopted to curb the Covid-19 pandemic during the first two waves of the pandemic (between 1 January 2020 and 31 March 2021). Although the main focus is on institutional cooperation and how the Nordic countries interact therein, it is also understood broadly to include intra-Nordic relations. The study focuses on Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, excluding insular Iceland. The report seeks to contribute mainly to practical discussions regarding the current state of Nordic cooperation, while recognising that these findings may also have relevance for more theoretically inclined research. The aim is also to provide policy makers with an analysis of the costs of measures that go against

1 Søreide & Sanner 2021.

2 Amaya & De Lombaerde 2021.

fundamental elements of Nordic cooperation, as well as to offer food for thought for those who work with Nordic issues. The research case studies of Tornedalen (FI/SE), Svinesund (NO/SE) and Öresund (DK/SE) in particular seek to achieve these objectives as they provide a deep dive into the realities of border areas during the pandemic.

The research will focus on two areas: political costs that may affect the deepening of Nordic integration, and issues pertaining to labour, the economy and society in cross-border regions. The report explores, inter alia, one set of questions that map national responses to the pandemic, including what travel restrictions were implemented in the Nordic countries in response to the pandemic. Another category of research questions pertains to Nordic cooperation and how it was affected by the travel restrictions, both in the short and long term. These issues will also be addressed from the perspective of cross-border regions, not only because their problems with the travel restrictions have been so visible, but because they represent the embodiment of the Nordic 'de-bordering project'. Finally, the report encompasses research questions on how Nordic cooperation can move forward following the pandemic crisis.

The research report has six parts, with the first two chapters setting the scene for the study of Nordic cooperation and the Covid-19 travel restrictions in general. The introductory chapter discusses the research framework and methods and Nordic cooperation at an analytical level, as well as the pandemic as a challenge at an institutional, political and local level. It also presents the various strategies the four countries in this study have adopted to fight the pandemic. The second chapter presents the travel restrictions by country, after which the functioning of Nordic cooperation during the pandemic crisis is explored in the third chapter. The fourth and main chapter analyses the consequences of the travel restrictions upon Nordic cooperation. This is done, first, by looking at their local societal impact in three cross-border regions, and second, by examining their potential long-term implications for political cooperation. The report concludes with a discussion on the main findings of the study as well as their implications for the future, and the final remarks connect this discussion to the analytical starting point of the study.

1.1 RESEARCH METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

The report draws on recent literature on Nordic cooperation in general, as well as on emerging data relating to the Nordics and travel restrictions,

including data produced by Nordic institutions themselves.³ Research on the impact of border closure upon other areas of regional cooperation was also utilised, as well as similar studies that examine the Nordic countries' pandemic strategies and their effect upon regional cooperation.⁴ National data from each country was employed to chart the adoption of restrictions and their perceived effect upon Nordic cooperation, including legislative acts, parliamentary debates, speeches by relevant governmental ministers (e.g. Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister of the Interior, Minister for Nordic Cooperation), official policy papers and relevant newspaper articles. Virtual debates, seminars and conferences pertaining to the topic were also used. The case studies on cross-border regions also benefit from and build upon a previous study concerning the impacts of the pandemic in the Tornedalen and Svinesund border regions presented in a research report titled 'Closed borders and divided communities: status report and lessons from Covid-19 in cross-border areas' published by Nordregio.⁵ This study, conducted in the autumn of 2020, includes an extensive number of interviews, meetings with cross-border committees and a webinar to which border experts from across and beyond the Nordic Region were invited to discuss the preliminary findings and policy implications.

The current research relies to a large extent on semi-structured interviews with altogether 39 interviews conducted for the purposes of this study. All interviews were anonymised by mutual agreement in order to allow frank discussion. Sixteen of the interviews were held with relevant government officials and stakeholders in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Nordic institutions.⁶ These interviews involve relevant authorities in each country who work with Nordic institutional cooperation or are responsible for borders, ranging from Ministries of Foreign Affairs to Ministries of Interior. It is worth noting that the responsibility for Nordic cooperation may be situated in different ministries, depending on the country in question. Based on background discussions with the project reference group, and with experts on Nordic cooperation and mobility, a joint interview guide was prepared for the research group to guide the interviews with interlocutors from various backgrounds. The interviews, as well as the analysis thereof, were conducted by the authors responsible for each country, after which the findings were discussed together by the whole research group.

3 Nordic Co-operation 2020a; Giacometti & Wøien Meier 2021.

4 Connor 2020; Bolt 2021; Etzold 2021.

5 Giacometti & Wøien Meijer 2021.

6 For a list of all the individual interviews, see Bibliography.

The research on cross-border regions included 16 individual and group interviews with a total of 23 interviewees. Seven interviews with eight persons were held in the Tornedal area, four interviews with six persons in Svinesund, and five interviews with nine persons in Öresund. Key stakeholders representing a variety of actors including border organisations, labour market actors, municipalities and businesses were interviewed. The selection of interviews helped ensure a diverse sample of perspectives from across the three case study areas. The interviewees were identified based on prior knowledge of actors in the area and the snowball method. The interviews were semi-structured, lasted between 45 minutes and one hour and were recorded. For the Öresund interviews, both authors from Nordregio were present. The material was subsequently roughly transcribed, analysed and compared. This empirical material was also compared to the findings of the Freedom of Movement Council's Nordic survey on border restrictions undertaken in 2020.⁷

A few caveats are warranted, however, concerning the research, its scope and its material. First, it is important to recognise that this research represents a snapshot both in time and of existing views on the research topic. The temporal limitation of the project to the first and second waves of the pandemic may affect the findings and the way they will be construed later. Thus, for example, the research cannot fully consider whether the policies of the Nordic countries have changed remarkably during the pandemic as a whole. It is also important to note that while the pandemic is in recession at the time of writing, the final outcome is uncertain. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, the limited number of interviewees in each country and among the Nordic institutions paints a picture of the state of affairs that is partially dependent on the selection and availability of interviewees. The research and the conclusions that can be drawn are limited: while giving indications about Nordic cooperation, they still represent an understanding of the situation within a particular time frame and among specific interviewees. To mitigate this somewhat, the researchers have sought to complement the discussion with external materials. Another limitation is geographical. The study focuses on Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden because these four countries share common borders and therefore have also witnessed the most significant effects of the travel restrictions imposed. For the study of cross-border regions, this means that three areas are explored: the Öresund Region (DK/SE), Svinesund (NO/SE) and Tornedalen (FI/SE). The selected case study areas provided a diverse sample of the Nordic countries having borders with other Nordic countries.

7 Nordic Co-operation 2020a.

It must also be conceded that separating the precise consequences of travel restrictions *per se* from those arising from other pandemic measures is difficult (see chapter 4.1.5. below). This problem is connected to the usefulness of figures and statistical data in this study, because the applicability of these statistics is limited for a number of reasons: there are no reliable statistics on border crossings, the number of frontier workers or the number of businesses and social relations that depend on free mobility. The approaches and measures taken in response to the pandemic also differed across countries, in addition to which the severity of impacts vary significantly depending on the economic structure and pre-pandemic performance of different areas, as well as their degree of socio-economic integration. Therefore, it is difficult to make clear-cut inferences about the cause of the changes registered in statistical records, such as GDP, bankruptcies, employment and border crossings.

To conclude with a conceptual note, the term ‘Nordic Region’ will be used exceptionally in this report to denote the four Nordic states studied here unless it is clear from the context that the concept is used in its ordinary meaning, that is, including all five states. For reasons of linguistic variation, ‘interviewee’, ‘respondent’ and ‘informant’ will be used synonymously in the report.

1.2. NORDIC COOPERATION

The Nordic countries and the way they interact continue to attract both theoretical and practical interest.⁸ One prominent lens through which Nordic cooperation has been analysed interdisciplinarily over the years is ‘Nordic exceptionalism’ – a term that has been used to describe a number of policy issues, phenomena and developments within the Nordic Region. Originally, the concept was coined by penologists studying Nordic penal systems, but the term has quickly spread to analyses of the Nordic countries and a range of other topics: development policies,⁹ the European Union, environmental policies, welfare nationalism and social trust, among other things. According to Christopher S. Browning, Nordic exceptionalism indicates ‘standing for an “exception” to standard practices in international and economic affairs’.¹⁰ The idea of distinctiveness serves Nordic identity construction, but also as a model for other societies.¹¹

8 See e.g. special issues on Nordic cooperation in *Politics & Governance* vol. 8(4) (2020), *Global Affairs* vol. 4 (2018) and *Internasjonal politikk* vol. 76(4) (2018).

9 Elgström & Delputte 2015.

10 Browning 2007.

11 *Ibid.*, 44.

The idea of exceptionalism may also be argued to permeate the sphere of freedom of movement and open borders as free movement and a common labour market have been central hallmarks of the Nordic project, and a sector in which the Nordic Region was a predecessor¹². The creation of the passport union in 1954, which allows Nordic citizens to travel and reside in the Nordic countries without passports, has been described as ‘one of the most visible results of postwar Nordic cooperation’.¹³ It is also one of the most appreciated aspects of Nordic cooperation among the region’s citizens,¹⁴ and a reference point and model for other countries to build upon. For example, creating similar structures in the Visegrad 4 countries or Scotland has been contemplated.¹⁵ The Nordic passport union also demanded state-of-the-art solutions in order to be maintained within Schengen, the EU’s corresponding area,¹⁶ with Norway and Iceland as non-EU members being forced to abandon fixed border controls vis-à-vis the Schengen countries. Thinking about borders and Nordic cooperation as a signpost of exceptionalism may also be based on the argument that Nordic foreign policy is internationalistic in nature because of values arguably prevalent to Nordic policy, namely solidarity, inclusiveness and universality.¹⁷

Yet, Nordic exceptionalism was not immediately visible in managing the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. Despite the similarity of the Nordic countries, there was no joint Nordic approach to managing Covid-19,¹⁸ and neither were the high ambitions of integration reflected in the strategies adopted. Value-based, joint Nordic action was missing, and national security solutions gained primacy, similarly to what was happening around the globe. At the outset and during the crisis, Nordic political cooperation displayed few signs of ‘sharing a common political, economic and administrative model’ so often attributed to the region.¹⁹ As stated by Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers Paula Lehtomäki: Nordic institutional cooperation is simply not seen as a tool to manage every-day issues.²⁰ In contrast to the Nordics, the Baltic States managed to create a ‘Baltic Bubble’, within which travel restrictions were mutually removed,

12 Bonnén et al. 2021.

13 Tervonen 2015, 131–132.

14 Hoybråten in Riksdagens framtidsutskotts publikation 7/2018, *Nordens nya relevans*, p. 39.

15 See e.g. Grietl et al. 2018; HM Government 2014.

16 Gros-Tchorbadjiyska 2010.

17 Strang 2020a.

18 Time & Veggeland 2020, 53.

19 Stie & Trondal 2020, 1.

20 Presentation by Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers Paula Lehtomäki at the webinar ‘Nordiska scenarier – kickoff’, *Magma*, 7 April 2021.

displaying what has been called ‘the new rise of Baltic cooperation’.²¹ Estonia and Latvia also exempted residents of the twin cities Valga and Valka from quarantine requirements.²²

The relevance of Nordic institutional cooperation has not been questioned only with respect to the Covid-19 pandemic, but more broadly.²³ The dynamic cooperation of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, entailing the legal harmonisation of numerous fields of cooperation, has reverted to the background with the ‘Europeanisation’ of Nordic cooperation. No major international conventions have been concluded in the last decade(s), and despite the existence of external challenges and threats to the Nordic Region, the countries seem to opt for softer means of cooperation, i.e. exchange of information and cooperation through soft law instruments.²⁴ In fact, since 1995 when Finland and Sweden joined the European Union, no major Nordic conventions have been agreed upon.²⁵ The waning political importance of Nordic cooperation has neither been compensated by extensively reforming Nordic institutions nor by extending institutional cooperation to new policy issues. This conclusion finds support in a review of the Stoltenberg Report conducted by the Nordic foreign policy institutes in 2019, which held: ‘Nordic cooperation seems to be most successful when it can draw on the strengths of informal cooperation and can utilize the dense cooperation between administrations of the various countries, rather than seeking to establish specific Nordic units or new institutions’.²⁶ Johan Strang has even gone so far as to claim that Nordic cooperation has become more of a trademark than actual cooperation between governments, administrations and populations.²⁷

Tobias Etzold has characterised Nordic cooperation as ‘differentiated integration’ rather than a common political order.²⁸ Cooperation is mainly driven in feasible policy issues, such as the environment, climate and social affairs.²⁹ This finding is also supported by a study on Nordic cooperation in foreign and security policy in which Kristin Haugevik and Ole Jacob Sending have argued that ‘overarching foreign policy coordination is likely to remain ad hoc and on a case-by-case basis’, at least in

21 Raik 2020; Beirens, Fratzke & Kainz 2020.

22 Veebel 2020.

23 Niemivuo & Viikari 2019.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid, 121.

26 Haugevik & Sverdrup 2019, 21.

27 Nyman 2021.

28 Etzold 2020.

29 Ibid.

the international domain.³⁰ Nordic security and defence cooperation, a field in which substantial progress has been made during the last decade and arguably ‘a central aspect of Nordic cooperation’,³¹ also testifies to differentiated integration with cooperation developing with varying pace and depth.

1.3. THE PANDEMIC AS A MULTI-LEVEL STRESS TEST

In January 2020, when the first reports of a deadly virus spreading from Wuhan, China, reached the Nordic countries situated far from the pandemic epicentre, few expected this crisis to turn into a stress test for Nordic cooperation. Despite the fact that the development of the infectious disease into a pandemic took a few weeks, the governments of the four Nordic countries studied here – Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden – resorted to national measures to guarantee national security and health. Their strategies diverged: Denmark, Finland and Norway chose to impose travel restrictions with the aim to hinder the spread of the virus, whereas Sweden kept its borders open and did not embark upon the path of societal lockdown similarly to the other Nordics, or most European countries for that matter.

The lack of a regional approach to the pandemic is not exceptional, however. Global mobility was reduced markedly during 2020, and parallels can be drawn to the European Union member states that have introduced internal border controls despite free movement being one of the pillars of the Union.³² Neither is the pressure upon free movement in the Nordic Region unprecedented. Already before the oft-cited cases of introducing border controls during the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, and those imposed by Denmark in order to hold off criminals in 2019, exceptions had taken place with regard to Finnish roma immigration in the 1950s and the so-called ‘Danish Passport Affairs’ in 2011.³³ This has led Miika Tervonen to argue that tension prevails in the Nordic ‘de-bordering’ project between the national desire to maintain control over borders versus the processes seeking to guarantee free movement.³⁴ In a sense, borders can be seen as ‘processes that cannot be finalized’.³⁵ In 2016, in

30 Haugevik & Sending 2020, 117.

31 Bengtsson 2020, 107.

32 Heinikoski 2020.

33 Tervonen 2015, 135-139.

34 Ibid., 142.

35 Scott 2012, 84.

the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis, the Ministers for Nordic Cooperation also stressed the necessity of resorting to exceptional means in order to maintain public order and security – despite the existence of a border-free Nordic Region.³⁶

The adoption of travel restrictions sends a signal that potentially questions the seriousness of Nordic integration, even though the vast majority of countries adopted travel restrictions as a response to the pandemic.³⁷ Arguably, ‘the image of a unitary, happy and cooperative region’ has been threatened,³⁸ with some even posing the question of whether border controls are the beginning of the end.³⁹ Restricting freedom of movement between the Nordic countries also conflicts with the stated long-term political aim for Nordic cooperation as expressed by the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic prime ministers in August 2019. The Nordic Council of Ministers’ Vision 2030 seeks to make the Nordic Region ‘the most sustainable and *integrated* in the world’.⁴⁰ Concerning the so-called Haga cooperation on rescue and civil preparedness, which takes place outside the Nordic Council of Ministers, it is also held that the Nordic states are ‘strongest when they stand together’.⁴¹

At the heart of the issue of free movement in the time of the pandemic is trust – as is the case with any kind of disturbance to normal free movement.⁴² This arguably requires the ability to rely on neighbouring countries’ testing practices, data reporting and sensibility regarding a broader pandemic strategy.⁴³ But trust among the Nordic countries has usually been seen to extend far beyond that. The level of Nordic trust has been described as ‘unique’, and it usually characterises the relations between authorities and citizens.⁴⁴ Trust is, however, a multifaceted concept, which can symbolise not only relations at different levels, but also belief in more abstract or comprehensive phenomena. For the sake of this study, another relevant dimension besides trust between people on the one hand, and trust between authorities and citizens on the other, is trust in open borders as part of the Nordic project. Arguably, every time border closures are used, ‘the instinct to return to national borders at times of crisis may

36 Nordic Co-operation 2016.

37 Connor 2020.

38 Sefton 2020; Bolt 2021, 23.

39 Jóhannsdóttir 2017.

40 Nordic Council of Ministers 2020 (emphasis added).

41 Haga declaration 2009.

42 Beirens, Fratzke & Kainz 2020.

43 Ibid.

44 Nordic Co-operation 2017.

only grow stronger'.⁴⁵ Eventually, the foundation for free movement will be eroded. One development that could witness to this trajectory is the proliferation of dual citizenships in the Nordic countries.⁴⁶

But the pandemic has not only tested the political will to engage in Nordic cooperation and the functioning of the institutions pursuing the Nordic agenda. The political relations between the Nordic countries have reportedly also been strained by the pandemic and the distinct national strategies regarding the pandemic. The Swedish Foreign Minister warned early on that the handling of the pandemic will leave deep scars,⁴⁷ and several commentators remark that Nordic friendship and solidarity have been put to test.⁴⁸ The 'gold' of the Nordic Region, that is trust, has become debated.⁴⁹ Among individual Nordic countries, the relations between Denmark and Sweden on the one hand,⁵⁰ and Norway and Sweden on the other,⁵¹ have been considered to have been specifically affected.

The pandemic has also stirred relations locally with unprecedented consequences for Nordic mobility and the daily lives of citizens throughout the four Nordic countries. Tens of thousands of people commute across their borders on a daily basis, and many more cross these borders on a regular basis for business, social gatherings, shopping and recreation. This connectivity is well exemplified by the Öresund bridge connecting Sweden and Denmark, which displayed a huge decrease in border crossing in the spring of 2020, caused by the national lockdown in Denmark. For example, traffic statistics on motor vehicles show that in April 2019, there were 613,280 crossings on the Öresund bridge, compared to 190,821 in April 2020.⁵² Commuters have also faced many uncertainties regarding, inter alia, taxation and social security, in addition to which discriminatory behaviour has been identified. Many cases of so-called 'corona bullying' were reported to have occurred in social media and in real life too, experienced by Swedish individuals working abroad. For example, Swedes have been forced to wear yellow vests at some workplaces in Norway for the sake of being identifiable, and eat their breakfast in separate rooms from the others.⁵³ Danish cars have been stoned in Scania,⁵⁴ possibly due to the

45 Ibid.

46 Strang 2020c.

47 *Dagens Nyheter* 2021a.

48 See e.g. Hansson & Stefánsdóttir 2021; Sefton 2020.

49 Nordic Council of Ministers 2017; See also Hansson & Stefánsdóttir 2021.

50 Hansson & Stefánsdóttir 2021, 38.

51 See e.g. Section 3.3. below.

52 *Öresundsbron* in Swedish and *Øresundsbroen* in Danish.

53 Preisler 2021.

54 Carlsson 2021.

way their country managed the pandemic. The borders between Sweden and Finland, which have reportedly remained open for centuries, have witnessed fences and border patrols, triggering claims of a new ‘Berlin Wall’.⁵⁵ Sweden also closed its border to Denmark two days before Christmas 2020, leaving the people of the Danish island of Bornholm unable to transit to mainland Denmark, a measure which has initiated discussion about a direct ferry line from Copenhagen to Bornholm.⁵⁶

1.4. FOUR COUNTRIES, FOUR STRATEGIES

As the first wave of Covid-19 hit the Nordic countries in March 2020, the four Nordic countries adopted measures in response to the pandemic, most of them seeking to limit the spread of the virus through strict measures domestically and with regard to their borders. Thus, Denmark, Finland and Norway adopted similar strategies with slight national variations, whereas Sweden deviated from the others.

Denmark was one of the first countries in Europe to react, with a lockdown from 14 March, including the closure of all its national borders⁵⁷ and the introduction of stringent social distancing measures, such as a directive to work from home and a limit on the number of people allowed in social gatherings (10 people). In mid-April, Denmark relaxed the social distancing measures and allowed social gatherings of 50 people. In late October, the maximum number of people allowed to gather was again reduced to 10, and face masks became mandated in all public places. In response to the second wave of infections, Denmark implemented a national lockdown from 25 December to 17 January 2021. Denmark partially reopened on 1 March 2021, while some travel restrictions remained in place.

By March 2021, Denmark’s death toll was close to 2,400, which was considerably lower than Sweden’s approximately 13,000. The political justification for and the general public’s acceptance of the travel restrictions in Denmark are to a large extent based on this discrepancy.⁵⁸ Denmark’s GDP decreased an overall 2.1 per cent in 2020 according to the figures from Statistics Denmark.⁵⁹ Economic aid packages and frequent and free testing have been important elements in keeping the economy afloat. Due to such measures, the Danish public and political parties in opposition have generally supported the government policies, including

55 See Section 1.4. ‘Four Countries, Four Strategies’ below on Finland.

56 Parliament of Sweden 2020f.

57 Klatt 2020.

58 Gordon et al. 2021.

59 Danmarks statistik.

travel restrictions. Criticism has mostly been directed at measures isolating the elderly, children and youth, whereas travel restrictions have mainly been criticised by those directly affected: commuters, Danes with summer cottages in Sweden and people travelling regularly to and from Bornholm through Sweden. The criticism of inadequate or slow bi- and multilateral coordination of social security, unemployment benefits, tax and other rules affecting commuters has increased during the period, leading to a growing lack of trust in Nordic cooperation in this segment.

In *Finland*, the Covid-19 pandemic started to spread in mid-March at a time when the World Health Organization (WHO) had already declared the spread of the coronavirus a pandemic. Since the spreading of the coronavirus in Finland and throughout the crisis, fighting the Covid-19 pandemic has been a governmental priority. Accordingly, the government as a whole has discussed and decided upon strategies and measures since the start of the pandemic. A broad range of measures have been taken, including strict travel measures, internal restrictions on freedom of movement, the closing down of schools, social distancing, recommendations for wearing personal protective equipment such as face masks, teleworking and limiting social gatherings. In the summer of 2020, witnessing a significant decrease in Covid-19 cases, Finland adopted a so-called hybrid strategy, whereby attention was paid to ‘test-trace-isolate-treat processes, targeted regional measures and vaccinations’.⁶⁰ Stricter measures have, however, been reintroduced when new different pandemic waves have hit the country.

The general governmental approach has been described as ‘more communicative than regulatory’⁶¹ as it relied on a combination of mandatory and voluntary measures ranging from the application of emergency laws to the adoption of recommendations. Saving lives has been the primary priority of the government in addition to ensuring the continued capacity of the health care system. The Finnish approach seems to have worked relatively well. International commentators have described the Finnish approach as a success story,⁶² and this appears to hold true in so far as one looks at mortality rates. At the end of March 2021, ‘Finland was the least affected country in Europe by confirmed Covid-19 deaths per 100,000, and the third least affected in terms of Covid-19 deaths per 100,000’ globally.⁶³

Yet, the handling of the coronavirus crisis also came with a price. Cross-border regions, such as Tornedalen and the Åland Islands, situated

60 Tengvall-Unadike 2021.

61 Scheinin 2021.

62 Höppner 2020.

63 Tengvall-Unadike 2021, 45.

between Finland and Sweden, have suffered the consequences of the Finnish strategy with strict measures on travel. Families have struggled to meet, unemployment rates have risen, commuting has decreased markedly and the cross-border identity has suffered a blow. For example, the raising of fences on the border between Finland and Sweden, which has not happened for decades, or even centuries, caused distress and hostility towards authorities in the cross-border area of Tornedalen.⁶⁴ It even triggered claims of a new Berlin Wall⁶⁵ and divided the community into ‘us’ and ‘them’.⁶⁶

In *Norway*, the first Norwegian Covid-19 case was recorded on 26 February 2020. In the ensuing days and weeks, the number of cases rose rapidly. Two weeks later, on 12 March 2020, the Norwegian government announced what Prime Minister Erna Solberg termed ‘the strictest and most intrusive measures Norway’s population has experienced in peacetime’ in response to the pandemic.⁶⁷ Among the measures introduced were the closing of all kindergartens, schools and educational institutions; bans on cultural events and organised sports activities; and the closing of all bars and pubs. Health personnel working with patient care were prohibited from travelling abroad.⁶⁸ The stated and unequivocal first priority for the Solberg government was to ‘secure the life and health of the country’s population’.⁶⁹ Over the next days, the government also introduced control measures at all internal borders. The MFA issued global travel advice against all travel abroad.

The travel restrictions and control measures had immediate effects on intra-Nordic mobility. While Norwegian government officials acknowledged that the new policies would have negative economic and societal consequences, the key focus was on limiting the number of deaths resulting from the pandemic. This concern trumped all others. At the outset of the crisis, the government’s stated response strategy was to ‘brake’ the pandemic wave. However, by the end of March 2020, this strategy had been replaced by one of ‘suppression’, with the operative aim of pushing the reproduction (‘R’) number below 1. The suppression strategy demanded tougher restrictions than the ‘braking’ strategy,⁷⁰ but polls

64 Karhu, Kursi & Kukko-Liedes 2021; Akimo 2020.

65 Karhu, Kursi & Kukko-Liedes 2021; Akimo 2020.

66 Sippola 2021.

67 Prime Minister’s Office & Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services 2020a.

68 Norwegian Directorate of Health 2020.

69 Solberg 2020.

70 Government.no 2021a.

suggested that the Norwegian population supported the government's chosen strategy.⁷¹

In early April, the government announced that the pandemic was under control, and that it would gradually start lifting restrictions and reopening Norwegian society. This included a gradual reopening of the borders by first permitting more work-related travel and then leisure travel in the Nordic area first and the EEA/Schengen area afterwards.⁷² In early November 2020, the Norwegian government stated that the second wave of the pandemic was underway. This resulted in updated travel advice and new control measures at the border.

While Norwegian media reported throughout the pandemic on challenges to intra-Nordic mobility and bilateral friction especially due to the closing of the Swedish border, Norwegian officials for the most part downplayed the difficulties in Nordic cooperation. The recurring message was that (a) travel restrictions and control measures at the border are undesirable, but necessary to save lives; (b) they are temporary; (c) Nordic dialogue and cooperation have overall been good during the pandemic; (d) matters will return to normal once the pandemic is under control; and (e) a more coordinated Nordic response to this type of crisis is neither realistic nor is it a political or bureaucratic aim.

Sweden took a different approach to tackling the spread of the coronavirus than the other Nordic countries. Instead of imposing lockdowns and hard restrictions, the Swedish strategy focused on limiting but not completely extinguishing the virus in order to keep the hospital spots at a manageable level. In comparison to other countries, Swedish society remained largely open, with elementary schools, shops and restaurants keeping open although required to adapt to spacing regulations and capacity limits.⁷³ The strategy received a lot of attention not only in the Nordics but also globally as it differed from the main line of lockdowns and instead relied on individual responsibility and authority recommendations to alter social behaviour.⁷⁴ The strategy prioritised defining risk groups, keeping the virus out of the elderly homes and keeping elementary schools open.⁷⁵ Herd immunity was not an outspoken priority but a sort of by-product of this liberal strategy, which was argued to be a better long-term solution as the virus was expected to be around in society for years.⁷⁶

71 NRK 2020a. However, Solberg's personal rating fell following media revelations in March 2021 that she and her family had broken national coronavirus regulations on the occasion of her 60th birthday. See Aalborg 2021.

72 Government.no 2021a.

73 Public Health Agency of Sweden 2020a; Parliament of Sweden 2020c.

74 Petridou 2020; Pierre 2020.

75 Ludvigsson 2020b.

76 Government Offices of Sweden 2020d.

As of March 2020, recommendations from the Public Health Agency of Sweden (Folkhälsomyndigheten, FHM) on how people should alter their social behaviour in a way that would limit the spread of the virus were updated almost daily. In the beginning, the recommendations mainly focused on physical distancing from people outside one's household, washing hands regularly and carefully, and working from home if possible. The government underlined that if these recommendations, and physical distancing in particular, were not practised, tougher measures would be introduced.⁷⁷ On 19 March, the public was also urged by FHM not to travel within Sweden unless necessary as Covid-19 cases started to rise especially in the Stockholm region.⁷⁸ The restriction was lifted on 13 June 2020 because of the limited spread of the virus.

The central factor for choosing a more liberal strategy was not to protect the economy, but rather that the emphasis on personal responsibility was believed to be the most appropriate approach for Swedish culture and society with high trust in government.⁷⁹ State epidemiologist Anders Tegnell underlined on multiple occasions that Sweden's approach was not that different from those of other countries as it shared the main feature of trying to keep people apart with the tools available.⁸⁰ Later, Tegnell has stated that 'if we were to encounter the same disease with the knowledge we have today, we would probably have to implement a strategy about halfway between what Sweden did and what the rest of the world did.'⁸¹

In addition to the government's and FHM's ambition to keep society as open as possible whilst limiting the spread of the virus, Sweden's constitution was argued to prohibit a lockdown because a lockdown would restrict the freedom of movement within Sweden and across its borders guaranteed for all citizens.⁸² The Public Order Act does, however, explicitly allow the government to restrict freedom of assembly and freedom to demonstrate in case of an epidemic, which is why Sweden could impose limits to public gatherings.⁸³ The Communicable Diseases Act also allows for restricting the free movement of certain individuals or restricting access to local areas, but not for a nationwide lockdown.⁸⁴ The Swedish government cannot, however, declare a state of emergency as seen in

77 Pierre 2020.

78 Public Health Agency of Sweden 2020b.

79 Pierre 2020.

80 See e.g. Paterlini 2020

81 State epidemiologist Anders Tegnell cited in Pierre 2020, 491.

82 Jonung 2020.

83 Swedish Ministry of Justice 2020.

84 Parliament of Sweden 2004.

many other countries to centralise authority and allow for more radical measures unless Sweden is in a state of war.⁸⁵

In order to make more restrictive measures available should the situation worsen in Sweden, the government proposed a temporary pandemic law at the beginning of 2021, which came into effect on 10 January after the Riksdag approved the proposition.⁸⁶ The temporary law allowed the government to ban access to public places and apply binding restrictions in areas such as gyms and shopping malls, which previously only followed recommendations, if deemed necessary to limit the spread of the coronavirus.⁸⁷

Another characteristic of the Swedish approach was the low visibility of the prime minister and other ministers. The cabinet ministers announced early on that they would follow the expert advice of FHM. The daily press briefings were thus held to a large extent with representatives from FHM, the Civil Contingencies Agency (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, MSB) and the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) rather than cabinet ministers. In particular, state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell became a central figure in explaining and defending Sweden's strategy both nationally and internationally. However, these agencies' expertise on pandemics is not the only explanation to why cabinet ministers were not as visible as in other countries. Just as the constitution prohibits limits to freedom of movement, it also guarantees the independence of public agencies' decisions and recommendations from ministerial interference.⁸⁸ The government is not bound to follow these recommendations, but usually does so by tradition.⁸⁹

85 Pierre 2020.

86 Parliament of Sweden 2020b.

87 Parliament of Sweden 2020d.

88 Jonung 2020; Government Offices of Sweden 2015.

89 Jonung 2020.

1/2

2 ADOPTED TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS BETWEEN MARCH 2020 AND MARCH 2021

2.1. OVERVIEW

In mid-March 2020, the first wave of Covid-19 had the governments of the Nordic countries impose measures and restrictions to control the spread of the virus. Denmark, Finland and Norway were all quick to set restrictions on passenger traffic passing through their country borders. Denmark closed its borders to all passenger traffic with the exception of people commuting between Denmark and Sweden, while Finland only permitted entry for those foreign people who work in the travel-to-work areas by the Norwegian or Swedish borders. Norway closed its borders to foreign nationals lacking a residence permit in Norway, except for those who live or work in Norway. Norway, Denmark and Finland also set quarantine rules for entrants, which in Norway were mandatory for anyone arriving from outside Sweden or Finland. In contrast to the other Nordic countries, Sweden was quite late to impose travel restrictions. While the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs advised against international travel since the outbreak of the pandemic, it was not until the end of 2020 that the first entry ban was implemented.

During the summer of 2020, the Nordic countries began to ease their travel restrictions. In May, Finland allowed commuting and other essential travel in the Schengen area, and border controls were lifted for travel between Finland and Norway in June. In June, Norway also allowed travel to certain countries, including Denmark, Finland, the Færoe Islands and Iceland, as well as certain regions in Sweden. Sweden removed its advice against non-essential travel to Iceland in June, to Norway and Denmark

in July and to Finland in September. Denmark reopened its borders for Swedish nationals and residents in August.

However, in the autumn of 2020 and towards the end of the year, measures had to be tightened again due to increasing infection rates. In Finland, border control at the Norwegian border was restored in August. In the same month, the Norwegian government issued advice against non-essential travel to all countries, and in November, new control measures at the border were introduced. Denmark reintroduced occasional random border checks in September and issued a quarantine requirement for Scania in October. On 21 December, Sweden imposed its first travel ban regarding entry from Denmark and Great Britain due to reports of a new virus mutation in Great Britain.

The first quarter of 2021 was characterised by tightening restrictions in all the Nordic countries under scrutiny. The Danish government tightened the rules for entry and exit between Denmark and Sweden and set a requirement for border commuters to show a negative Covid-19 test. Finland tightened entry restrictions from all Schengen countries, only allowing essential travel. Norway banned Swedish and Finnish commuters from crossing the border altogether at the end of January until a strict testing and control regime was introduced for this group a month later. In March, a requirement was set for anyone undertaking unnecessary international travel to stay at a quarantine hotel upon returning to Norway. Sweden banned entry from Norway in January and imposed a requirement for a negative Covid-19 test for entrants in February. At the end of our period of interest on 31 March, Sweden removed the requirement of a legitimate reason for entry from Norway and Denmark, while the restrictions in the other Nordic countries still remained in place.

	1 st quarter 2020	2 nd quarter 2020	3 rd quarter 2020	4 th quarter 2020	1 st quarter 2021
Denmark	all borders closed to passenger traffic, except for commuters across the Swedish border and later certain business travellers and persons in transit via Denmark		free entry of Swedish nationals and residents reintroduced in August, border control upheld in September, occasional random border checks reintroduced	a quarantine requirement for Scania introduced	rules for entry and exit between Denmark and Sweden temporarily tightened until 7 February border commuters required to show a negative Covid-19 test taken within 72 hours
Finland	all border traffic restricted crossing borders only permitted for those foreign workers who, based on a permanent employment contract, work in the intrinsic travel-to-work area on the border with Sweden or Norway	in April, only strictly necessary commuting across the Swedish and Norwegian borders permitted in May, commuting and other essential travel permitted in the Schengen area in June, border controls lifted for travel between Finland and Norway and for travel between Schengen countries involving pleasure craft	in August, border control restored at the Finland-Norway border, traffic across the Finland-Norway and the Finland-Sweden borders permitted for residents of local border communities in September, border control for traffic between Finland and Sweden and between Finland and Norway ends but is soon reintroduced for non-essential travel, except for recreational boat traffic		restrictions tightened for entry from all Schengen countries, including border communities, only essential travel for work and other essential travel permitted
Norway	a 14-day quarantine required for persons arriving from countries other than Finland or Sweden all travel abroad advised against, border controls introduced at all Norwegian internal borders borders closed to foreign nationals who lack a residence permit in Norway, except for those who live or work in Norway	advice against non-essential travel lifted for certain countries and regions, including Denmark, Finland, Færoe Islands and Iceland as well as the regions of Blekinge, Kronoberg and Scania in Sweden	advice against non-essential travel to all countries reintroduced	entrants must present a negative Covid-19 test, non-Norwegian residents must undertake quarantine at a quarantine hotel	obligatory testing introduced on the Swedish border at Svinesund entry into Norway first banned for Swedish and Finnish commuters (some exceptions, incl. health personnel), then commuting allowed under a strict testing and control regime in March, a requirement set that anyone undertaking unnecessary travel abroad must stay at a quarantine hotel when returning to Norway
Sweden	all non-essential international travel advised against	advice against non-essential travel to certain countries, including Iceland, removed	advice against non-essential travel to Denmark, Norway and Finland removed	entry into Sweden from Denmark (and Great Britain) banned in late December	in January, entry into Sweden from Norway banned all entrants must present a negative Covid-19 test taken within 48 hours in March, the requirement for a legitimate reason to travel to Sweden from Norway and Denmark removed

2.2. TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS BY COUNTRY

Denmark. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the border between Denmark and Sweden has been closed on two occasions, each with its own underlying causes: migration flows⁹⁰ during 2015-16 and criminality⁹¹ in 2019.

On 14 March 2020, the Danish government decided to close all its borders to passenger traffic, which included all air, ferry and train transport, except for the transportation of food and necessary goods such as medicine. Denmark also placed defence personnel on the borders, albeit the primary responsibility remained with the police. The borders to Sweden were closed as a temporary measure, which exempted border commuters and later also certain business travellers and persons in transit to another country as these were categorised as ‘worthy purposes’. Five months later, on 14 August 2020, Denmark reintroduced free entry of Swedish nationals and residents, without withdrawing the requirement to pass through border control. Less than a month later, on 3 September, Denmark returned to occasional random border checks at its borders.

Danish travel restrictions have varied according to the different developments of the pandemic. Denmark introduced travel restrictions to Scania on 22 October 2020 due to increasing Covid-19 infection rates. According to the Governor of Scania, Anneli Hulthén, Denmark’s unilateral decision on this matter has collided with the vision of a large and strong Danish-Swedish Öresund region.⁹² It caused friction in the Danish-Swedish relationship, not least because Denmark opened its borders to Germany in September 2020, while remaining closed to Sweden. On the Swedish side, this was viewed as ‘unreasonably discriminatory’ and as highly affecting the relationship between Scania and Sealand.⁹³ In addition, the leader of the Danish party Venstre, Jakob Ellemann-Jensen, stated that Germans were welcome, but Swedes were not due to considerations from health professionals’ point of view.⁹⁴ This statement caused dissatisfaction among Swedish politicians and the public, who were already dealing with the stigma of Swedish commuters in the other Nordic countries. The Swedish choice to implement a strategy different from those of the other Nordic countries has caused political friction, not only among politicians

90 Sweden introduces temporary border control on 12 November 2015; Denmark on 4 January 2016, but only at the Danish-German border.

91 Denmark introduces temporary border control to/from Sweden on 12 November 2019. The temporary border control towards Sweden was carried out as periodic controls targeted at road and train traffic over the Öresund bridge and ferry traffic in the ports of Elsinore, Frederikshavn, Grenå and Rønne.

92 Olsen 2020.

93 *Politiken* 2020.

94 *Ibid.*

but also at a societal level. At the same time, Sweden has criticised Denmark for its restrictive border policy towards Sweden, also insinuating that Denmark has used health issues as an ‘excuse’ or been ‘hypocritical’ since Danes continued visiting Swedish shopping centers and bars in Malmö, while Scanians were not allowed to visit Copenhagen.⁹⁵

Finland. On 16 March 2020, the Government of Finland, together with the President of the Republic, declared a national state of emergency due to Covid-19 in accordance with the Emergency Powers Act.⁹⁶ The widespread outbreak of the infectious disease was seen to be comparable to a major disaster owing to the rapid rise of ‘the number and incidence of Covid-19 cases in Finland’.⁹⁷ The executive power thus effectively took control of the country. Under its prerogatives, the government adopted Covid-19-related travel measures for internal Schengen borders for the first time on 19 March 2020, when it urged people not to travel abroad and instructed all persons crossing its borders to remain in a 14-day quarantine. While goods traffic and freight transport remained unchanged, at first there was broad confusion about whether the measures amounted to a full border closure or not.⁹⁸ According to government representatives, this was not the case, however, as the decision secured the right of Finnish citizens and permanent residents to always return to Finland or leave the country.⁹⁹ ‘Necessary cross-border travel for work’ between Finland and Sweden, and Finland and Norway respectively was also guaranteed.¹⁰⁰ In practice, for a short initial period, Finland stopped people from leaving the country, which affected those with family on the other side of the border.¹⁰¹ According to one interviewee, the decision on travel restrictions was open to interpretation and did not define ‘necessary work’ that allowed border crossing, thus leaving Finnish border guards with a margin of appreciation in deciding who could cross the border.¹⁰² Indeed, bodies overseeing legality in Finland have later criticised both the government and the Finnish Border Guard for ‘ambiguous drafting and misleading communication on decisions that have the appearance of legally binding regulations but in closer analysis have been recommendations’.¹⁰³

95 *Politiken* 2020.

96 Finnish Government 2021; Emergency Powers Act 1080/1991, Section 3, paragraph 5.

97 Finnish Government 2021.

98 Finnish Border Guard 2020a.

99 Interview, 6 July 2021, online, Finland.

100 Finnish Border Guard 2020a.

101 Interview, 16 June 2021, online, Norden.

102 Interview, 16 June 2021, online, Norden.

103 Scheinin 2021.

In April 2020, the travel restrictions were further tightened so that only ‘strictly necessary travel to work’ was allowed for those working along the borders of Sweden and Norway. A certificate issued by the employer on the essentiality of the work was also needed to cross the border. Finns working in Sweden and Norway in the areas along the Finnish border were also ordered to stay in quarantine-like conditions when residing in Finland.¹⁰⁴

Another testimony to the strict Finnish approach to the pandemic is the fact that Finland also restricted movement within the country. On 28 March 2020, the government issued an internal lockdown that concerned the capital region of Uusimaa, where Helsinki is situated.¹⁰⁵ Only necessary movement to or from the region of Uusimaa was allowed, with the army stopping all traffic at highways leading to or from Helsinki. Effectively, this meant the isolation of circa 1.7 million inhabitants due to the region being the epicentre of the pandemic. These restrictions were lifted after three weeks, on 19 April 2020.¹⁰⁶

After the establishment of the harsh March 2020 restrictions, three crucial paradigm changes can be discerned in Finland’s policy on travel restrictions during the period of observation in this study.¹⁰⁷ The first took place in the summer of 2020 when the number of Covid-19 cases diminished and restrictions were loosened. For example, on 15 June, internal border controls between Norway and Finland were lifted. At the same time, the right to entry was extended to, inter alia, persons in a dating relationship with a Finnish citizen or resident, as well as to persons owning holiday homes or real estate in Finland.¹⁰⁸ The second major change came in the autumn of the same year when the limit value of Covid-19 incidence was altered. As of 19 September, the limit value was 25 new Covid-19 cases per 100,000 inhabitants, meaning that entry restrictions were in place for persons coming from countries exceeding this incidence rate in the last 14 days.¹⁰⁹ The third big shift occurred in January 2021 when strict measures were adopted anew, making entry restrictions again dependent on essential travel for work.¹¹⁰ On other

104 Finnish Government 2020a.

105 Finnish Government 2020c.

106 Finnish Government 2020c.

107 Interview, 6 July 2021, online, Finland.

108 Finnish Border Guard 2020b.

109 Finnish Government 2020b.

110 Finnish Border Guard 2021.

occasions, less crucial measures were renewed, but these did not call for decision-making by the whole government.¹¹¹

While Finland's overall policy on fighting Covid-19 can be considered successful from the prism of mortality rates, the Finnish policy has been criticised for failing to abide by the EU Commission recommendations as well as the general principles of freedom of movement in the EU.¹¹² In February 2021, the EU Commission held in its letter to Finland that its travel measures had simply gone too far and needed to be terminated.¹¹³ One interviewee even points out that Finland pursued a nationalistic policy and was considered a spoiler of Nordic cooperation.¹¹⁴ But Finland's approach to the borders has also been much affected by its sea border with Estonia and its inability to prioritise some regions or countries over others.¹¹⁵

Norway. In the weeks leading up to the first Norwegian societal lockdown in March 2020, the Norwegian MFA consecutively updated its travel advice to countries affected by the emergent pandemic. These updates were made first to the Hubei province in China in late January 2020, and then to Northern Italy and Tirol, Austria, in early March after a large number of the early Norwegian cases had been traced back to skiing resorts in those areas. The nationwide policies and measures introduced on 12 March 2020 also included a 14-day quarantine for individuals entering Norway from countries 'outside of the Nordic region'. The day after, this exception was adjusted so that it instead included all countries except Sweden and Finland.¹¹⁶

On 14 March 2020, the MFA issued global travel advice against all travel abroad. The same day, the government set up border controls at all Norwegian internal borders – land, sea and air.¹¹⁷ The Norwegian police, assisted by the Norwegian Army and the Home Guard, were set to operate the land border to Sweden for the first time since 1905.¹¹⁸ Norwegian media reported that the new measures had created confusion and frustration on the Swedish side of the border. Not only had they been introduced on short notice, but Swedish municipalities and emergency authorities were

111 Interview, 6 July 2021, online, Finland.

112 Schengenvisainfo 2021; European Commission 2020.

113 Schengenvisainfo 2021.

114 Interview, 16 June 2021, online, Finland.

115 Interview, 6 July 2021, online, Finland.

116 Government.no 2021b.

117 Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security & Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020; Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2020.

118 VG 2020; Rana blad 2020.

uncertain as to how some of the restrictions were to be interpreted and put into practice.¹¹⁹

On 15 March 2020, the Norwegian government announced that it would ‘close the border to foreign nationals who lack a residence permit in Norway’. The decision was presented by the Minister of Justice and Public Security in the Council of State before it was sent to the Storting for approval.¹²⁰ In its report, the Norwegian Coronavirus Commission writes that it found ‘little documentation of the process leading up to the decision to close the border’.¹²¹ According to one informant interviewed for this study, the other Nordic countries were informed by the Minister for Nordic Cooperation only after the decision had been made.¹²²

The Norwegian border remained closed through April and May 2020, but the government made some adjustments to allow certain EEA citizens working in Norway to enter the country. During the spring, the MFA’s travel advice was adjusted according to weekly updated, colour-coded maps delivered by the Norwegian Public Health Institute.¹²³ Countries were coded with one single colour, with the notable exception of Denmark, Finland and Sweden. These three countries were colour coded by regions to allow for more differentiation and flexibility in travel advice and control measures within the Nordic Region.

During the spring of 2020, Norwegian media reported about growing frustration among businesses, workers and private citizens on both sides of the Norwegian–Swedish border in particular.¹²⁴ On 15 June 2020, the government lifted some of the restrictions on leisure travel between Norway and the other Nordic countries, but restrictions remained in place for regions and areas with high infection rates. On 15 July 2020, restrictions were lifted for individuals from some EEA/Schengen countries, depending on local infection rates.¹²⁵

In August 2020, following an upswing in infection rates, the Norwegian MFA once again advised against all unnecessary travel, first to selected European countries and to certain regions in Sweden,¹²⁶ and then, from

119 *Aftenposten* 2020a.

120 Norwegian Ministry of Justice & Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020.

121 Government.no 2021a.

122 Interview, 4 June 2021, Norway.

123 Government.no 2021a.

124 *Moss avis* 2020; *Halden Arbeiderblad* 2020; *Sarpsborg Arbeiderblad* 2020.

125 Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

126 Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020a.

7 August 2020, to all countries.¹²⁷ This global travel advice remained in place for the remainder of the period under scrutiny in this report.

On 5 November 2020, the Norwegian government announced that Norway was ‘at the beginning of the second wave of infection’ and reinserted stricter national control measures.¹²⁸ At the Norwegian border, two new requirements were now introduced: firstly, all persons entering Norway must present a negative Covid-19 test and, secondly, persons not residing in Norway must undertake quarantine at a designated quarantine hotel. Later in November 2020, an exception to the latter requirement was made for Norwegian students studying in another Nordic country, even if they were not registered as Norwegian residents. Some adjustments were also made for commuters from Finland and Sweden.

On 25 January 2021, the Norwegian government introduced obligatory testing on the Swedish border at Svinesund. Four days later, on 29 January 2021, Norway introduced its strictest entry rules since the beginning of the pandemic.¹²⁹ This decision also had direct consequences for intra-Nordic mobility. With a few exceptions, including health personnel, Swedish and Finnish workers commuting to Norway were prevented from going to work. The government estimated that around 3,000 individuals had been affected by the new policies. One month later, on 26 February, the Norwegian government announced that it had found a solution for this particular group and would allow exemption from the entry restrictions. These individuals could now again come to work in Norway, albeit under a strict testing and control regime.¹³⁰ By the end of March 2021, as a third wave of the pandemic was declared to be underway, Norway further tightened the regulations for testing and obligatory hotel quarantine upon entering the country.

Sweden. At the end of January 2020, following reports of coronavirus outbreaks in the Hubei province in China, the Swedish MFA issued its first advice against non-essential travel on account of the new virus. This first advice included only the Hubei province but was shortly accompanied by advice against travel to China as a whole, Italy, South Korea and Tirol, Austria. The gradual extension of the list of countries culminated on 14 March 2020 when the Swedish MFA issued advice against all non-essential international travel. This was the first time such advice covered the entire world. Travellers were encouraged to be attentive to symptoms and

127 Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services 2020.

128 Prime Minister’s Office & Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services 2020b.

129 Prime Minister’s Office, Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services & Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2021.

130 Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security & Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 2021.

practise general caution upon entry into Sweden, but not required to be in quarantine unless symptomatic.¹³¹

A few days later, on 19 March, the government issued a 30-day ban on all non-essential travel to the EU via Sweden¹³² following a recommendation from the European Council and Commission. This ban was continuously prolonged with some adjustments throughout the time frame of this study. On 19 March, the FHM also advised against non-essential trips within Sweden.¹³³ Combined with the previous recommendations for all Swedish residents without essential jobs to work from home and avoid public transport, as well as the MFA advice against international travel, these recommendations in practice encouraged self-quarantine.

The advice against travel within Sweden was lifted on 13 June 2020, followed by the removal of the advice against travel to Iceland on 30 June,¹³⁴ Denmark and Norway on 30 July,¹³⁵ and finally Finland on 21 September¹³⁶ as these countries eased restrictions to travellers from Sweden.¹³⁷ Regarding the lifted advice against travel to Denmark and Norway, Foreign Minister Ann Linde explicitly stated that the decision was a step towards the goal of a Nordic Region where people can move freely.¹³⁸

Although exposed to border closures imposed by its neighbouring countries from an early stage, Sweden did not implement restrictions to travel from countries within the EU/EEA until almost a year after the pandemic outbreak. On 22 December 2020, a temporary ban on entry into Sweden from Denmark and the United Kingdom was imposed after reports of a virus mutation in the UK. The ban on entry from Denmark was interpreted as necessary to avoid Christmas congestion in restaurants and shopping centres in the Scania County in southern Sweden.¹³⁹ Two interviewees highlighted that this was not an easy decision and that values other than strictly limiting the spread of the virus were taken into consideration. Border trade and making exceptions for commuters were two important factors considered by the Swedish government when imposing the ban. Danish citizens travelling to the Danish island Bornholm

131 These recommendations were in place for the time scope of this study, Q1 2020–Q1 2021.

132 Travellers from EES countries and Switzerland were exempted from the ban.

133 Public Health Agency of Sweden 2020b.

134 Government Offices of Sweden 2020g.

135 Government Offices of Sweden 2020h.

136 Government Offices of Sweden 2020f.

137 Besides the Nordic countries, the advice against non-essential travel was lifted for Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, San Marino, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the Vatican City.

138 Government Offices of Sweden 2020h.

139 Government Offices of Sweden 2020b.

via Sweden were exempted from the travel restriction only two days after it was imposed.¹⁴⁰

The ban on entry into Sweden was also extended to include Norway on 25 January 2021. As the Norwegian health authority feared a larger outbreak of the mutated form of the coronavirus in the Oslo region, the Swedish government decided to ban entry from Norway in order to prevent a potential flow of people over the border while Norway prepared for stricter measures.¹⁴¹

Travellers exempted from the travel bans were as of 6 February 2021 required to additionally show a negative Covid-19 test upon arrival in Sweden.¹⁴² The ban on entry into Sweden from Norway and Denmark was removed on 31 March 2021.¹⁴³

140 Interview, 4 June 2021, online, Sweden; Öresundsinstitutet 2021c; Government Offices of Sweden 2020b.

141 Government Offices of Sweden 2021c.

142 Exceptions applied. For example, people under 18, Swedish residents and personnel in the transport sector were exempted from the requirement of a negative Covid-19 test result. Swedish citizens were always allowed entry even without a negative Covid-19 test although encouraged to get tested. Travellers from the UK exempted from the travel ban had been required to show a negative test from 1 January. Government Offices of Sweden 2021b.

143 Government Offices of Sweden 2021a.

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3 FUNCTIONING OF NORDIC COOPERATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

The pandemic is not the first crisis to hit the Nordic Region. There have been previous emergency situations where the policies, practices and solidarity of the Nordic countries have been put to the test, such as the tsunami on Boxing Day in 2004, or the forest fires in Sweden in 2018. These situations have shown how communication can be improved,¹⁴⁴ and how other Nordic countries have offered their assistance in solidarity. The pandemic is exceptional, however, in terms of scope as it hit all Nordic states almost at the same time. Arguably, the Nordic Region has not witnessed such a test since the 1940s,¹⁴⁵ nor such political and financial impacts on free movement and open borders. Because the pandemic differs from earlier misfortunes that have struck the Nordic countries, it is valuable to explore how cooperation functioned when the pandemic started and was ongoing.

3.1. BETWEEN UNITY AND DIVERSITY

While the Covid-19 pandemic has challenged Nordic cooperation, it has in certain ways also brought the Nordic countries closer together and further highlighted the importance of cooperation.¹⁴⁶ This paradox of experiencing unity and diversity at the same time permeates Nordic cooperation in pandemic times. The narratives of and in the different Nordic countries

¹⁴⁴ See e.g. Kivikuru & Nord 2009.

¹⁴⁵ Interview 14 June 2021, online, Finland.

¹⁴⁶ Blomqvist 2021.

on the functioning of Nordic cooperation are varied. Nevertheless, the representatives of Nordic institutions who were interviewed for this study generally felt disappointed with the fact that Nordic cooperation was not considered a tool for coping with the pandemic crisis.¹⁴⁷ It was pointed out that Nordic politicians have first looked at their own respective borders, where they have primary responsibility, instead of thinking about the Nordic dimension.¹⁴⁸ As expressed by President of the Nordic Council Bertel Haarder, ‘[w]hen there is a crisis, the Nordic countries put themselves first’.¹⁴⁹ One reason for the lack of an all-Nordic approach to the pandemic was seen to lie in the fact that there is no Nordic body or institution that would have been able to consider the crisis from a Nordic perspective or suggest joint Nordic solutions.¹⁵⁰

Swedish interviewees interpreted the lack of a joint Nordic approach differently. From their point of view, the reason for there not being a joint Nordic response to the crisis was that it happened too fast, and that the differences in governance paved the way for different responses. All the Swedish respondents felt, however, that Nordic cooperation at the political level has worked well during the pandemic. Similar views were expressed by respondents in Denmark. According to the Danish central government officials and ministers who were interviewed for this study, the decisions on how to manage the crisis were made in collaboration and in close dialogue with the different ministries in Denmark and their counterparts in the Nordic countries.¹⁵¹ Close dialogue does not necessarily mean full consensus between all the Nordic countries because they all have their individual contexts and considerations. The obstacles and problems have arisen from the different styles of crisis management among the Nordic countries. Danish government officials highlighted that when thinking about Nordic cooperation, it is important to keep the questions of sovereignty and individual priorities in mind. This implies that, despite the wish for Nordic cooperation and visions of a stronger cooperation, each Nordic country has its own set of rules, population, circumstances and perspectives that complicate matters when it comes to streamlining the management of the Covid-19 pandemic with respect to borders.

Although no uniform way of handling the pandemic crisis was found among the Nordic countries, Finland and Norway in particular reported

147 Interview, 23 August 2021, online, Norden.

148 Ibid.

149 Preisler 2021.

150 Interview, 23 August 2021, online, Norden; Preisler 2021.

151 Interview, 2 June 2021, online, Denmark.

that the Nordics have constituted a key reference group in pandemic management. During a Finnish parliamentary debate, Minister for Nordic Cooperation Thomas Blomqvist stressed the important role that the Nordic countries play vis-à-vis Finland.¹⁵² According to Blomqvist, the Nordic countries have constituted an ‘extremely close and important reference’ for Finland in pandemic times.¹⁵³ Minister Blomqvist has further stated that the Nordic countries remain Finland’s most important reference group in foreign policy,¹⁵⁴ and that ‘the pandemic has further highlighted the importance of Nordic cooperation’.¹⁵⁵ It was, however, noted by several Finnish interviewees that much of the Nordic cooperation regarding the pandemic and the concomitant travel restrictions has taken place bilaterally, not within institutional cooperation.¹⁵⁶

For Norway too, the other Nordic countries have been key reference points throughout the pandemic. Figures from and response strategies in the other Nordic states have featured prominently in both political and media debate, where they have been used to contextualise, compare, justify or adjust Norwegian figures and policy choices. For example, in the opening phase of the pandemic, Norwegian media commended Iceland as a pioneer in mass testing, while Finland was highlighted both for its early decision to close down schools and its large national emergency stockpile of medical supplies. Denmark has been an important reference point for Norway when it comes to testing, border controls and the distribution of vaccines.¹⁵⁷ The coverage of Swedish policies has been more critical, with many media reports highlighting the difference between the Norwegian and Swedish response strategies and death tolls.

3.2. INCREASED DIALOGUE WITH UNEVEN RESULTS

Despite the challenges that the pandemic has brought to Nordic cooperation, all the studied countries and the interviewed Nordic representatives agreed that dialogue has improved during the pandemic. Danish interviewees claimed that there has been more dialogue than ever between the Nordic governments, and Swedish government officials hoped that the closer contacts established with their Nordic counterparts would

¹⁵² Blomqvist 2020.

¹⁵³ Blomqvist 2021.

¹⁵⁴ Blomqvist 2020.

¹⁵⁵ Blomqvist 2021.

¹⁵⁶ Interview, 14 July 2021, online, Finland.

¹⁵⁷ *Aftenposten* 2021.

also be maintained after the pandemic by using digital meeting tools, for example.¹⁵⁸ Finnish politicians and civil servants also felt that Nordic political cooperation has increased during the pandemic, which has also triggered claims that ‘the new post-pandemic normal’ should include ‘even more Nordic cooperation and contacts.’¹⁵⁹ The parties have become closer,¹⁶⁰ the number of informal contacts has increased¹⁶¹ and digitalisation has allowed more meetings to take place.¹⁶² During the pandemic, extra meetings have been held by numerous ministers or secretaries of state, including those responsible for Nordic cooperation, health, internal affairs, borders, development, defence, energy and labour.¹⁶³ The aims of these meetings have mainly been to increase situational awareness of the pandemic and discuss planned responses.¹⁶⁴

While in general dialogue is considered to have worked well and in ‘good spirits’¹⁶⁵ during the pandemic, there have been a few reports of tension from the Swedish side,¹⁶⁶ in addition to which all the Swedish interviewees mentioned communication as an area of improvement in Nordic cooperation. Poor information sharing and scattered data were seen to have hampered effective crisis management. In Sweden, the pandemic was believed to have revealed cracks in the bilateral communication between countries, with travel restrictions having been imposed too quickly, sometimes without an advance notice. Indeed, as one respondent from a Nordic institution argued, the communication between the countries appears to have varied from chaotic to well functioning.¹⁶⁷ Some of the Nordic countries have informed the affected other Nordic countries about new restrictions beforehand, whereas others have not. Finnish politicians reported that dialogue with Sweden has worked well,¹⁶⁸ despite claims to the opposite by their Swedish counterparts, who noted that the lack of communication between Norway, Sweden and Finland caused difficulties, in addition to which critical statements about the Swedish

158 Interview, 15 June 2021, online, Sweden.

159 Blomqvist 2021.

160 Blomqvist 2020.

161 Interview, 14 July 2021, online, Finland.

162 Interview, 14 July 2021, online, Finland.

163 Blomqvist 2020.

164 Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2020, 3.

165 Blomqvist 2020.

166 See speeches by MPs Jouni Ovaska and Erkki Tuomioja in Parliament of Finland 2020.

167 Interview, 16 June 2021, online, Norden.

168 See Thomas Blomqvist in Parliament of Finland 2020d.

strategy put Nordic cooperation at risk.¹⁶⁹ According to Swedish interviewees, communication regarding travel restrictions worked better with Finland than with Denmark and Norway, but also improved over time with the latter two. From the Finnish side, the possible lack of sufficient inter-Nordic communication was explained with the complex national decision-making procedures regarding Covid-19 measures, which have involved several ministries and numerous civil servants.¹⁷⁰

While dialogue between the Nordic countries has increased both bi- and multilaterally, as well as within Nordic institutions, this has not always led to concrete cooperative results. Still, there have been instances of successful Nordic cooperation that all four countries highlighted in the interviews – some of these being the result of informal cooperation. One such instance was the repatriation of stranded travellers. In early March 2020, Nordic citizens were to receive consular assistance from other Nordic countries in areas where their own state did not have consular representation. The Nordic foreign ministries also coordinated efforts to help Nordic citizens residing abroad return home by, among other measures, ‘filling Nordic planes with Nordic passengers’ and permitting Nordic citizens to pass through other Nordic countries on their way home.¹⁷¹ A Norwegian White Paper on Nordic cooperation published in April 2021 summarised that the Nordic cooperation in assisting Nordic citizens stranded abroad had been particularly close and successful. In the most acute phase, the White Paper observed, there were daily coordination meetings between the Nordic foreign ministries to help Nordic citizens return home.¹⁷² One Norwegian respondent interviewed for this study ascribed this success to the trusting and close relationship between Nordic ministers, which makes it easy to launch cooperation in practical, operative matters.¹⁷³ It is noticeable, however, that the cooperation in repatriating stranded citizens was not exclusively Nordic because it also involved Nordic-Baltic cooperation (NB8) and cooperation within the EU/EEA.¹⁷⁴

Another example of well-organised Nordic cooperation during the pandemic was Sweden’s activeness in exempting Iceland and Norway from the EU-wide export ban on certain medical protective equipment.¹⁷⁵

169 Nordiska rådets svenska delegation 2021.

170 Interview, 6 July 2021, online, Finland.

171 Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020b; Søreide & Sanner 2021.

172 Norwegian Ministry of Finance 2021, 37 (author’s translation into English).

173 Interview, 5 May 2021, online, Norway.

174 See e.g. Bolt 2021, 11; European Commission.

175 Reuters 2020.

Sweden also took on the role of vaccine coordinator for Norway and Iceland.¹⁷⁶ Nordic institutional cooperation also succeeded in dealing with some of the issues faced by stranded commuters in the Nordic countries. These problems included impracticalities related to tax rules, social security and unemployment benefits as commuters were forced to work from home or lost their jobs.¹⁷⁷ Social security issues were solved relatively fast by the respective ministers through a decision that the country where the jobs had been based continued to be responsible for social security despite the fact that teleworking changed the country where the work was actually done.¹⁷⁸ Tax issues remain unsettled, along with many other problems that have emerged for commuters during the pandemic¹⁷⁹ – altogether around 100 different types of disruptions to cross-border commuting have been listed.¹⁸⁰

3.3. INTRA-NORDIC FRICTIONS

The Nordic representatives and national respondents we interviewed reported about frictions between the Nordic countries – both locally and at the political level. The severity and frequency of these frictions have nevertheless varied. Overall, there seems to have been less friction among the states that have pursued a similar pandemic strategy,¹⁸¹ whereas Sweden with its different pandemic strategy was often featured in or pointed out these frictions. A few representatives of Nordic institutions explicated that Norway and Finland pursued nationalistic policies, whereas Denmark was more flexible and Sweden more internationalistic than the other Nordic countries.¹⁸²

On the part of Sweden, instances of discrimination against and isolation of Swedish commuters have raised concern and criticism. Swedish Minister for Foreign Trade and Nordic Affairs Anna Hallberg has stressed that the different treatment and isolation of Sweden exercised by the other Nordic countries would significantly – although not irreparably – damage future cooperation.¹⁸³

176 Government Offices of Sweden 2020e.

177 Interview, 2 June 2021, online, Denmark; Interview, 23 June 2021, online, Denmark.

178 Interview, 16 June 2021, online, Norden; Interview, 23 August 2021, online, Norden.

179 Interview, 16 June 2021, online, Norden.

180 Gränshinderrådet.

181 Interview 16 June 2021, online, Norden.

182 Ibid; Interview, 27 May 2021, Norden.

183 Bonnén et al. 2021.

The Norwegian government has recognised that there has been some intra-Nordic friction over the increased control measures at the Norwegian border, especially between Norway and Sweden. In July 2020, Norwegian media reported that Minister Hallberg was concerned about the state of Nordic cooperation and Swedish-Norwegian relations. Hallberg described it as dramatic that soldiers were now operating the Norwegian border. She observed that the once invisible borders had become visible, and that one had taken the stability of the Nordic Region for granted.¹⁸⁴

In a written response to Hallberg's assessment, Norway's Minister for Nordic Cooperation Jan Tore Sanner communicated that he was less concerned, writing: 'Norden as a region and Nordic cooperation will come strengthened out of the crisis'.¹⁸⁵ In late September 2020, Hallberg visited Norway, meeting with Sanner as well as with Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Søreide and Minister of Trade and Industry Iselin Nybø. In November, Norway's ambassador to Sweden Christian Syse summarised his country's different perspective as follows:

*The Norwegian government does not share the view we sometimes hear from the Swedish side that measures taken during the coronavirus pandemic have had serious consequences for Nordic cooperation. We in the Nordic Region have so much in common, and so many economic, cultural and other connections. But it is temporarily a difficult time when Norwegians and Swedes (and other 'Nordists') cannot move freely across the borders to visit family and friends, cabins and summer houses, buy groceries and enjoy nature and culture.*¹⁸⁶

The Norwegian White Paper on Nordic cooperation published in April 2021 also commented on the friction between Norway and Sweden over the Norwegian control measures at the border and their practical implications for businesses and ordinary citizens:

During the pandemic, in most cases one was able to quickly find solutions and lift restrictions for employees who live in one country but who work across the border in another. However, the activities that were hit strongly were leisure travel, ordinary visits and cross border shopping, especially

¹⁸⁴ Aftenposten 2020b.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Syse 2020 (author's translation into English).

*between Norway and Sweden – to some extent also between Norway and Finland. At times, this resulted in criticism, especially from the Swedish side, and from authorities, business actors and private citizens. In 2020, Sweden did not practice the same type of societal lockdown and entry restrictions as the other Nordic countries.*¹⁸⁷

One Norwegian respondent interviewed for this study confirmed that the travel restrictions had been particularly challenging for the Norwegian-Swedish relations. The respondent explained that the Norwegian key priority had been to stop the spreading of the virus, which necessitated the closing of the border. While this had caused many challenges and difficulties, and had even resulted in unacceptable incidents of Swedes being bullied at work, the solution was not to open the borders. The respondent noted the difference between the Norwegian and Swedish narratives about Nordic cooperation during the pandemic. While the Norwegian narrative was that Nordic cooperation would survive and recover in the end, the Swedish narrative was more concerned with how the closing of the borders had left deep traces and negatively influenced Nordic cooperation.¹⁸⁸

The Danish-Swedish relations were also put to the test during the pandemic. In particular, an erroneous article reporting that Danish authorities had seized vaccination equipment on the way to Sweden triggered harsh Swedish criticism of Denmark. The story was based on a ‘misunderstanding’, but according to President of the Nordic Council Bertel Haarder, the case testifies to the fact that ‘confidence in Nordic cooperation has eroded’.¹⁸⁹

3.4. CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY

Another issue that divides opinions between the countries is cross-border mobility and the way it functioned during the first two waves of the pandemic. Norwegian government ministers have described Nordic cooperation on cross-border mobility as good during the pandemic. When new travel restrictions and tighter border control measures have been inserted, exceptions have usually been made for the Nordic countries, and restrictions have been lifted sooner for all or some of the Nordic countries. Moreover, while other countries have been marked entirely as red/

187 Norwegian Ministry of Finance 2021.

188 Interview, 5 May 2021, online, Norway.

189 Bendtsen 2021, 1.

yellow/green on the maps forming the basis of MFA travel advice, the travel advice concerning Denmark, Finland and Sweden has been given at a regional level.¹⁹⁰

Respondents from the other Nordic countries did not share the overall positive assessment by Norwegian politicians, however. Denmark emphasised that the handling of commuters during the pandemic conflicts with the cross-border mobility agenda and the goal of making the Nordic Region the most integrated region in the world. Likewise, Swedish respondents mostly felt that cross-border regions were not involved in the decision-making on travel restrictions more than other regions because decision-making follows a certain process. It was pointed out that not only Sweden but all Nordic countries made their decisions on travel restrictions in the capitals without a sufficient understanding of how life functions in the border regions.¹⁹¹ Another interviewee expressed a similar view that there was an initial lack of understanding of just how integrated the border communities actually are, but stressed that Stockholm, and especially Minister Anna Hallberg, were very receptive to critique and made changes accordingly.¹⁹² However, there was also one respondent who felt the opposite, namely that there was a close dialogue with representatives of the border regions, and that they were able to voice their concerns and unexpected issues that might arise with the restrictions.¹⁹³

Several Finnish interviewees also recognised that cross-border regions have been disappointed in the national decision-making procedure and adopted travel measures.¹⁹⁴ Some interviewed civil servants pointed out that the assessment of the impacts of travel restrictions upon the cross-border regions was inadequate. What was also missing was a direct channel between the relevant regions and national centralised decision-making, in which exceptions to the general restrictions could have been discussed and restrictions consequently fine-tuned.¹⁹⁵ Within Finland, the Åland Islands have pointed out repeatedly during the pandemic that dialogue with the central government in Finland has been missing and that the relations have been far from optimal.¹⁹⁶ One interviewed Finnish civil servant held that Åland's position has been inferior to the northern regions due to their status as land borders, while Åland

190 Government.no 2021a.

191 Interview, 9 June 2021, online, Sweden.

192 Interview, 15 June 2021, online, Sweden.

193 Interview, 4 June 2021, online, Sweden.

194 Interview, 16 June 2021, online, Norden.

195 Interview, 20 August 2021, online, Finland.

196 Interview, 5 August 2021, online, Finland.

shares a sea border with Sweden. The Finnish authorities treated land and sea borders differently by denying those travelling by sea the status of commuters.¹⁹⁷

The role played by the Freedom of Movement Council was appreciated and stressed by both Finnish and Swedish interviewees. The Freedom of Movement Council was established in 2014 on the initiative of the Nordic prime ministers to facilitate freedom of movement in the Nordic Region, and it has played an important role in bringing attention to border-related issues during the pandemic. The issues it has raised have been well received by the governments and considered in policy. It has also successfully documented barriers to cross-border freedom of movement.¹⁹⁸

Representatives of Nordic institutions have made the connection between border closures and the future of Nordic cooperation more explicit and direct. President of the Nordic Council Bertel Haarder has stated:

*Today, free movement is threatened, not only in distant continents but also in Denmark, in Sweden, and throughout the Nordic region where the typical solution to a crisis that arises is to close oneself off, take care of one's own cooperation and invention of new barriers. But border barriers and closed borders are not a sustainable solution in today's modern and closely connected world. Nordic cooperation is based on the conviction that closed borders are not good.*¹⁹⁹

3.5. NORDIC COOPERATION ON OTHER TOPICS

The increased contacts between the Nordic countries have also had a spill-over effect on issues beyond the pandemic as the everyday contacts between government officials and their Nordic counterparts have improved. One Swedish interviewee said that they were in contact more often now than before the pandemic even in relation to non-Covid-19-related issues, which they viewed as positive and as something to continue after the pandemic. Similar observations have been made by Norwegian politicians, who highlight the informal aspects and the fact that Nordic cooperation ministers and foreign ministers have met more often than they normally

197 Interview, 20 August 2021, online, Finland.

198 Ibid.

199 Nielsen 2021.

do – on digital platforms, but also in physical meetings when possible. The White Paper on Nordic cooperation issued in April 2021 observed:

After the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020, Nordic foreign policy cooperation (N5) has been closer than ever before. Under the Danish N5 presidency, the Nordic foreign ministers have had frequent video conferences, altogether ten. These have proven effective both for the discussion of the foreign policy consequences of the pandemic and for direct crisis management.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ Norwegian Ministry of Finance 2021, 37 (author's translation into English).

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4 IMPACT OF TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS UPON NORDIC COOPERATION

4.1. LOCAL SOCIETAL IMPACT: AN IN-DEPTH STUDY OF THREE CROSS-BORDER REGIONS

4.1.1. Introduction

While the previous chapters have explored the political discourse at national and supranational (Nordic) levels, this chapter takes a deeper dive into the situation that unfolded on the ground in the border regions of Tornedalen, Öresund and Svinesund (Map 1).²⁰¹ These areas offer the perspectives of different types of border areas across different countries, each with their own approach to the pandemic. The areas include the land border between Finland and Sweden, and to some extent Norway in the very north; the central area across the Öresund strait (known as the Sound in English) between Denmark and Sweden; and the area around the busiest and southernmost land border between Norway and Sweden across the Svinesund strait.

The measures implemented from March 2020 until today to stop the spread of the coronavirus have taken a toll on society at large. However, the severe impacts observed in border areas have exposed the fragility of communities and businesses located along national borders to global crises. While free mobility and especially free markets have been actively pursued by European nations and global politics for decades, the institutions in place to protect citizens' rights and integrity have not followed suit. Free mobility in the Nordic and Schengen areas has been a founding principle of integration, but it is now threatened by the normalisation of

201 The interviews of this section are listed only in the bibliography because of reasons of anonymity and practical issues, such as some interview sessions having multiple informants.



Map 1: Case study cross-border areas of Tornedalen, Öresund and Svinesund.
By Johanna Jokinen, Nordregio.

hard borders and inward-looking nation-based policy. The case studies reveal that citizens and businesses with ties across countries have been at the mercy of top-down decisions made unilaterally by national governments, without coordinating actions to safeguard their interests and integrity.

The Nordic model is built on trust. Trust is the glue that keeps collaboration in place at every level – among family members, friends, business partners and institutions both political and non-political. Fear is the symptom or the result of distrust. Distrust of the neighbour, the institutions, the possibility of living a normal life across borders. Fear is what occurs when we draw distinct lines between ‘us and them’. The national approaches to the pandemic have been characterised by an ‘us and

them' logic, which tells much about the present state of trust in Nordic collaboration.

The case studies in this section explore the social and economic impacts of the measures implemented to cope with the pandemic, and their implications for individuals, businesses, and communities in these areas.

4.1.2. Tornedalen (FI-SE)

The Torne River basin or Tornedalen region comprises the border areas between Norway, Sweden and Finland. The Tornedalen border region gets its name from the Torne River, which physically divides the land border between Sweden and Finland. It begins near the Norwegian border and flows southwards into the Gulf of Bothnia in the Baltic Sea. However, the Torne River should not be seen as a natural barrier for 'in the past, the river was the road, not the border'.²⁰² Historically, the river was the transport route connecting settlements along the river, and its fish was an important resource. A common culture has therefore existed across the borders in the Tornedalen region for a long time. Indeed, many locals still perceive themselves as 'Tornedalean'. The common language, Meänkieli, has struggled to survive through the years but is still spoken by many and has seen a revival in recent years. Today, to a large extent, the local people live their lives across the borders. Most symbolic is the twin-city of Haparanda-Tornio – a well-amalgamated city, divided only by the national border.

Because of the high level of integration, the sudden re-emergence of hard borders during the pandemic has been particularly difficult for people in the Tornedalen border region. In addition to dividing a population with a shared identity, hard borders affected the local society, economy and politics in very concrete ways. The closely intertwined labour markets, supply chains and social structures, as well as the agreements between the local public administration for the delivery of cross-border public services were ignored by national one-size-fits-all policy. From one day to another, people woke up to the realisation that freedom of movement could not be taken for granted. According to the Finnish Border Guard, border crossings dropped by 91% nationwide in May 2020 compared to the 2019 average.²⁰³ Eventually, the Finnish authorities made concessions to the border community, granting it a special status and allowing residents to cross the borders more freely. However, this measure was criticised for creating borders within the country and failing to represent

202 Interview in Giacometti & Woien Meijer 2021.

203 Giacometti & Woien Meijer 2021.

commuting patterns and the border community identity.²⁰⁴ It was also inconsistent with further guidelines adopted by national authorities. Interviewees pointed out that subsequent border restrictions announced by the Finnish government did not provide any specific guidelines for border communities.

Key labour market issues

The labour market in the Tornedalen region has experienced many challenges during the pandemic. However, impacts differ significantly between regions and municipalities depending on the country measures, municipalities' economic structures and their pre-pandemic performance. Border restrictions, in particular, had a serious impact on the labour market across the three countries. Border crossings were virtually paralysed, except for frontier workers travelling from Finland to Sweden, who had to comply with testing and quarantine rules, however. The impact of this was highly imbalanced across the three countries. This was partly due to the fact that Finland and Norway implemented harder border restrictions, lockdowns and mandatory quarantine upon return from other countries, which indirectly stopped people from travelling even when they could have travelled. Instead, Sweden's approach allowed individuals to judge for themselves. Another reason for this imbalance was the Swedish border municipalities' higher dependency on labour from Finland than vice versa. The Swedish health care and other public sector services, and to some extent also the mining and trade sectors, are particularly dependent on Finnish workers. According to the public employment office in Lapland, some 80% of commuters in the Tornedalen region are Finnish residents crossing to Sweden and Norway. Of the crossings towards Finland, many are made by Finnish-born Swedish residents. According to interviews conducted for this study, many Finns are attracted to reside on the Swedish side because of lower housing costs. Indeed, more than 50% of Haparanda's residents have a foreign background,²⁰⁵ meaning that they are foreign born or have at least one parent coming from abroad. Moreover, 40.8% of them are foreign born, and 33.7% Finnish-born specifically²⁰⁶.

Even though Sweden did not close its borders, the quarantine rules in Finland made it very challenging for Finns to cross the border for work. In many cases, commuters described that they had been in permanent quarantine in Finland during the early months of the pandemic as they needed to cross the border daily to get to work in Sweden. However, the

204 Wøien Meijer & Giacometti 2021.

205 Statistics Sweden A.

206 Statistics Sweden B.

full effect on commuters is difficult to assess because there are no reliable statistics on cross-border work patterns. According to the employment service in Lapland, many companies operate across the borders, but their employees are registered in one country only, which means that they are not considered commuters in the statistical records. This is true for mining firms which operate in mines in both Sweden and Finland. Additionally, some workers are dependent on sporadic jobs or zero-hour contracts, and therefore, without being able to prove that they have been employed in the other country, they lose out on opportunities. In some cases, companies had to lay off their staff because of the border restrictions.²⁰⁷ In one specific case, a transport company moved permanently from Sweden to Finland and hired new staff.²⁰⁸

Aside from the border restrictions, many other measures were applied to cope with the pandemic, and it is thus difficult to attribute the negative impacts solely to the proximity to the border. Additionally, labour markets and economic sectors tend to expand far beyond municipal boundaries. Therefore, zooming out to the regional level provides a useful scale to assess the more general impacts on specific sectors and compare across municipalities.

The situation in the Swedish county of Norrbotten, where the Swedish part of Tornedalen is located, played out much better than initially predicted. Unemployment figures increased slightly in Norrbotten during the early months of the pandemic but remained significantly lower than in other regions. Norrbotten had the lowest unemployment rate in Sweden (6.8%) in August 2020.²⁰⁹ Many employers who signalled their intention to lay off staff did not carry on as planned. Contrary to what was expected, employment was maintained thanks to the compensatory measures implemented by the national government to protect workers and businesses, but also because of the well-functioning supply chains. Norrbotten has a strong and diversified economy, which made it less vulnerable to this crisis. The chronic labour deficit in the region makes companies more careful when laying off workers. Nevertheless, a number of jobs were lost in the region, mostly in more vulnerable sectors, such as hospitality, construction and transport. After a peak in weeks 11–15 (2020), the number of job seekers stabilised, despite normal seasonal fluctuations.²¹⁰

By contrast, if we look at Lapland as a whole, the labour market was significantly more affected. The lockdown and travel restrictions affected

207 Giacometti & Woien Meijer 2021.

208 Ibid.

209 Ibid.

210 Swedish Public Employment Service (A).

particularly the tourism industry, a key sector in Lapland. By the end of April 2020, Lapland registered 11,130 job seekers, which represents a 22% increase from the same month in 2019 (over 8,000 job seekers). Tourism experienced quite good years in 2017–2019, which had led to increased employment in the region. The damage caused by the pandemic is severe, with many jobs lost and many companies worried that seasonal workers who come from other regions may not come back if they find other jobs elsewhere. These impacts, however, are not as much related to the border restrictions affecting their neighbouring municipalities as they are to the travel restrictions affecting tourists from other countries, and particularly Asia.

Lapland suffers from structural unemployment, with figures higher than the national average in Finland. Many unemployed people do not have the necessary skills for the jobs available and belong to an age group which is unlikely to gain new skills. According to our interviews, of the 11,000 unemployed in the region, 40% are over 50 years old.

The situation is more nuanced when zooming into the municipal level. Unemployment levels in Norrbotten vary from 4% in Gällivare, which represents the lowest level in Sweden, to 10.8% in Haparanda, which is above the national average (8.2%).²¹¹ In Finnish Lapland, differences in unemployment rates are also significant, being 9.2% in Sodankylä and 18% in Muonio by March 2021.²¹² Nevertheless, these differences cannot be considered to be related to the municipalities' proximity to or distance from the national borders.

When looking at the recovery trend one year into the pandemic, differences between the border municipalities show that the crisis has impacted them differently. For instance, one interviewee suggested that the decline in unemployment in the Swedish towns of Pajala and Övertorneå²¹³ is probably linked to the high number of people reaching retirement age. Moreover, low unemployment in Pajala is also related to the high labour demand in the mining industry. At the same time, municipalities that rely on tourism and trade have been clearly impacted by the border restrictions regardless of their proximity to the border. This is the case in Arvidsjaur and Arjeplog, but also in the larger towns of Luleå and Piteå, which typically receive an important number of Norwegian visitors, as well as in Rovaniemi, which receives international visitors.

211 Swedish Public Employment Service (B).

212 Ely Centre Lapland.

213 -1.2% and -1.6% in April 2020–2021; Swedish Public Employment Service (B).

Key economic issues

From a macro-economic perspective, Norrbotten has fared rather well during the pandemic. The Chamber of Commerce of Norrbotten carried interviews with over 120 companies from across sectors to identify the impacts of the pandemic. This survey showed that companies were very afraid that supply chains would be disrupted. However, despite a few bumps in the beginning, supply chains reacted well globally. According to our interviews, ‘companies and suppliers found ways to overcome the challenges’, and ‘the planned investments remain’, and therefore the ‘attitude was rather positive after two to three months into the pandemic’. Nevertheless, the hospitality sector and companies across the border were heavily affected. Haparanda, for instance, is highly reliant on cross-border trade and consumer goods. A number of Haparanda’s trade and retail companies operate in markets that cover the northern regions of Finland, Norway and Sweden. These include not only grocery and tobacco shops, but also large stores such as IKEA, which serves the whole northern region across the three countries.

The generally good performance of Norrbotten’s economy despite the crisis can be attributed mainly to the strong industrial basis and the positive outlook of the regional economy in the medium and long terms. Huge investments surrounding the green economy are currently under way. The HYBRIT initiative and H2 Green Steel are two key examples, which are competing to produce fossil-free steel. These and other major investments in large process and energy industries are boosting the innovation system and generating a high number of jobs in the region.

Lapland represents quite a different scenario. It is an important tourist destination in Finland, with a large number of visitors coming from abroad, particularly Asia. Tourism has experienced an important expansion in recent years, which made the crisis even more damaging, with hundreds of tourism providers left in limbo month after month without knowing when they could restart operations. The high degree of uncertainty several months into the pandemic meant that tourism providers had to cancel their winter season offers altogether, with a few weeks’ notice.

Moreover, Lapland struggles with high unemployment rates, with many people categorised as ‘unemployable’ because of their lack of skills and advanced age. However, the situation varies significantly across municipalities and sectors. One informant described the situation in Kemi-Tornio as ‘business as usual’ as ‘the economy of Kemi-Tornio is mostly based on big industry – wood, paper & pulp, mining, steel and a growing recycling industry’. Being less dependent on tourism, the area has been less impacted by the crisis. In contrast, municipalities such as

Rovaniemi and Kolari have been badly hit, with the impacts expected to last several years.

Kemi-Tornio is, however, undergoing a period of uncertainty with the Stora Enso factory closing, which may entail the loss of approximately 1,500 jobs, both directly and indirectly. At the same time, the Metsä Group is building a new factory, a bioproduct mill, which represents a huge investment for the region and will create many new jobs across different professions.

The pandemic has also catalysed a quick process of adaptation. E-commerce has increased dramatically, also for grocery shopping. This has threatened jobs in retail but has also generated new jobs in customer service, packing and delivery. Tourism providers have also adapted their offer to target local visitors, from both their regions and their countries, in the absence of international tourism. In some cases, tourism has increased due to the higher number of domestic tourists who have chosen to visit other regions in their country instead of travelling abroad. Yet, initiatives to boost cross-border tourism have been halted by the pandemic. ‘Two countries, one destination’ is an initiative that is marketing Haparanda-Tornio as one destination and helping companies that provide complementary services to offer joint packages – ‘like rafting and safari, or bed and breakfast and agrotourism’. Making this possible, however, requires a big effort in building relations and trust between actors. While this initiative continues, no major steps forward were possible under restricted borders and a general sense of uncertainty.

Key social issues

The impact of the pandemic has been as visual as it has been symbolic. A fence was erected in the middle of Victoria Square, which separates Haparanda from Tornio, barricades were placed on major bridges along the Torne River and heavily armed National Guards were deployed by the Finnish government to take control of border transit.²¹⁴ Being one of the world’s most peaceful borders, these measures have shaken the local population. Many argue that they were out of proportion. People cross the border not only to profit from cheaper grocery shopping, as many outsiders wrongly assume, but to carry out normal life activities in the same way any resident crosses municipal borders within the metropolitan areas of Stockholm or Helsinki. Numerous people have family members living on both sides of the border, many attend school across the border, many access services that exist on only one side of the border and many own a country cottage on the other side from where they reside.

214 Giacometti & Wøien Meijer 2021.

The hard borders have meant that families have been divided, students have not been able to attend school and frontier workers have had to experience extreme stress for having to constantly face border controls with severe guards, testing and being pushed away by neighbours and acquaintances for having been in contact with people on ‘the other side’.

Integration will be affected in rather concrete ways. The uncertainty generated around free mobility, combined with the difficult experiences commuters and many families have been through, has discouraged people from finding jobs or sending their kids to school across the border. Even at the political level, local authorities are debating whether certain cooperation agreements, such as the language school and the joint bus station, should be lifted. ‘Mistrust is the keyword’ said one local. Yet mistrust is not necessarily directed at public institutions as such, but rather at decision-makers at the national level. There is a general feeling that politicians at the national level do not have the knowledge or ability to make the right decisions for border areas, distant to the capital region.

4.1.3. Svinesund (NO-SE)

One of the busiest border crossings in the Nordic Region is Svinesund between Norway and Sweden. Whether for social reasons to meet family and friends, shopping or tourism, people have been living borderless lives for decades, even centuries.²¹⁵ With highly integrated lives, Swedes and Norwegians live side by side, whether in Norway or Sweden: ‘It is like we’re living in one big municipality’, one informant stated. With the pandemic and the sudden closure of borders, the appreciation of the unique situation often found along borders was absent in policy-making. Although there is a general consensus that the countries acted in a way that was right for them, given their lack of knowledge and experience about global health crises, the issues that have emerged point to the necessity to find ways to handle crises across countries in the future.

Key labour market issues

Svinesund is a highly integrated labour market – if you lose your job on one side of the border, you seek labour market opportunities across the border, both through personal networks and through, for example, the Swedish Employment Agency or the Norwegian equivalent, NAV. ‘It’s been a politically driven development’, one informant stated. NAV has always had a good working relationship with the Swedish Employment Agency and EURES²¹⁶ on the other side of the border, and the pandemic

²¹⁵ Giacometti & Wøien Meijer 2021.

²¹⁶ European cooperation network of employment services.

has brought them closer together. Due to their common labour market, the threshold for getting in touch is low. The absorption capacity across the labour market is highly necessary for overcoming unemployment issues on both sides of the border. 'It is more natural for a person from Halden to travel to work in Strömstad than to Oslo', one informant reported. During the pandemic, there have been several meetings between the business officers in the municipalities on either side of the border and between the Swedish and Norwegian employment agencies.

The pandemic has had a major impact on the labour market in the Svinesund area, although perhaps most dramatically on the Swedish side of the border. While the Norwegian municipalities prepared for a greater wave of unemployment than what materialised, Swedish employees were hit most severely. Unemployment and temporary layoff rates have been constantly changing with the waves of infection rates. What has become particularly clear is the difference in regulations concerning temporary layoffs, for example, in Swedish and Norwegian law. For example, Swedish frontier workers who were prevented from crossing the border to Norway had to take holidays to get paid as they could not be laid off temporarily or dismissed.²¹⁷ According to the Norwegian Working Environment Act, a company cannot dismiss their employees without a factual reason.²¹⁸ As long as the company is not in financial difficulties and has enough work to go around, employees cannot be dismissed, temporarily laid off or put on sick leave. People who resided in Sweden but were working in essential sectors (e.g., health care) were allowed to cross the border. Norwegian frontier workers were also able to travel to Sweden during this period. However, both Swedish and Norwegian workers who crossed to the neighbouring country had to spend their free time in quarantine.

According to an informant, this situation was particularly difficult for one of the larger industry actors in Halden, Norway. Forty of the company's employees working in key competence-based positions were prevented from crossing the border. As these positions were critical for the company's operations, the whole company was thrown into a crisis where 600 positions were suddenly at risk. The local employment office was tasked with mapping and filling the 40 available positions, which proved very difficult due to the nature of and competence required for these jobs. Moreover, it became an ethical issue for those assisting in the search for new people; these were jobs already possessed by key staff from Sweden: 'We were to find employees for positions that were already taken by others. . . but these are people with children who might lose their job.'

217 NRK 2021.

218 Lovdata 2021, § 15-7. *Vern mot usaklig oppsigelse.*

The situation was solved by bringing in retirees, but the issue shows how competence gaps cannot be solved so easily, as one informant described: ‘We were meant to see the closed border as an opportunity, but it wasn’t as easy as [the employment directorate] thought it would be. Particularly when it comes to competences and skills that cannot be replaced.’

Although the situation was resolved, these cases show the complexity and layers that cross-border working involves, as well as the realities of a functional labour market stretching across national borders. Frustrations have been particularly high in municipalities along the border as they feel relatively comfortable with the status of infection risks when it comes to border commuters: frontier workers coming from Sweden are frequently tested. It should be noted, too, that Norwegian employees in Sweden have been allowed to cross the border throughout the pandemic. At the same time, Norwegians employed in Sweden have been required to fulfil Norwegian quarantine rules upon their return to Norway at the end of the working day. One informant explained: ‘It’s been tough. [Norwegian commuters] have been in quarantine since March last year because they run shops [on the other side of the border]. They are prevented from being with their children or grandchildren, like picking them up from kindergarten.’

The situation has also affected different groups, young adults being one of these. According to informants from the Swedish Employment Agency in Fyrbodalen, there were 115 registered unemployed young adults in 2020, which equalled 5% of the unemployed in the labour market area. The informants reported that one year later, in March 2021, the percentage had increased to 16.5%: ‘We worry about those without diplomas’ one informant said, ‘There is a big challenge ahead.’ Skills and education are becoming increasingly more important, and the employment agency in Fyrbodalen is seeing an increased pressure on education institutions. The level of education in the Strömstad area is generally low, but since the start of the pandemic, efforts to map competence in Fyrbodalen have been important. Young people who normally travel across the border for summer jobs on the Swedish side are also prevented from gaining work experience and money for their studies. The tourism industry is a significant employer, and young people working in the tourism industry have an important role as innovators in the industry. Similar concerns are observed in the eastern part of Viken. According to the prognosis published by NAV in eastern Viken, unemployment figures went from 2.7% on 12 March 2020 to 11.3% by the end of March the same year. Unemployment

has declined since March 2021, but the percentage of unemployed or partly unemployed is still higher than pre-March 2020.²¹⁹

Apart from the challenges experienced by the tourism industry in Svinesund, one of the biggest issues currently is recruiting people within the restaurant and food industries. As this sector was hit particularly hard during the pandemic, many have taken the opportunity to widen their skill set and seek work elsewhere. This places businesses dependent on tourism in a difficult situation if the border should reopen for the peak seasons. As one informant from a municipality in Svinesund stated: ‘We are working with this on a daily basis, it all happened so fast. Many who have been working in the sector, especially chefs, have long been saying they wanted to leave the industry due to tough conditions, and now that the opportunity arose, they grabbed it. The hotel and restaurant union can confirm this trend’.

Foreign-born people who are trying to enter the labour market have also had a harder time during the pandemic. Although unemployment rates are relatively low in Halden, the case still rings true on both sides of the border; those who already had difficulties in accessing the labour market for a host of different reasons have been pushed further afield: ‘There is a lot of concern connected to different groups. Everything has worsened.’

There has also been a rise in the number of part-time workers in Norway. According to an informant: ‘There have never been so many part-time workers, and the majority of them are within retail. [Part-time contracts] generate a lot of uncertainty. It is difficult to get permanent contracts. People cannot get a loan with part-time contracts, and the future is uncertain.’ When the national restrictions, including the requirements of working from home and social distancing, were put in motion, NAV expected high levels of unemployment. Of particular concern were the many Norwegian employees at the Nordby shopping centre in Strömstad. However, the transition went better than expected. Personal networks helped solve many issues, and people found part-time or temporary contracts in retail on the Norwegian side of the border. However, the situation across the border prevailed, and the situation at Nordby, for example, was precarious. As one informant described: ‘we had quite frequent meetings with the Nordby shopping centre in May and June 2020. It was only then it really hit me what the impacts of Norway’s border restrictions meant. I was not at all prepared for how angry they were on the other side of the border, and how much this means to them. It was after all only a small group that was affected in Norway.’

219 NAV 2021.

Key economic issues

Svinesund normally has a formidable economic turnover from border shopping. In addition to the regular shopping areas in town centres, some of the municipalities along the border have areas dedicated to and designed for a much larger customer base than what would be natural for the respective municipality's size. Grocery stores, shops and alcohol retailers by the Norwegian border are scaled for 150,000 people – a large Swedish city. Border shopping has been going strong for years, and as one Swedish informant put it, 'we thought we were unstoppable'. Although most of our informants believed that businesses and trade will find opportunities regardless of the future, the pandemic has still uncovered underlying issues that need attention, including worker mobility, trust and taxation issues.²²⁰

According to Statistics Norway, the effect of the border restrictions between Sweden and Norway can be seen in the increase in retail turnover, also when discounting the increased prices. Halden saw the greatest increase in retail turnover at 48%, but Fredrikstad and Sarpsborg also increased by 41%. Border shopping took a plunge from a turnover of NOK 16 billion in 2019 to NOK 2 billion in 2020.²²¹ Alcohol and tobacco sales have been particularly high in Norway during this period due to the border restrictions.

It is important to note that although there have been positive changes for Norwegian retail following the border closures, it is not certain that the situation will continue. Nevertheless, it provides an incentive to work harder to carve out a niche for businesses on the Norwegian side of the border. In the words of one informant: 'We will continue to develop businesses. There are only two things that can prevent a "leakage" to Sweden: the level of convenience, or if it is a lot better [than what you get in Sweden].' What is interesting, the informant noted, is why Swedes do not go to Norway in the same way: 'There are a lot of good things in Halden too, but it's a whole different thing. We don't have the shops [to make people stay]. . . when the border opens, you will be travelling across just to buy a packet of chewing gum.' This exemplifies that people's experiences are not well understood at the national level. While proposals to change sugar and alcohol taxes to compete with Swedish prices are debated in the parliament, this is only one side of the story in these border areas. One informant explained this further: 'Cinemas, for example! You go to Strömstad to go to the cinema. There are different film screenings and a different culture altogether. You'd rather eat pizza in Strömstad. It is

220 Giacometti & Wøien Meijer 2021.

221 Statistics Norway 2021.

a full-year thing. You go where you find the best opportunities on offer, and it is not just about prices on goods.’

The impact of the border restrictions can also be witnessed in the border crossing figures. According to the Norwegian Public Roads Administration’s National Border Index, the changes in border crossings from January 2021 through March 2021 were radically different compared to 2020.²²² For all vehicles (‘light’ and ‘heavy’), the reduction of border crossings was -73.5% (January), -82.2% (February) and -64.5% (March).²²³ This can be seen to reflect the border closing measures implemented at the beginning of the year and the gradual easing up of the restrictions over the summer months. What is particularly interesting is the difference between ‘light’ and ‘heavy’ vehicles (shorter or longer than 5.6 metres). It is clear from the Public Roads Administration’s statistics that the reduction in border crossings affected light vehicles more strongly than heavy vehicles.²²⁴ This can be explained with the different rules that applied to the transport of goods over the border (highest, -19.0% in Jan 2021) versus private trips (highest, -91.0% in Feb 2021). The main border crossings are located in Svinesund, Ørje and Magnor.

Svinesund is a much-loved tourism destination for many Scandinavians. The national parks of Hvaler and Koster, the archipelago, and the sun and sea provide the backdrop for many holiday memories for both Swedes and Norwegians. Tourism is an important industry. In recent years, Swedish and Norwegian municipalities have been collaborating to achieve ‘borderless tourism’. Although the impacts were not apparent until the peak summer months, the Strömstad municipality estimated a loss of approximately of SEK 30 million in parking and docking fees alone.²²⁵ By contrast, the tourism industry in Halden fared quite well as people enjoyed their ‘staycations’. The winter months were tougher as alcohol serving restrictions were enforced. All-season tourism has been part of the municipality’s strategies, and the differences in seasons have been particularly clear during the pandemic. Predicting difficulties in the tourism industry, the municipalities were prompted to take action. Efforts to limit the spread of the infection, such as ‘Strömstad’s safe for visitors’ (Besökssäkert Strömstad), were implemented in Strömstad, but they did not improve the situation or change the Norwegian government’s stance on border restrictions. The measures were well received in the municipality, however. The Halden municipality took similar steps and provided

222 Statens Vegvesen 2021.

223 Ibid.

224 Ibid.

225 Giacometti & Wøien Meijer 2021.

a compensation package early on (April 2020), including free parking and free use of municipal grounds for restaurants for outdoor seating.²²⁶

Not all municipalities along the border suffered from the pandemic to the same degree as Strömstad. While the pandemic did affect municipalities such as Tanum and Dals Ed, their unemployment figures and level of economic losses were somewhat less significant.²²⁷ This may be due to their more diversified economy, but perhaps also to their somewhat lower dependency on Norwegian border crossers, which are issues noted by Strömstad's municipal officers. 'Strömstad will change with time', one informant stated, 'it will be a Strömstad with a different business structure. The tourism sector was too vulnerable.' For example, in Dals Ed, the investment in local businesses led to new café openings, and the camping grounds were full of Swedes throughout the summer.²²⁸ The municipality has also engaged in active dialogue with the businesses and industries in the area in order to make sure that their needs are met.²²⁹

According to municipal officers, the municipality's role in contributing to the building and construction sector through public procurement and long-term plans has become more important than ever before. Although there is a boom in the construction sector now, it may be a slow burn in disguise as risk aversion and lower spending in the private sector might impact the sector in the future. These concerns also emphasise the necessity to understand the broader effects of crises in general and prepare for other global megatrends, including the so-called Industry 4.0, in which automation and digitalisation take the front seat and might impact job availability in the short term. This is particularly important in places like Halden, where approximately 19% of the labour force works in process industry companies. E-commerce is an area that requires more attention and is perhaps the greatest threat to local trade in the Svinesund area.²³⁰

Key social issues

One issue that our informants noted as of particular importance, and that caused bewilderment among them, was the lack of good explanations and reasons for closing the border in fighting an enemy that knows no national boundaries. Based on our interviews, it is clear that there has also been a lack of appreciation and understanding between the countries of their respective strategies. The initial strict measures curbed people's ability to

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

travel within the country as well (e.g. to their second homes) in order not to put excessive pressure on local health care services, which are sized to accommodate permanent residents.²³¹ There was also a quarantine period for domestic travellers from the south to the north of Norway.²³² On the other side, Sweden's initial strategy was to minimise the impact on people's normal life, promote voluntarism and keep the economy afloat.²³³ The ability of the Swedish government to impose strict measures on its population is made difficult by the protection of people's private lives stipulated in the constitution. General recommendations for pursuing individual responsibility were therefore the main approach.²³⁴

The ripple effects following the border closures were also manifested negatively in the social consciousness of people living along the border.²³⁵ According to our informants, the inability to travel across the border to see family and friends has been one of the most taxing aspects of the border restrictions following the pandemic outbreak. Social isolation and increased levels of anxiety and stress, which have also been connected to job uncertainty, are important aspects, demonstrating the social side of the restrictions placed upon society. What has also emerged are much sharper divisions between people. One of the informants pointed out that the restrictions have divided people into those who have and earn nothing, those who work from a home office and have purchasing power and those who have no option but to physically travel to work. Moreover, the restrictions have also led to a classification of human relations and definitions of 'family', whereby proof of partnership outside marriage has been required for entry into Norway. As one informant stated, 'it's okay to be apart from your partner for a shorter period. But not for a whole year, which has been the case for unmarried couples.'

Although the border police are aware of the issues that unclear guidelines cause, the frequent changes in the regulations have made the task of enforcing them steadily more difficult. According to an informant, the ambiguity of guidelines can be exemplified by looking at a single Norwegian company with ten Swedish employees. Five of them crossed the border without problems, three were not allowed to cross the border, and two had to argue their way across. The differences in responses, unclear guidelines and 'pulverisation' of responsibility have generated a lot of frustration among Swedish and Norwegian border commuters.

231 See e.g. Schnell & Skjulhaug 2020.

232 NRK 2020b.

233 Pashakhanlou 2021.

234 See e.g. Moodie 2021.

235 Giacometti & Wøien Meijer 2021.

The uncertainty on the labour market is not only connected to border restrictions in Norway, but also to the short time horizon for operationalising new regulations. ‘Suddenly there’s a new press conference with expectations of starting new regulations the following day. None of them have even considered that there are border areas with frontier workers, who should be taken into account. Even when there have been smaller changes, [frequent changes] result in people and especially companies contacting [the municipality].’ Few things affect businesses more than the difficulty of finding employees:

There is a lot to learn from this situation, but we haven’t learnt anything yet. We need to get an overview of what happened. The border services have done a lot and have raised the issues to the NCM [Nordic Council of Ministers], but it’s still incredible that there are no exceptions for these areas. Everyone understands the necessity of restrictions to prevent higher infection rates. Employers have paid up without questioning, but the regulations should have been clear solutions that stood the test of time. Or at least longer than three weeks. We have seen no attempts to create lasting regulations. Predictability is very important.

4.1.4. Öresund (DK-SE)

The Öresund border region, also known as Greater Copenhagen, gets its name from the narrow strait separating Swedish Scania and the Copenhagen Capital Region in Denmark. The area was made famous by the series *The Bridge*, but the functioning of the collaboration between the countries during the Covid-19 pandemic is more questionable. While the border restrictions did not officially prevent frontier workers from crossing the border during the pandemic, family and friends were restricted from travelling across due to the Danish border restrictions. Families and friends were thus separated in an area that functions as one mega region – facilitated by the bridge, which opened in 2000 in an effort to boost integration and mitigate cross-border obstacles. Yet, the bridge has not automatically eased communication between the national authorities. In April 2020, the total number of crossings plummeted by more than two-thirds compared to the same time in 2019.²³⁶ With no clear indication of whether the border would be open or closed, from one day to another, people living and working across the border felt uncertain about their everyday lives.

²³⁶ Öresundsbron 2021.

Rather than building bridges, the bridge has become a symbol of what could have been instead of what is now in terms of real integration. The municipalities and regions have worked hard to merge the labour markets and integrate aspects of cross-border working but have been powerless in influencing decisions made at the national level during the pandemic. Interregional collaboration has not been an issue during the pandemic, but the regions' influence has been inhibited by the protective measures implemented nationally. One informant reported that 'there is a lot of political willingness to work on closer integration on a regional level, but not the national', and added that the national authorities' response to the pandemic 'brought about a very protective approach'. However, the same informant believed that this is not what they need, 'instead, we need a regional approach.'

However, the pandemic is not the first crisis leading to border controls. During the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, Sweden imposed stricter controls on the border to Denmark. This was followed by passport controls with random checks by the Danish authorities after criminal incidents in Copenhagen involving persons from southern Sweden. These series of events changed perceptions of borderless societies, which are something that the European community has been fighting to achieve throughout its existence. 'It suddenly became okay to talk about border restrictions', noted one interviewee. More worryingly, another informant feared that these restrictions may become normalised. In their words: 'when you start building physical obstacles, they will not easily go away.'

Although the reasons for restricting border crossings during the pandemic have been justifiable, informants felt that the decision-making had been done on myopic grounds: primarily based on the realities of capital cities, ignoring the realities of border regions. With the nationally oriented policies following the outbreak of the pandemic and the ripple effects it has caused in its wake, many interviewees concurred on the need to rethink and rewrite the agreements governing the collaboration between the two countries. One informant revealed that 'the Öresund Agreement has never been challenged like this. We've seen a lot of issues with it.' Several informants believed that the old agreements and EU-wide rules on tax collection and social security are 'completely unfit to meet today's requirements' because the labour market has become increasingly globalised and more people work remotely.

Key labour market issues

The labour market in the regions that form part of Greater Copenhagen (Halland and Scania in Sweden, and Zealand and the Capital Region in

Denmark) has been affected by the pandemic. It is difficult to assess the full extent of the damage because of the lack of sufficient data. Aside from the absence of reliable statistics, narrowing down a cross-national labour market to daily commuting renders it too simplistic. In addition to daily commuters, the business ecosystems are largely intertwined, with many people working and companies operating on both sides of the border and even globally, for that matter. The life sciences sector, for instance, relies on specialised labour travelling from Scania to Copenhagen, but also on the complex relations that exist between research centres and businesses across the border and internationally. Moreover, being a large city, Copenhagen offers important job opportunities to young people in Scania entering the labour market. According to one interview, many Scanians find their first job in Copenhagen. Nevertheless, taking into consideration commuters only, there is a significant imbalance as 90% of frontier workers live in Scania and commute to work in Denmark, while only the remaining 10% travel the other way. In 2020, the number of Swedish citizens who work in the Capital Region (Region Huvudstaden) and Zealand (DK) but who do not live in Denmark dropped by 4%.²³⁷ It is important to remember that a combination of factors may have contributed to the cross-border labour loss in addition to the border restrictions.

Throughout the pandemic, the border remained formally open to frontier workers. However, due to the lockdown implemented in Denmark and recommendations to work from home in Sweden, many of them stopped travelling to work. This group has suffered from the insecurities related to the two Öresund Agreements that govern the right to social security and taxation, and define specific rules about where to pay taxes and register for social security according to the share of time spent in each country. Based on the interviews, it is clear that the Agreement needs to be revised. Moreover, a new Swedish law introduced in January 2021 states that employees hired by a foreign company without permanent establishment in Sweden will be taxed in Sweden when they perform work for a business in Sweden.²³⁸ This new taxation rule, combined with the ‘home rule’ in the Öresund Agreement, has resulted in various approaches to the ‘work from home’ regimes for frontier workers, primarily those travelling from Sweden to Denmark. In the life science sector, one interviewee perceived that productivity has remained high and that ‘things are done differently but not necessarily worse.’ Yet, they ‘worry about the social glue that has been a necessity for a network organisation.’

²³⁷ Öresundsinstitutet 2021b.

²³⁸ Parliament of Sweden 2020a.

According to our informants, it is often more expensive to hire employees from across the border, and the different restrictions between countries have led to unfair treatment of employees. For instance, Danish employers have encouraged Swedes to stay at home while letting Danes use their office space more freely. Due to the new law regarding the taxation of hired foreign staff introduced in January 2021²³⁹, the information services have had phone calls concerning Swedes forced to travel to Denmark despite their worries about the virus and the formal recommendation to stay at home, which has given rise to concerns about potential double standard by the administration. Frontier workers have been burdened with unclear guidelines and information issued by different authorities. 'For everyone else in Sweden it is pretty clear what you need to do, but in border areas you have to keep your eyes on both countries', one informant said. The Freedom of Movement Council of the Nordic Council of Ministers conducted a survey during the summer of 2020. Based on this survey, it is clear that the border obstacles hamper labour market absorption capacity, whereas well-functioning cross-border mobility has been an important tool for complementing labour markets and accessing skills.²⁴⁰

According to one informant, unemployment in Malmö increased from the already challenging levels of around 14% to 16–17%. This informant explains that the high unemployment rates are partly related to the high share of young people and immigrants, who generally have more difficulties in entering the labour market.

Skilled vs unskilled labour force

Access to skills and the absorption capacity of the labour market across the border play an important role in the economic development of the Greater Copenhagen area. As the impact of the pandemic on the hotels and restaurants in the area was also significant, unskilled workers from the Scania region in Sweden were hit hard. Due to the great diversity of services and labour market opportunities in the Capital Region of Copenhagen, the area absorbs unskilled workers from the other side of the border who may not otherwise have found suitable occupations. Big employers in the Amager area in the Capital Region in Denmark, home to Kastrup International Airport, took a blow. As a result of the crisis, the airport is digitalising its operations, which may threaten many jobs. According to an informant, 'some households have both people working at the airport, both unskilled', which makes them 'less flexible in

239 Ibid.

240 Nordic Co-operation 2020a.

terms of transferring skills'. With digitalisation, the divide becomes even clearer; as one informant explained, 'unskilled workers are not digital workers. . . being digital is the prerogative of those with higher education'. Coupled with the skyrocketing e-commerce sector, it threatens the unskilled labour market opportunities in shops. At the same time, the growing e-commerce sector has saved many jobs during the pandemic due to the increasing demand for transport services and logistics.

Informants working with labour market issues in the Greater Copenhagen area see opportunities in using the aftermath of the pandemic to re-educate and upskill people to be ready for the 'green transition'. However, attracting enough people for jobs related to the green transition and reskilling workers will not be enough to meet the labour such a transition demands. One informant commented that it is 'a big, but unlikely idea' that long-term unemployed people can be part of the green transition. Limited access to skilled labour may affect the economic development of the region, particularly in Scania. 'If there are problems finding people with the right skills, companies will have problems scaling up, and will move elsewhere', an informant ascertained. Nevertheless, labour market experts are still optimistic. One informant believed that Copenhagen will remain an important magnet for workers in western Scania: 'it is a capital, there are higher wages and more opportunities.' Yet, informants thought that countries need to show that they can respond to future crises to restore people's trust that they can work across borders without much additional burden.

Key economic issues

The panic-stricken atmosphere at the beginning of the pandemic has slowly petered out, and informants for this study indicated that the integration of the labour market as well as the business sector is relatively mature. As most commuters have had the possibility to travel across the border to Denmark or work from home, the direct impact on productivity has been relatively low, although it is clear that specific industries have suffered disproportionately. The hospitality sector in particular, on both sides of the Öresund strait, has suffered from the absence of tourists and business travellers. Yet, an important imbalance can be noted here, which may be directly connected to the stricter restrictions for Swedes to enter Denmark than vice versa. The number of Danes staying overnight in Scania dropped by 54% during 2020. By comparison, the percentage of Swedes staying in the Danish capital dropped by 74% in the same period, compared to the previous year.²⁴¹

241 Öresundsinstitutet 2021a.

The statistics collected by the operator of the Öresund bridge also show that there has been a more dramatic drop in border crossings by car, camper van or motorcycle; vehicles driven by private individuals. The number of passengers using coaches has also changed dramatically across the Öresund bridge, from 7,260 passengers in June 2019 to 942 in June 2021.²⁴² This drop may not be solely related to the border restrictions but also to the lockdown and other recommendations to stop people from travelling. As opposed to industries catering to tourists, general value and supply chains have functioned well. This can be supported by statistics on vehicle crossings. Looking at truck and van crossings, there was only a slight drop in 2020 compared to 2019, in the months of April and May, and even a slight increase in the month of June.²⁴³ In this light, it seems clear that supply chains and the transport of goods have continued to operate almost as normal. Instead, issues surrounding staff working conditions and taxation have been most troublesome for companies.

From an industry perspective, measures to curb the infection rates implemented overnight or without much warning have been the most disruptive. Based on our interviews with industry actors, they have primarily affected the level of trust in national actors to maintain free mobility and stability in the market. The large life science industry stretching across Scania and the capital area of Copenhagen has done well during the pandemic, and not only due to the nature of the crisis. One informant said that ‘most life science companies are moving on; big companies are doing well, [whereas] smaller companies have been most affected.’ Increased collaboration and research have been essential to emerge relatively unscathed from the crisis. Risk and trust go hand in hand. In the beginning, people feared that supply chains would collapse and destabilise the market, yet effective measures applied by companies to adapt to the new conditions and private-public partnerships led to increased trust.

A representative from a life science cluster in the Greater Copenhagen area highlighted collaborative projects as key enablers for cross-border integration between companies. This also points to an issue that is often overlooked with respect to open borders, which is the added economic value of working in multinational companies and consortia. One informant explained that ‘SMEs in Denmark may see opportunities to thrive in Sweden and may end up on the Swedish stock market’, and while this may be viewed as a loss for Denmark, he added that ‘this is not a zero-sum game.’ On the contrary, he believed that it is a strength for the business ecosystem. That specific company may have closed without the

242 Öresundsbron.

243 Ibid.

opportunities found in Sweden. Therefore, he concluded that ‘the more open the region, the more opportunities companies have to grow and thrive’ on both sides of the border. Seeing companies in isolation prevents growth and innovation, which needs to be part of the conversation when considering the purpose and extent of closed borders in future crises. Although collaborations may still happen digitally, informants were quick to point out the importance of interpersonal relationships for collaborations to develop. One interviewee highlighted that ‘when you work across borders it is important to meet, to get the feel of it, [whereas] it is very difficult to develop the same types of connections if you do not.’

Nevertheless, digitalisation has also strengthened the resilience of the global market and the possibility to keep working productively despite working from home. As one informant put it, ‘digitalisation [helps] – although everything is closed physically, digitalisation keeps the world open.’ Indeed, following the pandemic and the reliance on digital working, none of the informants seemed to expect to return to the pre-Covid-19 ‘normal’. Companies are adapting towards more flexible workspaces.

Key social issues

The societal aspects of the crisis may be seen in light of the nationally oriented policies implemented across the Nordic Region, which have ignored the realities of people living in border areas. While policies have focused on families and general societal wellbeing, they have been conceived from a national perspective, forgetting the personal ties existing across countries and overlooking the integration objectives that Nordic ministers themselves set out to achieve. A region’s wellbeing is measured on the basis of its relative regional economic strength within the country, and not across borders. However, by neglecting the role of open borders, one is effectively not taking into account the complex interpersonal relationships that might underpin the economic fortitude of the area.

While many more Swedes head across the border for work than vice versa, informants stated that Danes use the Scania region for cultural reasons, and some 10,000 Danes own second homes in their neighbouring country. With the initial restrictions on border crossing for recreational reasons, Danish second homeowners argued for their admittance based on property maintenance reasons, burglary prevention and their right to travel to their privately owned properties. During the brief Swedish border closure, the residents of Bornholm were placed in a difficult situation. Although the island of Bornholm is part of the Capital Region in Denmark, the access to the rest of the country is mainly by ferries via Sweden. As Sweden closed its borders, islanders hoping to celebrate Christmas with family in mainland Denmark were prevented from leaving

Bornholm. According to an informant, this has given rise to discussions about investing in direct ferry lines with larger capacities than at present, and whether to invest in larger-scale air travel opportunities.

Another group affected by the restrictions have been those with partners across the sound who are not married. As one informant reported: ‘People never spoke about these people before; there are 2,000 of them.’ When these social complexities are combined with the distance between Stockholm and Scania, for example, the attention given to them may be further impacted. ‘Border regions are in peripheries – if you are not sitting in it, you do not see it. [We need to] find ways to create the sense of urgency [that capital cities would be treated with] to solve these challenges’, one informant remarked.

The different approaches to the pandemic adopted by the two countries and the insecurities that emerged contributed to making cross-border living somewhat more difficult. ‘Citizens cannot keep up with the frequent changes. People are unsure what the restrictions are because none of the countries give you any indications of whether you will be able to cross the bridge or not, beforehand. This has been particularly difficult for people with shared custody’, one interviewee described the situation. Sharing information and updating the rules through sudden press conferences by national agencies has brought difficulties for the information services in the area. One informant explained that the initial border restrictions with passport controls on both sides of the border led to questions concerning the level of freedom when living in a border area. In their words: ‘when you close down things so fast, it creates a feeling of limits and destroys trust. . . . Can you make it work in your life like that?’ Moreover, the informant stated that the longevity of and complications surrounding the current cross-border regime, together with the number of papers and evidence of employment required and the increased commuting time, have had a negative psychological impact on frontier workers.

People living in the area understand the potential ups and downs that come with living across borders. Although it was not smooth sailing prior to the pandemic, it was generally accepted as a feature of such life, and the border remained open as a constant feature of cross-border living. Finding a common road ahead and acknowledging the shortcomings of existing regimes will be key to securing the social and economic resilience of the Öresund region in the future. One interviewee said that the recovery measures in ‘Scania need to extend to Copenhagen because the laws and recommendations at the national level failed during the coronavirus pandemic’. The lack of collaboration is ‘a threat to Nordic integration’, this person concluded.

4.1.5. Comparative analysis

There are many similarities between the cases of Öresund, Svinesund and Tornedalen. The disruption of people's lives in border areas has been challenging, frustrating and a wake-up call to the realities of those choosing a borderless life. Several themes emerge from the cases in these four Nordic countries, including trust, the impact of the measures and border closures, regional economic structural changes, and changing social structures. Despite being aware of the challenges that come with living across borders, people generally accepted them as a feature of their lives. Relations have been put to the test, but now it is important to put differences behind and work to find new ways of collaboration in the future. 'It is important to also keep the conversation going after the pandemic to make sure that this doesn't happen again', one informant stated and added that 'it can be difficult to change things when measures are applied at a national level.'

Trust as capital in cross-border areas

Trust is one of the major issues surfacing from the interviews conducted in the case studies. In this context, however, it is important to unpack what is meant by 'trust', and towards whom and what. With respect to authorities, it is possible to distinguish between trust towards political decision-makers in national and local governments versus trust towards apolitical public institutions. There may also be differences in trust towards the authorities of different countries, in other words, people may trust their authorities, but not those of their neighbouring countries, which was revealed in our interviews and in the Nordic survey.²⁴⁴ Supranational institutions represent yet another layer towards which people can develop a sense of trust or distrust. These include the EU and Nordic institutions, as well as global ones, such as the WHO. Additionally, interpersonal trust, or the lack thereof, exists among people. Trust is also the founding principle on which people rely when trying to live a normal life across and along national borders.

The lack of consideration of the specific realities of border communities in national one-size-fits-all measures provoked enormous uncertainty and distress. The fear of the unknown exacerbated residents' distrust of national-level decision-making in relation to their local needs. Yet, what started as political measures adopted by national authorities trickled down into society, generating confrontation in social media between sympathisers of the approaches of different countries. In some cases, this confrontation transcended social media, with cars being vandalised

244 Nordic Co-operation 2021.

or people being rejected when entering shops.²⁴⁵ However, while some believe that time will heal these wounds, others think that society has not been severely affected, but instead argue that a greater challenge will be to restore trust towards national authorities. As one informant put it: ‘we trust institutions and the health care institutions, but we in the border region do not like [the governments in] Helsinki and Stockholm telling us how to live; we want to make our own decisions.’

People’s trust towards their national governments is, to a large extent, shaped by their belief in the national authorities’ ability to solve local and regional problems. As the pandemic played out, including the resurrection of hard borders, power was centralised, thus giving it more influence over local matters.²⁴⁶ This sudden recentralisation of power, however, has not resulted in improving people’s perceptions, but has rather generated criticism and strengthened the voices of those who argue that power should be closer to those who understand the dynamics of border relations at the local level. This was true for most of the informants interviewed for our case studies. Border communities have felt misrepresented, also prior to the pandemic. The measures during the pandemic have reinforced this experience by exposing the national authorities’ lack of understanding of the specific realities of border communities and economies. The top-down approaches, particularly in Finland and Norway, can be perceived as breaching the social contract. The more people think their national governments fail to make decisions that are relevant to them, the more they lose trust in their ability to handle other types of issues. Many fear their ability to live across borders has been affected.²⁴⁷ An important remark, however, is that the lack of trust in national government does not necessarily imply a loss of trust in institutions. Indeed, many interviewees confirmed that people continue to trust in health care and even in local authorities.

Furthermore, in view of the functional labour and housing markets stretching across borders, and further actions to encourage Nordic and European integration, the imposition of hard borders has been perceived as a betrayal of the Nordic and European project. Considering the fundamental principles of freedom of movement, and the active dismantling of cross-border barriers championed by supranational institutions, people have been living with an uncompromised freedom of movement since the middle of the last century. When robbed of the chance to move freely

245 Giacometti & Wöjen Meijer 2021.

246 Ibid.

247 Ibid.

across borders, especially in areas where cross-border labour markets are encouraged, people's trust in authorities has been shaken.

Border committees and municipalities have actively pursued the removal of cross-border barriers to further integrate border areas. Border communities are built on freedom of movement as a fundamental principle. The resurrection of hard borders and strict border patrolling has led to further frustration and perceptions that basic freedoms have been violated. According to our informants, there are countless stories about the ways the regulations have been practised at the border because the interpretation of the rules has depended on the judgment of individual border officers, leading to inconsistent practices. This has added to the negative view people have of national governments as the responsible authorities.

National measures vs border restrictions

It is important to differentiate between the role of general national Covid-19-related restrictions, such as lockdowns, and their impact on people's lives, and the impact of border restrictions. Both have affected people's normal lives and business, but neither effect can be solely attributed to one or the other in border areas. Both lockdowns and border restrictions have impeded people from visiting their relatives and accessing shops and services. Additionally, different government aid programmes may have benefitted businesses in different ways across national borders. Although it is difficult to determine causality, the border restrictions have particularly disrupted large sectors such as trade and the hospitality and tourism industry. They have also challenged access to skills and the labour market. Most dramatically, they have affected people whose lives transcend national borders in terms of family, homes and jobs.

At the same time, making concessions to border areas has also brought up issues and arguments built around the idea that such concessions 'create borders within a country'. However, this undermines the complexity of border areas' wider reach through markets, public services and everyday life. Border areas are not only organic but also politically willed constructions driven by the mutual benefits of working and living across borders, as well as by the economic benefits of larger markets and labour force pools. Therefore, the double effect of the national measures to curb infection rates and the border restrictions is testing the overall regional resilience. The restrictions demonstrate regions' strength in meeting both internal and external challenges, and their ability to 'bounce' back or forward in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Regional economic structures

The prevailing regional economic structures seem to determine the regional impact of border restrictions on a region's industries and businesses. Areas with fewer sectors and industries seem to have been worse off than areas with greater economic diversity. Those areas in Öresund, Svinesund and Tornedalen that are less dependent on people, businesses or services from the other side of the border have fared better.

In contrast, areas where businesses specifically target people crossing the border have felt the impact more acutely. This is particularly clear when looking at the tourism sector. All three border areas in this study exhibit reliance on either tourism from the other side of the border or seasonal tourism, drawing people from further afield, while there are huge imbalances in the directions of the flows of shoppers, tourists and frontier workers. Local economies that mainly rely on tourism have been significantly more affected than more diversified ones. Tourism catered to neighbouring regions is also related to border shopping and trade in these areas, which has been particularly challenging during the pandemic.

On the other hand, some areas have done better than expected. This bears witness to the resilience of both global supply chains and the global economy, but also to the diversity and nature of the industries in areas such as Norrbotten and Denmark's Capital Region. Interestingly, the situation that was predicted to lead to long delays and disruptions in supply chains did not materialise to the extent that was expected. Although several companies in Norway have experienced delays in Swedish subcontractors' work or deliveries, especially within the construction sector, as well as in components coming from Asia, businesses have survived. Global supply chains adjusted quickly. According to our informants, the construction and building sector has done particularly well during the pandemic, due to both home renovations and municipalities' objective of keeping the industry going through local projects in Norway, for example. However, there is some concern for the sector's long-term perspective as regards the ability to stay afloat in the future. Informants stated that economic uncertainty among clients may lead to a risk averse approach in the future. When it comes to the process and manufacturing industries, the situation has mostly continued unaffected. The optimism with which investors have held on to their investments i.e. the current developments in the steel industry in Norrbotten, or the recycling industry in Kemi-Tornio, is evidence of this. However, informants also noted that it takes time to build relations and trust across borders, and the extent to which these were affected is impossible to measure. In some cases, businesses have lost opportunities to operate across borders. It may take time to rebuild

trust that borders will remain open and that those opportunities to do business without new barriers will continue to exist.

Structural unemployment and access to specific competence and skills have been a prevailing issue. Access to competence across borders plays a key role in many larger industries, including the process and life science industries in both Svinesund and Öresund, as well as in health care and other public sector jobs in Tornedalen and Svinesund. It is also worth noting that despite the current difficulties, areas such as Öresund, which includes Copenhagen, are likely to continue as normal without much adjustment because people still search for jobs across borders. According to our informants, metropolitan areas such as Copenhagen with diverse labour markets play a positive role for the current, and future, economic strength of areas like the Swedish region of Scania.

It is difficult to tell which of the labour market and economic impacts on the cross-border regions are connected to the border restrictions implemented along the Finnish-Swedish-Norwegian land border, or to the entry restrictions from the other countries, and which to the other measures, such as the lockdown, quarantine or testing requirements. These are all interlinked. What is more, the structures of the local labour markets and economies have significantly influenced the degree to which they have been affected.

Changing social institutions (and organisation of work)

The border restrictions have also contributed to surfacing social issues. As only 'necessary' travels across the border have been allowed for large parts of the 18-month-long pandemic, visiting friends and extended family, or even continuing a somewhat normal life, has been difficult. These difficulties were also exacerbated by the different practices across countries concerning quarantine rules. This has been the case for the majority of those having to cross the borders as quarantines have been required for employees working in certain jobs. This means that some people were in a constant state of quarantine for several months so that they could keep their jobs on the other side of the border. They were also not able to pick up their children from school or kindergarten, or meet their friends or family. Another interesting aspect of the border restrictions has been the emphasis placed on formal relationships and the validity of personal relations. Unmarried people have not been able to travel to see their partner. An old social institution such as marriage has been regarded as one of the few solid proofs of real commitment. This brings about questions connected to the way society evaluates and values institutionalised relationships versus personal relationships. It is also problematic in a society that has evolved beyond institutionalised traditions.

The organisation of work has also been put to the test during the pandemic. The trend towards more flexible working conditions, including remote work, has accelerated, with no or few alternatives for employers. What was considered a luxury for the few in the past has become mandatory for many during the pandemic. This seems to have created a division between those who are able to work from home and those who cannot due to the nature of their work. In border areas, the situation is more complex because of the rules surrounding taxation and social security, which are connected to the amount of time people spend working in one country or another. These rules have conflicted with the obligation or recommendation to work from home. In many cases, frontier workers have been obliged to travel to work across the border to follow taxation rules while at the same time being urged to work from home. These issues have brought to light that labour rules, as well as tax and social security regimes, conflict with the realities and needs of the changing labour markets, particularly in cross-border areas. Moreover, the contradictions between the rules and regulations of different countries have become particularly obvious in this time of crisis. This, in turn, generates a debate about the opportunities and demands for those individuals and businesses whose employment or operations require physical presence.

Cross-border collaboration

Despite the negative aspects of the border closures, the municipalities across the borders in all the cases have maintained and reinforced conversation as an important mechanism for knowledge sharing to address common challenges and to ensure that good relations are maintained.²⁴⁸ Collaboration and dialogue have been essential during the pandemic in helping find new collaborative constellations between different actors within the municipalities, or between actors across the border. The municipalities have had to find new ways of organising work to meet the information demand from all facets of society, and these have included new crisis councils and lower thresholds for discussion across different social actors in, for example, Norway. The active involvement of different authorities and agencies has been key to reaching consensus and making the right decisions. Similar collaborations can be found on the Swedish side of the border, even though halfway through the pandemic, informants there felt there could have been even more collaboration between actors.²⁴⁹ The collaboration between cross-border areas and key actors working with border issues has been crucial in influencing decision-making at national

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

levels. Border organisations such as Öresunddirekt and the North Calotte Council teamed up with the Freedom of Movement Council and Info Norden to identify some of the key border barriers emerging from the border restrictions. Their effort was pivotal in signalling the appropriate national authorities what issues required immediate intervention.²⁵⁰

One of the main features needed for gaining a better understanding of the (mutual) reliance of the regions on one another is to develop common statistical benchmarking. Currently, the collection and exchange of micro level data is challenged by the confidentiality laws in Norway, Denmark and Finland, which are compromised by Swedish transparency laws. The Scania region is currently testing the Danish-German commuter statistical model, which gathers data along different parameters. If the model is relatively accurate, it may positively contribute to increasing the knowledge base around commuters in the area. However, mutual reliance is clear. One informant said that the recovery of ‘Scania needs to include Copenhagen – the laws and recommendations at the national level failed during the coronavirus pandemic in the form of taxes, for example. [The lack of collaboration has been] a threat to Nordic integration’. The same person added that ‘the Nordic cooperation ministers have a difficult task – they are trying to fix something that is broken at the national level, but there is a lack of discussion and negotiation, which affects border regions.’ Therefore, they concluded that there needs to be dialogue ‘every day until the countries start making strategies together.’ This suggests that regions need to be taken into account beyond national borders.

The Nordic Region had a good start following the introduction of the passport union in 1954, but with global threats coming thick and fast, its validity is determined by the level of trust the Nordic countries feel comfortable placing in each other. The Nordic countries need to find ways to facilitate a greater range of problem-solving approaches and strengthen their joint institutions. Recognising and appreciating differences between the countries are key to taking the Nordic Region into the future, and to weathering potential challenges ahead. As one informant put it:

If we are not collaborating between ourselves here in the Nordic Region, who is going to listen to us? . . . If we cannot unite around values, trust development, open-mindedness and our welfare model – if we don’t spend the time necessary on this in the Nordic Region, we won’t have the strength to stand against dark clouds on the horizon.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

What is clear from the interviews is that Nordic leaders did not learn enough from the refugee crisis in 2015, and a future pan-Nordic crisis plan is necessary. One informant expressed that ‘we need a smart way rather than a panicked way to approach crises. It has been more about the domestic voters than smart solutions for the country as a whole.’ This informant believed that the approaches adopted were not based on the wellbeing of society as a whole, but somewhat driven by party politics. Furthermore, our informants pointed to the necessity of learning from this crisis and previous crises. Finding a common ground will be key to securing the social and economic resilience of cross-border regions in the future.

4.2. LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICAL COOPERATION: FOUR VIEWS

4.2.1. Denmark

Specific examples demonstrating the (in)effectiveness of Nordic cooperation have generally concerned the commuters. Commuters faced significant obstacles and challenges due to the travel restrictions, which motivated the Freedom of Movement Council to address this issue with the Nordic heads of states, urging them to make a plan for future crisis management. The handling of the commuters is highlighted as a big setback regarding the border mobility agenda and the declared aim to work towards making the Nordic Region the most integrated and sustainable region in the world. Mistrust also infuses the visions of long-term political cooperation. The issues regarding the commuters have caused a breach in trust, primarily between citizens and politicians, but also among some politicians across the party political spectrum.

The relationship between Denmark and Sweden is important since prior to the Covid-19 crisis, the two countries had made use of their neighbourly advantages, especially in the Öresund region. The Copenhagen airport is an important hub for all Nordic air transport; it practically serves as a domestic airport for people living in southern Sweden, and as such should not be considered a national airport only. Another example of neighbourly advantage mentioned in our interviews is Lund University, which attracts talent from all over the world, who often prefer to live in the larger city of Copenhagen rather than in Lund, which is possible due to the short distance, well-functioning public transport and the Öresund bridge. Such mutually benefitting advantages have been challenged by the travel restrictions.

At a more general and analytical level, ‘smart borders’ are in the process of being developed around the world. The borders between Canada and the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and Norway and Sweden are usually the ones highlighted as having come furthest in utilising new technologies to facilitate fast and secure movement of persons and goods. Standards and best practices such as domestic and cross-border coordinated border management as well as trusted trader and trusted traveller programmes are generally promoted in efforts to reduce compliance requirements and make borders almost friction free. Customs and other border control practices that keep borders open, such as release before clearance, deferred duty payments and clearance away from the border, are increasingly seen as the best way to keep borders free of traffic and speed up or remove the need for processing. Technologies such as automatic number plate recognition, enhanced driving licences, barcode scanning and the use of smartphone apps can additionally have a significant impact by reducing paperwork and allowing pre- or on-arrival release, which can decrease or even eliminate the need to stop or undergo checks.²⁵¹

‘Smart borders’ have been criticised for enabling the filtering of ‘indispensables’ (goods, data, capital, key workers) from ‘dispensables’ or ‘unwanted’ human beings (irregular migrants and asylum seekers). The border closures and travel restrictions introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic have given rise to similar criticisms.²⁵² In the Nordic Region, critics have pinpointed that states have resorted to methodological nationalism, breaking with the principles of health cooperation on a global scale. Far from mobilising appropriate health care resources and joint responses, priority has been given to security mechanisms for controlling human mobility.

4.2.2. Finland

Finnish and Nordic researchers have expressed concerns over the potential long-term ramifications that the adoption of national travel restrictions may have for the future of Nordic cooperation.²⁵³ Yet Finnish politicians and civil servants perceive the Covid-19 pandemic and the concomitant travel restrictions as a parenthesis to a cooperation that is otherwise successful. No permanent damage at the political level is expected,²⁵⁴ which is considered largely dependent on politics and the views of single

251 European Parliament 2017.

252 Delmas & Goeury 2020.

253 Nyman 2021.

254 Interview, 6 July 2021, online, Finland; Interview, 20 August 2021, online, Finland; Interview, 14 July 2021, online, Finland.

government ministers. However, this might seem at odds with the public statements by politicians in Finland's neighbouring countries. As noted above in this study, Swedish Foreign Minister Linde expressed in June 2020 her concern over the effect of the travel restrictions upon Nordic cooperation.²⁵⁵

On the part of the Finnish interviewees, the prevailing belief was that the travel restrictions have not harmed the Nordic relations or trust at the political level. This assessment has also been confirmed by the Minister for Nordic Cooperation, who held in August 2021: 'We [the ministers for Nordic cooperation] have come to realise that trust between our countries stays strong despite challenges.'²⁵⁶ However, one may ask what the relevance of trust is if it does not materialise into solidarity.²⁵⁷ Silja Dögg Gunnarsdóttir, a former President of the Nordic Council, has stated: 'It is now that the friendship and trust we have built up must show its worth'.²⁵⁸ For some Finnish interviewees, it seemed that trust is to be understood as an outspoken respect for the sovereign views and decisions of each Nordic country.²⁵⁹ Accordingly, it was felt that there is no reason to believe that Nordic cooperation would be unable to pick up from where it was left when the pandemic hit. One interviewee even felt that the pandemic has reawakened politics in Nordic institutions.²⁶⁰

Be that as it may, there was broad agreement among the Finnish interviewees that travel restrictions are not a step in the right direction. The resort to travel restrictions was understandable to protect national security and public health, but some of the interviewees were concerned about the lowered threshold to close borders in the event of any disruptions or disturbances.²⁶¹ The trend of adopting travel measures has been noted over the last years, especially at the border between Denmark and Sweden, with respect to a variety of perceived threats, such as refugees and migrants, as well as criminals. To a certain extent, the self-image of the Nordics has suffered, and the border closures represent a loss of face.²⁶² We have perceived ourselves and our institutional cooperation as unique, but now, with the incidents of border closure, we have come to realise that the Nordics resort to ordinary measures as any other country

255 *Dagens Nyheter* 2021a; Hedlund 2021.

256 Blomqvist 2021.

257 Hansson & Stefánsdóttir 2021.

258 Nordic Co-operation 2020b.

259 Interview, 14 July 2021, online, Finland.

260 Interview, 20 August 2021, online, Finland.

261 *Ibid.*

262 Nyman 2021.

or region. The previous dynamicity and innovative approach to freedom of movement have been lost.²⁶³

When it comes to the Vision 2030 of the Nordic prime ministers and its goal of becoming the most integrated and sustainable region, politicians maintain its relevance. Some of the civil servants we interviewed called attention to the fact that despite this goal, no innovative Nordic solution to the pandemic was adopted.²⁶⁴ It was nonetheless admitted that the imposition of travel restrictions did not support the goals of the vision.²⁶⁵

4.2.3. Norway

While Martin Kolberg from the Labour Party stated in October 2020 that the Nordic Region should have higher ambitions for joint crisis management,²⁶⁶ the Norwegian government has maintained that Nordic cooperation has worked well during the pandemic. Commenting on the state of Nordic cooperation since the pandemic broke out, Norwegian officials have used positive terms, highlighting the record number of meetings the Nordics have had during the pandemic, especially on issues relating to foreign affairs and health and the successful Nordic consular cooperation in the early stage of the pandemic to help Nordic citizens return home.²⁶⁷ The White Paper on Nordic cooperation observes that despite somewhat different management strategies, the Nordic countries have consulted, informed and helped each other during the pandemic. The White Paper emphasises the strong institutions and tradition of cooperation as valuable in this context, as well as the high number of meetings and contacts, both at the administrative and political level.²⁶⁸

As for whether a more institutionalised Nordic approach to crisis management would have been desirable, Norwegian government representatives and officials have held that the national level must be the point of departure also when managing global crises such as the present one. As Minister for Nordic Cooperation Jan Tore Sanner has observed:

We must learn from the crisis we have now been through, look at what worked well and what we could have done differently – nationally, and also within the Nordic circle. I have had several conversations about these questions with

²⁶³ Interview, 5 August 2021, online, Finland.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Stortinget 2020.

²⁶⁷ Søreide & Sanner 2021.

²⁶⁸ Norwegian Ministry of Finance 2021, 5.

*my Swedish colleague. We have had somewhat different approaches, but I think that precisely the fact that we are able to discuss these questions contributes to us being stronger in the next round. We have also both bilaterally and in the Nordic circle managed to solve concrete challenges underway, but it is evident that we need to continue working with this nationally, at the Nordic Council of Ministers and in cooperation with the Nordic Council. We need to learn from this crisis, but I believe it is important to hold on to the position that a health crisis must be managed and governed at the national level.*²⁶⁹

One interviewee complemented this account, explaining that the Norwegian view is that the current institutional setups work well, and Nordic institutions should not be given more tasks and authority in crisis management. While it is natural to review intra-Nordic communications and coordination during the pandemic to see if there is improvement potential, the interviewee pointed out that the next crisis will not be identical to the present one. Therefore, learning must happen at a more general level.²⁷⁰

4.2.4. Sweden

From the Swedish perspective, the vision of the Nordics as the most integrated region in the world has been challenged during the pandemic, but nonetheless remains in place at the political level. The travel restrictions displayed a lack in communication, but there was a general feeling among Swedish policy officials that both they and their Nordic counterparts approached the different choices of strategy with a curiosity and intention to understand rather than echoing the harsh tones reported from certain workplaces and social media. There was also increased communication between Nordic ministers on issues not necessarily related to the pandemic in order to maintain and foster close bilateral relations.²⁷¹ In other words, the political relationships were in many ways improved during the pandemic, although the closed borders exposed faults in Nordic cooperation and put the political dialogue to the test.²⁷²

Another experience in Sweden is that Nordic cooperation has received considerably more attention both on the political arena and in media than

269 Stortinget 2020 (author's translation into English).

270 Interview, 5 May 2021, online, Norway.

271 Government Offices of Sweden 2020c; Interview, 15 June 2021, online, Sweden.

272 Interview, 14 June 2021, online, Sweden.

before. During 2020, there were several parliamentary debates on Nordic cooperation and the situation in the border regions.²⁷³

One direct effect brought along by the closing of borders and the exposure of the fragility of Nordic political cooperation during the pandemic was that Nordic relations became a recurring topic in the meetings between the ministers for Nordic cooperation.²⁷⁴ For example, Swedish Minister for Nordic cooperation Anna Hallberg initiated discussions with the other Nordic cooperation ministers on clarifying responsibility in border-related issues and the important role of the cooperation ministers in promoting the Nordic perspective within their respective national governments.²⁷⁵

The harmed trust in border regions is viewed as a major issue in moving forward towards the Vision 2030. The enhanced borders have caused doubts about the reliability of Nordic cooperation and spurred nationalist surges. Politicians and policy officers consider this development to be very serious. They worry that people will hesitate to take a job in another Nordic country or invest in a business that relies on border communities after their experiences of the pandemic and the uncertain conditions related to, for example, compensation and sick pay, as well as the lack of communication.²⁷⁶

However, the general public in Sweden wants to see increased Nordic cooperation in the future, despite almost one in five having been subject to corona bullying during the pandemic.²⁷⁷ According to a study by the Norden Association, almost 80% of the participants viewed expanded cooperation between the Nordic countries as more important to Sweden's international influence than increased cooperation with the EU or the United States.²⁷⁸

Sweden's ambition has been to maintain an open dialogue regarding the travel restrictions with all Nordic countries. When the MFA removed the advice against travel to Denmark and Norway, the explicit aim was to nurture the Nordic relationships and the vision of a Nordic Region free from restrictions of movement.²⁷⁹ There was an ongoing dialogue regarding borders throughout the pandemic, but it was complicated by the fact that decisions on borders and travel were implemented very

273 See e.g. Parliament of Sweden 2020e; Parliament of Sweden 2019.

274 Interview, 4 June 2021, online, Sweden.

275 Government Offices of Sweden 2020a; Government Offices of Sweden 2020c.

276 Interview, 14 June 2021, online, Sweden.

277 Föreningen Norden.

278 Föreningen Norden.

279 Government Offices of Sweden 2020h.

quickly.²⁸⁰ In most cases, border issues could be solved with exceptions and amendments, but it is the Swedish view that many issues could have been avoided through more communication. There was an improvement in communication over time, accompanied by a gradually better understanding of each Nordic country's decision-making culture.²⁸¹

Overall, the political relations have not been negatively impacted by the travel restrictions, apart from the lack of communication regarding border issues at the beginning of the pandemic. There is a general understanding in Sweden that the Nordic countries have a common aspiration of achieving a more integrated Nordic Region. The pandemic has revealed cracks in the relationships that may have been taken for granted. Sweden views the breached trust between Nordic people and particularly among border region residents as the main area to be addressed and cherished if the vision of an integrated Nordic Region is to be realised.²⁸²

280 Interview, 4 June 2021, online, Sweden; Larsson Hultin 2020.

281 Interview, 4 June 2021, online, Sweden.

282 Government Offices of Sweden 2020c; Interview, 4 June 2021, online, Sweden; Interview, 9 June 2021, online, Sweden; Interview, 14 June 2021, online, Sweden; Interview, 15 June 2021, online, Sweden.

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5 DISCUSSION AND THE WAY FORWARD

5.1. SUMMING-UP

The country-based reports from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden indicate that it is possible to discern common perceptions and understandings of Nordic cooperation in times of the pandemic even though the focus may vary between the countries. The cross-border research conducted by Nordregio also draws attention to specific problems shared by different regions. These collective findings that rise above the opinions of single countries or interviewees will be summarised in the following, after which the findings will be contextualised and complemented with the views of representatives of Nordic institutions.

- The Nordics have been a key reference point for one another in how to deal with the pandemic, and some exceptions and flexibility pertaining to the other Nordic countries have been sought;
- There is a demand by governments for respect for sovereign solutions in handling a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic;
- The Nordic states have different backgrounds, administrations and identities, as well as foreign policy tools, all of which affect how they respond to crises;
- The crisis has increased political dialogue, and more meetings, especially informal ones, have been held than in pre-pandemic times;
- Digitalisation has played a crucial role for the increased dialogue;
- Nordic cooperation has been successful when it comes to repatriating Nordic citizens from abroad during the first wave of the

pandemic, as well as handling social security issues, whereas it has failed to solve taxation problems;

- The Vision 2030 still enjoys support at the political level, but it has become more difficult to attain the goals;
- The imposition of travel restrictions has not damaged Nordic political relations in the long term; however, this position is not unanimously shared by all the countries or representatives of Nordic institutions;
- Trust in Nordic cooperation and freedom of movement in cross-border regions, but also elsewhere, has suffered, and long-term trust building will be needed;
- The Freedom of Movement Council receives praise for its proactivity and actions, as do the advice services in cross-border areas, which are specially appreciated by local residents;
- The economic costs of the pandemic measures have varied among the cross-border regions, in addition to which the labour market has suffered from the travel restrictions;
- Social institutions such as worklife and marriage have changed, and this must be paid attention to when discussing free movement within Nordic cooperation;
- The pandemic crisis has been an eye-opener, and lessons must be learnt from it when potentially developing Nordic crisis preparedness.

There seems to be a general agreement in the explored countries that a joint response to handling the pandemic would have been unrealistic. Finnish and Norwegian interviewees pointed out that Nordic cooperation is not about crisis management and that crises should primarily be managed at the national level. Swedish interviewees also stressed that no joint Nordic response to the crisis could be conceived as the crisis evolved very fast, in addition to which national variations in governance and its structures brought about national solutions – an interpretation also advanced by Danish interviewees. The emphasis on sovereign solutions is hardly a surprise since sovereignty has always played an important role in Nordic cooperation.²⁸³ What is more, it seems easier for the Nordic countries to enforce solidarity when only one or a couple of them face challenges.²⁸⁴ The statement by Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers Paula Lehtomäki also attests to this as she has held that if they wish, the

283 Etzold 2021.

284 Strang 2020c.

Nordic countries can use the Nordic Council of Ministers as a platform for heightened cooperation concerning the pandemic.²⁸⁵

It is widely admitted that there are historical, administrative and constitutional differences between the countries that affect cooperation. While Finland was portrayed by several interviewees as displaying crisis preparedness in the form of emergency supply stocks, for example, few found this surprising considering Finland's historical hardships, including fighting wars. This 'crisis mentality' was also understood by some to have paved the way for the strict governmental measures that the Finnish population has to a large extent followed uncritically.²⁸⁶ On the other hand, Sweden's approach of emphasising personal responsibility in its pandemic measures may find justification in the long democratic history of the country,²⁸⁷ its higher level of self-confidence²⁸⁸ or the high level of trust in government agencies.²⁸⁹ Arguably, for Norway and Denmark, it was easier to close schools and adopt travel restrictions quickly because 'politicians are more directly in charge of administration'²⁹⁰ in these two countries. For example, Denmark imposed strict travel restrictions although this was not recommended by the Danish Health Authority.

Despite handling the pandemic through distinct national strategies, the Nordic countries have not navigated through the pandemic wearing blinkers, but have looked at each other with regard to pandemic measures. While Denmark has mostly used Sweden as a point of reference, the other Nordic countries have used the Nordics as key reference points in more broad terms. Notably, there have also been attempts at finding flexible solutions for the other Nordic countries or their concerns. For example, Finland accommodated the concerns of Swedes over nurses in Tornedalen, Sweden exempted people living on Bornholm from the border closure, and Norway issued travel advice by regions instead of by country.

One of the decisively positive consequences of the pandemic mentioned by interviewees in all the four countries under study, as well as by representatives of Nordic institutions, has been the increased political dialogue, which was in large part due to the possibility of holding digital meetings. The pandemic seems to have pushed officials at various levels and organisations to establish informal contacts in the Nordic Region and across the Nordic countries. It was nonetheless pointed out by some

285 Nordiska ministerrådet 2021.

286 Interview, 16 June 2021, online, Norden.

287 Ibid.

288 Strang 2020b.

289 Bolt 2021, 19.

290 Strang 2020b.

that dialogue at the level of prime ministers was largely absent.²⁹¹ There are hopes that this new level of contacts would also be maintained in the post-pandemic world even though the increased dialogue has not correspondingly resulted in a rise of mutual solutions. While Nordic cooperation worked well in some issues, such as the repatriation of citizens and the social security of stranded commuters, the taxation of involuntary teleworkers represents an unsolved problem – despite repeated calls by the Presidium of the Nordic Council to work together to overcome these problems.²⁹² While there was a sense of understanding for the fact that travel restrictions were adopted to curb the Covid-19 pandemic, Nordic Council members in particular expressed frustration over the long time it has taken to remedy the practical problems that have emerged.²⁹³ Nevertheless, dialogue made it possible to respect and most often also understand the solutions adopted in the other Nordic countries.

Similar observations about increased dialogue and collaboration were also made in the three cross-border region case studies. Closer contacts and joint efforts have been crucial not only in making policies and informing cross-border residents, but also in efforts to influence national decision-making together with, for example, the Freedom of Movement Council. This proactivity of the cross-border actors themselves towards national decision-makers has been essential in solving some of the immediate hurdles caused by the travel restrictions.

However, the increasingly prevalent phenomenon of closing borders was not seen as a good development by most Nordic countries, and some held the view that the threshold for reaching the goals set by the Vision 2030 has risen.²⁹⁴ In fact, an influential group of parliamentarians from the Nordic countries has described the objective of being the world's most integrated region in 2030 as a utopia rather than a vision.²⁹⁵ Many interviewees in this study also expressed disappointment in the lack of creative solutions considering the ambitious political goals of Nordic cooperation. It was not believed, however, that the pandemic has called into question the political relevance of the Vision 2030, to which the countries are still committed.

Connected to the vision of a further integration of the Nordic Region, is the issue of trust and the many levels it permeates. While most countries studied here felt that the long trust between the countries at the political

291 Interview, 23 August 2021, online, Norden.

292 Preisler 2021; Nordic Co-operation 2020.

293 Interview, 23 August 2021, online, Norden.

294 Interview, 16 June 2021, online, Norden.

295 Bonnén et al. 2021.

level has not been damaged, there were also voices to the opposite. Danish interviewees were concerned that the mistrust generated by commuter-related issues may affect long-term political cooperation. At the same time, some respondents from other countries also admitted that it is important to be responsive to any ruptures at the political level that may appear in due time.²⁹⁶ Some representatives of Nordic institutions who participated in the study also expressed that political cooperation has suffered a blow.²⁹⁷ The handling of the pandemic has also stirred distrust of national political authorities. This mistrust may not, however, be directed towards public institutions as such, but instead towards decision-makers at the national level as a result of the recentralisation of power that occurred during the pandemic. People in cross-border areas have felt that politicians at the national level have not considered the specific needs of border areas distant from the capital regions,²⁹⁸ and it is clear that trust among people in the cross-border regions between Finland, Sweden and Norway has also suffered.

However, views diverge even with respect to the trust the cross-border regions and their populations hold towards Nordic cooperation and freedom of movement in particular. Some interviewees pointed out that any incidents, harassment or discrimination that have occurred during the pandemic represent bilateral problems with a Nordic dimension, and not outright Nordic problems.²⁹⁹ It is possible that the extent of distrust at the local level will be clarified as the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council are conducting a survey on how people feel about Nordic cooperation.³⁰⁰ In any case, there is widespread agreement that Nordic institutions should invest in long-term trust building regarding open borders in the years to come. There were views expressing the need, at the very least, for a joint statement by Nordic politicians that freedom of movement will be respected, and that travel restrictions will not be arbitrarily resorted to. Infrastructure projects should be planned and realised according to existing plans, and a potential ‘flagship’ project could be implemented with investments from the Nordic institutions. One concrete example mentioned was moving ahead with the so-called Öresundmetro connecting Malmö and Copenhagen³⁰¹ – a proposal launched by the respective mayors in 2018.

²⁹⁶ Interview, 14 July 2021, online, Finland.

²⁹⁷ Interview, 23 August 2021, online, Norden.

²⁹⁸ Interview, 9 June 2021, online, Sweden.

²⁹⁹ Interview, 20 August 2021, online, Finland.

³⁰⁰ Interview, 23 August 2021, online, Norden.

³⁰¹ Interview, 27 May 2021, Denmark.

While it is difficult to fully separate the effects of the travel restrictions from the broader societal measures taken to curb the pandemic in the cross-border regions, the measures have undisputably had significant economic consequences for these societies – a fact also admitted by national respondents in the various countries. While the economic costs have varied depending on the regions' economic structures, those cross-border regions whose economy relies on people, such as tourism, have fared worse than those areas with greater economic diversity. Accordingly, the economy in Lapland has suffered more than that in Denmark's Capital Region and Norrbotten, for instance. Some industries, such as process and manufacturing, have largely continued unaffected by the pandemic measures, while others have even thrived. The construction and building sector belongs to the latter group.

The travel restrictions also had a significant effect upon the labour market, while the effects were uneven across the cross-border regions, depending on the national measures and pre-pandemic economic situation. The responses to the pandemic generated unemployment and hardships pertaining to entry requirements and quarantine rules. For instance, many Finnish commuters working in Sweden were forced to live in constant quarantine because of the strict Finnish entry rules, and this also affected their family and private life. Structural unemployment and access to skilled labour have been prevalent concerns in the cross-border regions, with larger industries and the health care sector often lacking skilled labour. Some companies have even moved their business away from the border areas.

Leading a normal life in cross-border regions has also been challenging because of the travel restrictions. Friends and families have been separated, shared custody of children has been difficult to arrange, and formal social institutions, such as marriage, have often guided the application of travel restrictions. The formerly beneficial option of working from home became practically mandatory even though many rules regarding teleworking, including social security and taxation, remained undecided. The pandemic measures and travel restrictions thus served to highlight the changing social realities and conditions of work.

In a broader, international perspective, it is noteworthy that opposite conclusions have been drawn on what the pandemic and the way in which it has been handled mean for Nordic cooperation. One Nordic respondent emphasised the positive impact of the pandemic in that it has forced the Nordic countries to broaden their perspective beyond the borders of the Nordic Region – a prism that will be needed when dealing with future

challenges as well.³⁰² New threats and challenges, such as pandemics, migration, cyber attacks and climate change, do not know borders, which is why a strong Nordic voice is needed internationally. Therefore, the respondent believed that Nordic cooperation will be increasingly internationalised, even though this is not included in the formal institutional cooperation. Along similar lines, the Presidium of the Nordic Council has called for more Nordic cooperation in international organisations such as the WHO and the EU.³⁰³ However, contrasting opinions have also been expressed, arguing that the pandemic measures in the Nordic Region, especially those concerning lives and livelihood in cross-border regions, represent a betrayal of the Nordic project itself, as well as of European integration at large.

5.2. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The above country positions that are mostly supportive of the national approaches to the pandemic do not exclude the fact that things could have been done better at the Nordic level and that politicians in the Nordic countries, as well as in the Nordic institutions, must learn from the pandemic experiences. As pointed out by President of the Nordic Council Bertel Haarder: ‘I don’t think we will see the same thing happen again. We in the Nordics want to learn from this.’³⁰⁴ Indeed, there seems to be broad agreement on the fact that the pandemic crisis must be analysed and lessons learnt from the measures adopted and the way relations to other Nordic countries were handled.

The various, somewhat overlapping, measures that the Nordic Council of Ministers has decided upon testify to the determination to learn from the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the Secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers has been mandated to explore internally how the council’s structures and organs have been utilised during the crisis. Former President of the Nordic Council Jan-Erik Enestam has also been commissioned to deliver 10 to 15 concrete recommendations on how to strengthen future crisis cooperation.³⁰⁵ What is more, the Nordic Council of Ministers has decided to fund a project exploring Nordic security of supply from a comparative and future-oriented perspective.³⁰⁶ As yet, however, ‘grand

302 Interview, 23 August 2021, online, Norden.

303 Nordic Co-operation 2020b.

304 Preisler 2021.

305 Nordiska ministerrådet 2021.

306 The project is entitled ‘Nordic Security of Supply in an Age of Disruption’, and it is conducted by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. It runs from August 2021 to June 2022.

declarations' regarding future cooperation to ensure open borders have been lacking.³⁰⁷

Overall, two strands of thinking seem to prevail regarding how to proceed from the lessons learnt from the pandemic. One points in the direction of improving those aspects of cooperation that already lie within the scope of institutional cooperation; the other sees an opportunity to move towards a more integrated approach, or even formalisation. First, some countries pointed out that Nordic institutional cooperation is not meant to be a crisis organisation and neither should it be developed in that direction. In their view, the option of common decision-making in a corresponding crisis does not exist as it would require amendments to the Treaty of Helsinki and the de facto formation of a Nordic union.³⁰⁸ The majority of the political-level respondents in this study did not believe in concluding new Nordic treaties because the political maneuvering room in Nordic cooperation is considered to be very limited in comparison to the one in the EU.³⁰⁹ The Nordic level of ambition was held to be too low.³¹⁰ It was also felt by some interviewees that Nordic cooperation no longer attains to the aims of the Helsinki Treaty, that is, legal harmonisation. Instead, Nordic cooperation has become similar to the OECD or the Council of Europe, where different experiences are aired³¹¹ and where the Nordic Council of Ministers has turned into a 'report ordering automaton'.³¹²

Thus, instead of trying to integrate joint crisis management into Nordic cooperation, the Nordic countries could seek to strengthen existing cooperation both within the Nordic Council of Ministers and outside of it. With regard to the former option, there seems to be room to do more³¹³ even though some governments appear hesitant to move in that direction.³¹⁴ As to particular areas for improvement, information sharing between agencies and improved communication are seen as important issues moving forward. For example, having agencies use the same data would improve the communication and understanding regarding the different measures taken in possible future crises. There are also hopes to maintain the closer contacts established during the pandemic between the policy officers of different Nordic countries by making use of digital

307 Sefton 2020.

308 Interview, 14 July 2021, online, Finland.

309 Interview, 20 August 2021, online, Finland.

310 Ibid.

311 Interview, 20 August 2021, online, Finland.

312 Interview, 16 June 2021, online, Norden.

313 Nordiska ministerrådet 2021.

314 Nilsson 2020.

meeting tools. Regular fifteen-minute meetings and check-ins between Nordic counterparts are seen as valuable to establish closer relationships and easier communication.³¹⁵ More information about what Nordic cooperation can and cannot do should also be shared as there seems to be confusion about this in the general public.³¹⁶

A concrete suggestion pertaining to the Nordic Council of Ministers specifically, and how to improve its responsiveness to crises, is the idea of strengthening the less rigid forms of cooperation.³¹⁷ Hence, the ability to create ad hoc ministerial councils to deal with topical issues has been set forth – an idea that has been expressed before.³¹⁸ This would allow governmental competencies to meet better as a ‘meeting of competencies’ does not always occur in the permanent ministerial councils. Different issues are handled by different ministers and departments in different Nordic countries, from which it follows that matters cannot be discussed and proceeded with. Admittedly, such councils of ministers already exist, such as MR-DIGITAL, which seeks to promote digitalisation in the Nordics. They could, however, be even more flexible in nature than before by being easy to set up and equally easy to close down. A more prominent use of ad hoc councils of ministers would nonetheless mean that attention must be paid to the participation of the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. Another precondition for increased ad hocism would be support for their work by the Secretariat.

A second view was represented by those stakeholders who called for moving towards joint decision-making when crises affecting free movement occur, or at least engaging in a fundamental discussion on whether there should be common Nordic decision-making in matters pertaining to travel restrictions. Such calls were raised in particular among the respondents representing the Nordic institutions, but also by those representing the cross-border regions and other affected areas. The pandemic crisis was seen as an eye-opener, whereby Nordic cooperation is at the crossroads between heightened political relevance and a future doomed to discussions and project commissioning.

The basic idea set forth in the proposals by these respondents revolves around the idea of creating a forum for discussing disturbances that threaten free movement in the Nordic Region. This forum or body would give recommendations from the prism of the Nordic dimension, and its formation would have a symbolic value demonstrating that the

315 Interview, 15 June 2021, online, Sweden.

316 Interview, 14 July 2021, online, Finland.

317 Interview, 20 August 2021, online, Finland.

318 Etzold 2020.

pandemic crisis was a serious lesson for Nordic cooperation. It was felt that in times of crisis, Nordic cooperation needs somebody who ‘speaks on behalf of the Nordic dimension’ – a feature that has been lacking in the coronavirus pandemic. The views of these respondents seem to coalesce with those of the Presidium of the Nordic Council, which has suggested the creation of a Nordic Contingency Commission.³¹⁹ These suggestions do not, however, seem to pay heed to earlier findings regarding Nordic cooperation, which have stated support for informal networks rather than the creation of new units.³²⁰

The suggestions for creating a forum often went hand in hand with proposals to establish a procedure for how to deal with potential future travel restrictions. One proposal included the development of a handbook applicable to disturbances that potentially limit freedom of movement, with a list of check points to be followed.³²¹ This mechanism would include an obligation to negotiate with the other Nordic countries before resorting to travel measures affecting freedom of movement in the Nordics.³²² It would also identify those parts and groups of cross-border societies that are highly vulnerable to restrictions on freedom of movement. Such groups include workers, companies, freight and families.³²³ A prominent advocate for creating a joint procedure has been Minister Hallberg from Sweden, who has advanced a model for united action.³²⁴

At the optimistic end of the spectrum of intensified Nordic cooperation in crises, one respondent believed that the right way to proceed is the formalisation of Nordic cooperation in times of crisis.³²⁵ In other words, a new convention on crisis preparedness should be concluded between the Nordic countries.³²⁶ Arguably, the time is ripe for such a decisive move with the 50th anniversary of the Nordic Council of Ministers recently celebrated and the Nordic Council turning 70 years in 2022, in addition to which there have not been conventions concluded for a long time.

319 Nordic Co-operation 2020b.

320 Haugevik & Sverdrup 2019.

321 Interview, 16 June 2021, online, Norden.

322 Ibid.

323 Ibid.

324 Holmberg 2020.

325 Interview, 23 August 2021, online, Norden.

326 Ibid.

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6 FINAL REMARKS

Against the background of the analytical framework of Nordic exceptionalism, this study has found that the Nordic countries were not that different from other countries in responding to the pandemic mainly through national measures instead of regional or global ones. The handling of the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that exceptionalism has receded into the background, paving the way for arguments stressing the diversity of the Nordic countries and how differentiated integration seems a more accurate description of Nordic cooperation overall, and even more so in pandemic times. Neither are the Nordics unique in trying to ponder the lessons learnt (the EU, for example, is doing the same).

Nevertheless, one thing that seems to separate the Nordic countries from other regions is the experienced perseverance of political trust among the countries – the abstract glue that arguably binds the Nordic countries together. Even though many Nordic citizens, especially those living in cross-border regions, have lost faith in the Nordic de-bordering project, the majority of the national politicians and government officials partaking in this study felt confident in the ability of the Nordic countries to move forward towards the vision of becoming the most integrated region in the world.

Still, this report begs the question of how prepared the Nordic countries actually are to jointly confront future global threats, many of which seem to be borderless in nature. Future global threats and challenges such as climate change, pandemics, migration and cyber security cannot be solved nationally by re-bordering the Nordic Region. The gloomy outlook of multilateralism in an era of rising competition between great powers

arguably gives regionalism preponderance, making various regional cooperation arrangements important foreign policy tools. The pandemic has shown that in times of crisis, the Nordic countries use each other as a reference and, to a certain extent, try to implement flexible solutions in relation to their Nordic neighbours. This may not be enough when the next crisis hits. There might be need for robust means and mechanisms going beyond the prevailing soft governance mechanisms and political dialogue. The question is: can the oldest regional cooperation reinvigorate its political dimension and create a system to be applied in the next crisis that hits the region, or will it sink deeper into becoming a venue for ventilating different experiences and interests, where borders are not a bastion of the Nordic family but symbols of increased nationalism?

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INTERVIEW LIST

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Interview, 9 June 2021, online, Sweden
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Interview, 15 June 2021, online, Sweden

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NORDIC COOPERATION AMID PANDEMIC TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

Since 2020, the Nordic countries have been confronted with the Covid-19 pandemic, which has been a multi-level stress test for the region. The strong basis of open borders and free movement in Nordic cooperation has been questioned by national pandemic measures, including wide travel restrictions. The Nordic dimension to pandemic responses has largely been missing, the trust between the countries has arguably been put to test and cross-border commuters have been subjected to differential treatment. Especially cross-border regions have suffered the consequences of travel restrictions, causing disruptions to work and private life.

The report draws attention to the preparedness of the Nordic Region to jointly confront global crises. It explores the different strategies and travel restrictions adopted by four Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. It also studies how Nordic cooperation functioned in a time of crisis. At the local level, it examines the economic, labour market and social implications for three cross-border regions, that is, Tornedalen, Svinesund and Öresund. The report finds that while there is room for improvement in handling a crisis like the pandemic, there are diverging views on the desirability to have all-Nordic approaches to situations affecting national security. The consequences are, however, serious for free movement and the aim to become the most integrated region in the world. /