

# SZÁZADVÉG

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## FAULT LINES

The impact of the 2015 migration wave on Sweden's political establishment.



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## 1.1 Introduction

A decade after the peak of the migration crisis that hit Europe in 2015, the political consequences that few dared to talk about at the time are now becoming clear. Massive and uncontrolled influxes of migrants have brought about significant changes in Member States that were previously considered model states due to their “open door” policies. The sudden burdens placed on governments in terms of integration, humanitarian and law enforcement tasks have not only led to a rethinking and tightening of immigration rules, but also to a partial or complete breakdown of the political status quo in many Member States. This process was mirrored across Europe, but perhaps nowhere as tangibly as in Sweden.

## 1.2 Left-wing hegemony

When we think of countries in the European Union with an “open” mentality in social and political terms, Sweden stands out almost as a matter of course, alongside many Western European Member States. This is no coincidence, as domestic political processes in the northern country over the past 80 years have been dominated by the hegemony of the left, its narrative formation, and the consistent implementation of its objectives.

Just looking at the political structure over the last four decades, despite the center-right governments formed in 2006 and 2010, Sweden was governed by left-wing governments from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s and from 2014 to 2022, with the largest party, the Social Democratic Party, giving the heads of government and thus also the intellectual direction of the government.<sup>1</sup> As a result, Sweden, which was already exposed to various immigration processes, positioned itself as one of Europe’s leading humanitarian countries.<sup>2</sup> Thus, successive governments included numerous immigration-related commitments in their policies, which in some cases went beyond even the most basic refugee protection standards, thereby significantly increasing Sweden’s attractiveness in terms of migration.

However, while building an international image based on acceptance and assistance, the northern country has not forgotten to keep its own economic and labour market interests in mind. This is because Swedish migration policy prior to 2010 focused on aligning the additional benefits of migration, namely the surplus workforce, with the country’s demographic and resulting economic goals.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, this approach fitted in perfectly with the mainstream European political trends characterised by an open society, on the other hand, although Sweden’s welfare system was one of the most robust social safety nets in Europe,

<sup>1</sup> Statisticdatabasen: [https://www.statistikdatabasen.scb.se/pxweb/en/ssd/START\\_ME\\_ME0104\\_ME0104C/ME0104T3/table/tableViewLayout1/?loadedQueryId=67784&timeType=from&timeValue=1973](https://www.statistikdatabasen.scb.se/pxweb/en/ssd/START_ME_ME0104_ME0104C/ME0104T3/table/tableViewLayout1/?loadedQueryId=67784&timeType=from&timeValue=1973)

<sup>2</sup> Swedish Institute *Sweden and migration* | [sweden.se](https://sweden.se)

<sup>3</sup> Englund - [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/239-SW.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/239-SW.pdf)



the country's aging society found it increasingly difficult to maintain it year after year, so an immigration policy with no upper limits may have seemed a rational decision at first.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, in recent decades, the left-wing political hegemony that had a decisive influence on the country's development worked to establish and operate a migration system that attempted to manage, institutionalise and coordinate both labour and refugee immigration. Two government reforms carried out in the years leading up to the millennium clearly illustrate the burden that this commitment placed on the country in administrative terms in the 1990s. First, they took refugee integration out of the Ministry of the Interior's purview and made it a separate policy area. Then, to free up the central government structure from the bureaucratic pressure that came with it, they set up the Integration Office.<sup>5</sup>

However, Sweden's commitment to achieving and maintaining a diverse society was illustrated not only by the aforementioned commitments and governmental reforms, but also by the collective attitude demonstrated during the first large-scale wave of migration in the 1990s. This involved the northern country taking in hundreds of thousands of Bosnian and Kosovar Albanian refugees who were not specifically arriving as workers, but who had fled the hardships of the Yugoslav War from the territory of what was then Yugoslavia.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note, however, that this wave of migration differed significantly from those experienced in the past. For one thing, the country had never experienced such a large wave of migration in its 20th-century history,<sup>7</sup> and for another, the demographic makeup of those fleeing to Sweden was significantly different from previous waves. Migrants, who had previously been culturally heterogeneous and focused primarily on the labour market, were replaced by refugees on humanitarian grounds, who formed more homogeneous groups in terms of their outlook on life and for whom achieving a comfortable lifestyle became more important than social inclusion and catching up with Western standards.<sup>8</sup>

This shift in emphasis proved to be the tipping point, at least as far as Sweden's international image on immigration and the Swedish political elite's perception of migration are concerned. After all, the country has, deliberately or not, positioned itself as one of Europe's most welcoming countries for those countries with high emigration rates, where large numbers of residents leave not primarily to pursue opportunities in developed labour markets, but in the hope of a better life and family reunification.

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<sup>4</sup> Karolinska Institute - <https://ki.se/en/imm/research/units-at-imm/unit-of-epidemiology/the-ageing-population>

<sup>5</sup> Petterson - Shakra - <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1454674/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Petterson - Shakra - <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1454674/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Swedish Institute - <https://sweden.se/culture/history/sweden-and-migration>

<sup>8</sup> Horváth-Sántha - <https://migraciokutato.hu/2015/09/10/integracios-gyakorlatok-svedorszagban/>



In light of this, welfare spending in Sweden has increased dramatically since the 1990s, with the aim of ensuring widespread integration efforts and to help refugees, who were in poorer health and mental condition than native-born Swedish citizens, catch up.<sup>9</sup> In addition, in order to better address the additional challenges posed by mass migration, legal reforms were introduced in the mid-2000s that enabled the review of settlement and citizenship applications handled by the competent government authorities through the establishment of so-called migration courts, as well as the outsourcing of powers relating to unaccompanied minors to local governments.<sup>10</sup> Given that in 2005 more than 22,000 immigrants obtained Swedish residence permits on the basis of family reunification alone, and in 2017 this figure had risen to 48,000, the need for these reforms and their annual review was beyond dispute.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.3 Migration as trauma

Government measures to track changes in migration patterns to the country were initially only moderately successful, and over time they increasingly failed to live up to expectations. Apart from the fact that dissatisfaction with this issue was already evident in the results of the 2010 and 2014 Swedish parliamentary elections (see 1.4.), the real shortcomings of the inclusion-based system and the resulting symptoms (rising unemployment and crime, lack of language skills, the emergence of parallel societies, the outbreak of the housing crisis) were revealed by the effects of the historic migration crisis that reached Europe, and Sweden along with it, in 2015.

As is well known, in 2015, Sweden accepted the highest number of asylum seekers in Europe in proportion to its population, with a total of 162,877 people<sup>12</sup>, which, in addition to the already high proportion of people born abroad, and thus culturally less attached to the country – currently 20%<sup>13</sup> – further distorted Swedish society's perceptions of integration and identity. Moreover, the Swedish government's capacity was not only strained by the large number of refugees arriving in a short period of time (for example, the specialised authorities had to decide on a total of 353,000 asylum applications between 2013 and 2017<sup>14</sup>) but also by the assessment of applications from family members who wanted to join relatives who had settled

<sup>9</sup> Kirchner – Mittendorfer-Rutz - *European Journal of Public Health* - <https://academic.oup.com/eurpub/article/33/1/106/6808913>

<sup>10</sup> Petterson – Shakra - <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1454674/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Skodo - <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/sweden-turns-welcoming-and-restrictive-its-immigration-policy>

<sup>12</sup> Skodo - <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/sweden-turns-welcoming-and-restrictive-its-immigration-policy>

<sup>13</sup> Ohlsson - <https://novus.se/en/think-with-novus/blogg/the-swedish-people-greatly-overestimate-the-proportion-of-foreign-citizens-in-sweden/>

<sup>14</sup> Rojas - <https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=8996428&fileId=8996429>



in previous years or decades. All this inevitably led to the overburdening of the asylum and welfare systems.<sup>15</sup>

In order to obtain an accurate and tangible picture of the impact of mass migration on Swedish society, it is worth reviewing the issue in question exclusively in the form of relevant statistics and, above all, time series data.

In 2016, a year after the definitive failure of European immigration policy, characterised by lax border controls and an open society, became a hot topic of public debate in Europe, Pew Research, one of the most reputable American pollsters, published a comprehensive study reporting that in eight of the ten European Member States surveyed, at least half of the population was primarily concerned about increased national security risks in connection with the wave of migration.<sup>16</sup> And although the pro-immigration political elite received these statistics with skepticism, if we take a closer look at the figures relating to public security in Sweden, we see a trend that is eerily similar to the European trend mentioned above.

As regards Swedish residents' fears of terrorism or terrorist attacks, until the arrival of the wave of migrants, nearly half of those surveyed considered this issue to be very worrying. However, in 2017, this proportion increased sharply, with the majority of respondents, 60%, feeling that the issue of terrorism in Sweden was extremely worrying.<sup>17</sup> Of course, this trend was understandable, given that the number of terrorism-related incidents in Sweden increased dramatically in 2015<sup>18</sup>, and then 2017 saw the country's most serious Islamist attack, when a man with a migrant background who had pledged allegiance to Islamic State drove a truck into a crowd on a pedestrian street in Stockholm, killing several people and critically injuring others<sup>19</sup>.

It is important to note, however, that beyond the emergence of terrorism, the wave of mass and uncontrolled immigration has had a serious impact on the entire public security and criminal culture in Sweden. While there was a clear increase in the number of crimes committed with firearms between 2017 and 2022<sup>20</sup>, the number of homicides committed with firearms also rose: while the authorities recorded only 17 cases in 2012, by 2022 this number had almost quadrupled, with a total of 63 registered cases.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Tanner - <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/overwhelmed-refugee-flows-scandinavia-tempers-its-warm-welcome>

<sup>16</sup> Pew Research - <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/07/11/negative-views-of-minorities-refugees-common-in-eu/>

<sup>17</sup> Statista - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/901019/share-of-people-concerned-about-terrorism-in-sweden/>

<sup>18</sup> Statista - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/541448/incidences-of-terrorism-sweden/>

<sup>19</sup> BBC - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39564825>

<sup>20</sup> Statista - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1178223/number-of-shootings-in-sweden/>

<sup>21</sup> Statista - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1315108/number-fatal-shootings-sweden/>



Although political correctness had for a long time prevented the presentation of detailed statistics on crime and migration in Sweden, the downward trend in many of the areas under review was undeniable. The emergence of groups specialising primarily in drug trafficking and other crimes, stemming from the development of parallel societies, was supported not only by the deterioration of statistics on drug-related crimes, but also by the increase in reports of sexual crimes. While the Swedish authorities recorded approximately 94,000 drug-related crimes in 2012, by 2020 this number had risen by 30,000 to a total of 124,000.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, while the number of reported sexual incidents across the country was just under 16,000 in 2012, by 2021 this number had exceeded 26,000.<sup>23</sup>

In order to fully understand the change in Swedish society's attitude towards migration and the transformation of the political establishment, it is essential to mention the responsibility of the Swedish government, which refused to give up on an open society, either during the gradual increase in migration from 2013 onwards, and then explosively from 2015 onwards, nor in the years that followed.

A striking example of this flawed approach, which is damaging to the fabric of Swedish society, can be seen in the figures which show the amount of social benefits paid by the Swedish state in a time series breakdown between households of native-born Swedes and households of those born abroad. These show that while households headed by foreign-born individuals received approximately SEK 1.7 million more in social benefits in 2013, this difference nearly doubled in 2018. Furthermore, data from the same period also show that while households of native-born Swedes received fewer and fewer social benefits, households headed by foreign-born individuals, in contrast, received more and more benefits.<sup>24</sup>

If we compare these data on state benefits with the employment indicators at the time, which show, for example, that in 2017 there were four times as many unemployed people among those born abroad (14.7% unemployment rate) than among those born in Sweden (3.7% unemployment rate),<sup>25</sup> we may come closer to understanding how Swedish society has shifted to the right over time and how this has shaken the pro-immigration and left-wing political status quo that had dominated the country for decades.

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<sup>22</sup> Statista - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/534299/sweden-drug-related-crimes-2005-2015/>

<sup>23</sup> Statista - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1177271/number-of-reported-cases-of-sexual-offence-in-sweden-by-type/>

<sup>24</sup> Statista - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/530884/sweden-expenditure-on-social-welfare-by-household-origin/>

<sup>25</sup> Statistics Sweden - <https://www.scb.se/en/finding-statistics/statistics-by-subject-area/labour-market/labour-force-supply/labour-force-surveys-lfs/pong/statistical-news/labour-force-surveys-lfs-4th-quarter-2017/?menu=open>



## 1.4 Loss of balance

When examining the transformation of the Swedish political landscape through the prism of the effects of migration, three fundamental aspects should be taken into account. Firstly, whether the most recent anti-elite formation was able to break out of the communication quarantine imposed by the mainstream parties and media elite during the period under review, i.e., whether it was able to build political capital despite its obvious lack of resources. Secondly, at the same time, can a significant loss of votes be detected among the largest parties that make up the establishment, which in itself could contribute to a shift in the status quo? Thirdly, are there any public opinion poll data available that could support the transformation of the political landscape through changes in society's attitudes towards migration?

If we examine the period between 2010 and 2018 in Sweden, during which three parliamentary elections were held, these points provide a clear picture of the extent of the changes that have taken place.

In light of the statistics presented in the previous chapter (1.3) concerning Swedish society, public security, and labour market, it is perhaps not too surprising that the first finding is that the communication quarantine imposed by the mainstream parties and the media elite was already considered ineffective before the migration crisis peaked, in the face of the advance of the “extremists”, i.e., the advance of the Sweden Democrats (SD), whose programme specifically and radically focused on exposing and eliminating problems related to immigration, which had been taboo in the country for decades.<sup>26</sup>

In the 2010 parliamentary elections, something happened that few people in Sweden or Europe had expected: for the first time in history, the Sweden Democrats crossed the parliamentary threshold with 5.7% of the vote.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the organisation won 20 seats, placing it ahead of the Christian Democrats and the Left Party in terms of power balance in the Riksdag, which comprises eight parties.

The fact that the results of the 2010 parliamentary elections were not merely a reflection of Swedish voters' momentary protest behaviour, but rather of the increasingly widespread rejection of migration in Sweden, is clearly demonstrated by the elections four and eight years later, when the SD received even higher percentages of the vote.

While a year before the peak of the infamous mass wave of European migration, the Social Democratic Party<sup>28</sup>, which was committed to the idea of a diverse society, won a narrow victory, the SD, which increasingly targeted center-right voters in its rhetoric and manifesto, doubled

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<sup>26</sup> Nilsson - <https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=9160830&fileId=9160835>

<sup>27</sup> BBC - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11367622>

<sup>28</sup> Euractive - <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/lofven-confirmed-as-sweden-s-next-prime-minister/>



its voter base in a single parliamentary term, achieving 12.9% of the vote.<sup>29</sup> Led by Jimmie Akesson, the party became the third strongest party in the Swedish parliament in just one parliamentary term, ahead of parties such as the Greens, the Centre Party, and the Liberals. Despite analyses examining the limitations of the SD's political performance at the time, its further strengthening in the 2018 elections (17.5%<sup>30</sup>) was almost certain. In light of this, the communication quarantine imposed by mainstream politics for years, which was intended to prevent the SD from going forward, proved to be ultimately ineffective.

In order to draw correct political conclusions about the shift in society, in addition to noting the rise of the Sweden Democrats, another important question is whether the largest establishment parties leading the political blocs have indeed suffered a significant loss of votes in parallel with this. As election figures show, the Social Democratic Party, which has the longest history of government and has always led the left-wing bloc, lost more than 100,000 voters between 2014 and 2018, while the Moderate Party, which has always led the center-right bloc, lost nearly 170,000 supporters during the same period.<sup>31</sup> By comparison, during the same parliamentary term, the SD gained more than 330,000 supporters,<sup>32</sup> representing by far the largest increase among parties with a growing voter base.

Finally, to better understand the role played by the change in Swedish society's attitude toward migration in the political realignment, it is worth recalling the data from two public opinion polls. For example, according to a Eurobarometer opinion poll, in 2009 only 9% of Swedes considered migration to be the most important challenge facing Sweden, but this had risen to 53% by 2015. A 2013 survey by Ipsos MORI only confirmed this negative trend, as 33% of respondents at the time felt that there were too many immigrants in Sweden, but four years later, in 2017, this figure was 50%.<sup>33</sup>

In light of the figures discussed in this chapter, it can therefore be said that the Swedish political elite's "open door" immigration policy has caused such damage to the two largest parties with high social embeddedness over the course of a few parliamentary terms that the consequences have irreversibly trickled down to the level of Swedish voters. All this foreshadowed the emergence of a radically new political landscape.

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<sup>29</sup> IFES - <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2406/>

<sup>30</sup> IFES - <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3066/>

<sup>31</sup> IFES - <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3066/>

<sup>32</sup> IFES - <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3066/>

<sup>33</sup> Holloway, Faures, Leach - [https://media.odi.org/documents/ODI-Public\\_narratives\\_Sweden\\_country\\_study\\_revMay23.pdf](https://media.odi.org/documents/ODI-Public_narratives_Sweden_country_study_revMay23.pdf)



## 1.5 Rightward shift

Less than six months before Sweden officially took over the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, decisive elections were held in the country in the autumn of 2022, the outcome of which clearly signaled the arrival of this ominous new political landscape. In line with the trend seen in recent years and expectations, the Sweden Democrats have once again made history on the back of years of pent-up dissatisfaction with immigration in society. With nearly 21% of the vote in the September elections, the party not only expanded its base by 200,000 voters but also became the second largest political force in the country.<sup>34</sup>

And although the Social Democratic Party won the most votes in the party contest, the specifics of Swedish domestic politics, which forces coalitions, meant that it was unable to gather enough seats to form a government with its traditional allies showing signs of decline (the Greens, the Left Party, and the Center Party).<sup>35</sup> This is how it could happen that a completely new political era began in Sweden in 2022, in which the right-wing bloc (Moderate Party, Christian Democrats, Liberals) eventually realised, despite their reservations, that the only way to govern was through the SD, which had become unavoidable and was now the largest party on the right.

The fact that this recognition on the part of these parties was not solely motivated by considerations of power is clearly demonstrated, for example, by the informal political rapprochement that took place prior to the 2022 election between Ulf Kristersson, leader of the Moderate Party and candidate for prime minister after the election, and Jimmie Akesson, leader of the Sweden Democrats.<sup>36</sup> However, regardless of the motivations of the right-wing bloc, it is important to note that by growing from a party that initially barely crossed the parliamentary threshold and was in a state of communication and political quarantine over the course of four parliamentary terms, the SD managed to become Sweden's second strongest organisation, gaining a degree of political gravity that even the most persistent opponents of the party, the Liberals, were unable to counter.

The final collapse of the *cordon sanitaire* led directly to everything that the collective Swedish left had always feared. Namely, that the right-wing bloc, with the involvement of the Sweden Democrats, calls for a hybrid (*confidence and supply-based*) cooperation which, thanks to its parliamentary majority, will not only be able to pave the way for radical political changes for a four-year parliamentary term, but will also completely redraw the political landscape thanks to

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<sup>34</sup> IFES - <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3813/>

<sup>35</sup> IFES - <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3813/>

<sup>36</sup> Financial Times - <https://www.ft.com/content/1e692a28-1764-11ea-9ee4-11f260415385>



the political legitimacy that such cooperation brings, effectively broadening the playing field for the left's hitherto weak political opponents.

The beginning of this paradigm shift came one month after the elections with the signing of the so-called Tidö Agreement<sup>37</sup> by the right-wing bloc and the SD, which, although it placed particular emphasis on the immediate resolution of the comprehensive problems caused by migration in Sweden, also aimed at joint work between the signatory parties in a number of other areas.

However, it would be a mistake to interpret the novelty of the agreement's acceptance solely in terms of the transformation of the political landscape, i.e., the prospect of the collapse of the *cordon sanitaire*. The document attempted to radically transform the Swedish immigration system, which could lead to a long-term transformation of Swedish identity and culture.

This objective had four main proposals, which were totally different from the left-wing migration policies of the past decades. The first step was to review refugee status, with the document recommending only temporary protection for refugees from crisis-stricken areas. Furthermore, applicants would differentiate on a territorial basis (divided into those arriving from directly neighboring or indirectly neighboring countries), while also limiting the level of assistance provided in the procedure, which could not exceed the level set out in international conventions or EU legislation. The second step established that shaping immigration policy is a responsibility, and procedures must reflect this. Subsequently, it established that the key to long-term integration is the introduction and use of a requirements-based set of criteria, which subjects must strive to meet. Finally, the objective that the challenges posed by parallel societies require immediate attention can also be read as a basic principle.<sup>38</sup>

As expected, the Tidö agreement caused political turbulence and drew criticism not only domestically, particularly from Swedish civil society organisations<sup>39</sup>, but also from the European establishment, which sees mass immigration as an opportunity.<sup>40</sup> However, it is important to note that, contrary to the general criticism from the left, the trend toward stricter policies resulting from the influx of migrants ten years ago did not occur exclusively in Sweden.

For example, within the Scandinavian region, Denmark underwent a process that was not only similar to that in Sweden, but in many respects even more drastic. As is well known, in response to the 2015-2016 European migration crisis, Denmark also further restricted eligibility for refugee status and introduced restrictions that, in the case of immigrants, were clearly

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<sup>37</sup> Tidöavtalet - [Tidoavtalet-Overenskommelse-for-Sverige.pdf](#)

<sup>38</sup> Tidöavtalet - [Tidoavtalet-Overenskommelse-for-Sverige.pdf](#)

<sup>39</sup> Picum - <https://picum.org/blog/utterly-inhumane-civil-society-reacts-to-swedish-plan-to-oblige-teachers-doctors-to-denounce-undocumented-people/>

<sup>40</sup> Euractiv - [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/swedish-liberals-leader-bitter-over-renew-europe-cold-shoulder/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/swedish-liberals-leader-bitter-over-renew-europe-cold-shoulder/)



designed not to promote integration but to facilitate their return to their country of origin as quickly as possible.<sup>41</sup>

## 1.6 Summary

This summary attempts to highlight the milestones that brought about political and social changes which, in little more than a decade, not only radically and irreversibly transformed Sweden's attitude towards migration, but also reshaped the balance of Swedish domestic politics that had existed for decades. If we were to judge the change resulting from these milestones solely on the basis of the number of asylum seekers registered under the new right-wing government, which, according to the combined data for the past three years, is only a fraction of the numbers seen in the first half of the past decade<sup>42</sup>, all signs would suggest that the political and social changes discussed in detail above will remain permanent features of Swedish public life in the long term.

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<sup>41</sup> Századvég - <https://szazadveg.hu/cikkek/a-dan-varospolitika-es-a-migracio/>

<sup>42</sup> Statista - <https://www.statista.com/statistics/550125/number-of-refugees-accepted-in-sweden/>



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