
7. The Nordic Passport Union and the Nordic Council

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INTRODUCTION¹

When Swedish, Norwegian and Danish athletes and sports leaders from the Nordic countries arrived in Helsinki for the 1952 Olympic Summer Games, they could do so without having to show their passports. On 14 July 1952, five days prior to the opening of the games, a protocol for passport free travel between Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland had been signed by the respective governments. The 1952 games are remembered as the first time Soviet athletes presented themselves to competition with the rest of the world, a setting for one of the many Cold War battlefields for prestige. Europe was now divided by the Iron Curtain, severely restricting free movement for a great part of European citizens. The world's sporting youth met some 180 km from the Finnish–Soviet border, with the Soviet controlled Porkkala naval base just 30 km west of Helsinki. However, at the same time Nordic cooperation was taking one of its most significant steps that would affect the future of the region. In comparison with the simultaneous Western European integration process, the Nordic countries were ahead concerning the practical implementation of free movement.

The 1952 protocol was the starting point of a process that was finalised in 1957, when a decision to lift the internal border controls was concluded. Iceland and the Faroe Islands would join this agreement in 1965 and 1966 respectively. The Nordic Passport Union is largely seen as one of the main achievements during what has been referred to as the golden years of Nordic cooperation (Kettunen et al. 2016, p. 78; Träskman 2013). It was a concrete result boosting the legitimacy of the newly established Nordic Council and facilitated Nordic integration in several ways from private travel to free labour force mobility. It also became a powerful symbol of the trust between the Nordic countries, and as such also a dogmatic part of Nordic cooperation self-celebratory language. Yet from the start, Nordic cooperation on borders and migration also involved complicated questions over the management of free movement, and intermittent tensions between national and regional policy goals (e.g. Tervonen 2016).

In this chapter the background and establishment of the Nordic Passport Union will be described as part of Nordic cooperation history, but also the restrictions and limiting factors will be given attention. After the millennium shift the Nordic Passport Union has faced two major developments. The establishment of EU's Schengen Area in 1995 started a process which made all five Nordic countries join in 2001, merging two integration projects into one. During the past 10 years the Nordic Passport Union has faced violations by its members, as border controls have been implemented ad hoc against the common agreement. The dynamics between processes of debordering and rebordering, i.e. debordering of regional boundaries understood as internal and the rebordering of boundaries depicted as external (Schimmelfennig 2021), are here used to describe and analyse the development of the Passport Union and the challenges it has been facing in recent years.

THE BIRTH OF THE PASSPORT UNION 1952–1957

The idea of free movement between the Nordic countries was not an entirely new idea after the Second World War. No passport had been required for travel between most European countries during the three decades prior to the First World War, and in the Scandinavian countries both passport and visa requirements were reintroduced in 1917. During the interwar years some of these obstacles would be lifted, at least between some of the Nordic countries. The visa requirements were swiftly abolished after the war, and in 1929 all five Nordic countries agreed on introducing a travel card that would replace passports during intra-Nordic travel. The card was cheap and easy to get, not even a photograph was required, but was valid for only six months. Soon some special arrangements were implemented at the busiest border controls between Sweden and Denmark. In 1930 the travel card ceased to be a requirement at the Öresund border controls and soon after this was also implemented on the ferry route between Frederikshavn in Jutland and Gothenburg.

In practice any kind of valid legitimation in addition to the travel card was enough for shorter travel between the Nordic countries during the 1930s, but the customs controls remained. This was often brought up as an unpleasant nuisance both practically and symbolically. Oftentimes when bigger Nordic meetings were arranged by professional or civil society organisations the hosts would approach the national customs services and ask for smoother customs procedures for their Nordic guests (Stadius 2018). The support for further debordering was considerable at a time that saw Nordic cooperation gain momentum. However, all this stopped in the autumn of 1939, when photographs became mandatory for the travel cards, and finally, when the war reached the Nordic countries passport and visa requirements were reintroduced.

After the war the visa requirements were lifted in 1945, with the exception of Finland, whose citizens would need to wait until 1950 for visa free travel to their Nordic neighbours. This reflects the political outcome of the war and the insecurity Finland faced during the so-called years of danger 1945–1948, but also the general unwillingness of policing authorities in all Nordic countries to loosen the control that had been reinstalled during the war (Wendt 1979, p. 113). The tension between national security and Nordic trust and solidarity was a major factor for the resolute actions retaken to introduce a passport free Nordic zone. In the spring of 1951, as part of the ongoing preparations for establishing the Nordic Council, the Parliamentary Committee for Freer Communication was established. The Committee's pronounced task was to reintroduce total passport freedom as it had existed before the First World War, and to in all ways possible "make the Nordic borders invisible" (Wendt 1981, p. 188). Two social democratic politicians, the Danish Hans Hedtoft and the Swedish Rolf Edberg, were the main architects lobbying in public for free movement, and actively engaging in convincing the respective governments to back the initiative (J. A. Andersson 2000, p. 78; Edberg 1952).

The Committee became the driving force in the process that step by step created the passport free Nordic zone by 1958. As mentioned, the first step was to provisionally remove passport requirements starting in July 1952. In practice this meant that customs control of Nordic travellers was limited to sample checks, while non-Nordic citizens were still required to show passports when moving between Nordic countries. This was only the first step towards a more comprehensive debordering policy that was a vital part of reforming Nordic labour market cooperation. The agreement of 1954 abolished the time limit of three months completely, and also removed requirements for residence and work permits. Iceland was a latecomer in

this respect, joining this practice only in 1955, and after that still preserved work permits as obligatory until 1966. The Icelandic authorities did not see an immediate benefit in attracting foreign labour, and generally there was a concern for not altering the social and population structure of the sparsely populated insular nation.

The final step for a passport free zone was taken in 1957 when a decision was made to abolish all passport controls, including for non-Nordic citizens, between Nordic countries. This agreement was implemented starting in 1958 and meant that a residence permit for any of the four countries was valid in all the others. An amendment in 1963 gave citizens from West Germany, Austria, Lichtenstein, Switzerland and France free entrance for a maximum of three months (excluding work permits) with only having to show valid legitimation. In 1972 this rule was extended for travellers from Italy and the Benelux countries, as part of dealing with Denmark's EEC membership and the country's continued commitment to the Nordic passport free zone. This was the first significant step of many in the merging of two separate integration projects.

The reforms and decisions described above brought with them many practical consequences that made the Nordic integration process a reality. On the one hand the common labour market had many effects. On the other hand, vacation travel became easier, serving the traditional imperative for Nordic cooperation to enhance knowledge about the neighbour countries and create contacts and a sense of togetherness between Nordic citizens. In addition, the operation of customs control for transport was streamlined, and many reforms to make border-crossing easier were made. After a trial period an agreement between Norway and Sweden was made in 1959 to decrease double customs stations at the long border. Out of 32 border-crossing stations only the three biggest maintained toll stations on both sides of the border, while the rest were kept by either nation according to agreement (Wendt 1979, p. 116). This meant that Norwegian and Swedish customs personnel would perform their duties for both countries respectively. Both Swedish and Norwegian customs rules applied to a border zone of 15 km. Eventually similar practice was introduced in the north between the borders of Norway, Sweden and Finland, the Öresund region and other maritime routes in the south-west. These measures also signified considerable economic incentives of pooling resources, which has been one of the justifications for Nordic cooperation over the years.

Efforts at joint Nordic planning of migration and asylum procedures were reflected from the 1950s to the 1980s in the regular cooperation meetings between Nordic immigration authorities. Before the "migration stops" following the oil crisis in 1972, the Nordic countries undertook an active joint process of visa liberalisation with third countries around the world. Moreover, an agreement on a common Nordic entry ban list and the principle that the first country of entry is responsible for asylum seekers were agreed upon (MFA 20 C2, 20 C3), the latter bearing resemblance to the later EU Dublin Regulation.

A COMMON NORDIC LABOUR MARKET WITH MANY IMPLICATIONS

The Nordic Passport Union was closely linked to the strategies for establishing a common Nordic labour market, and these two main endeavours of the Nordic Council in many ways go hand in hand (see also Chapter 19). The Committee for Freer Communication also took a decisive step in 1953, proposing that Nordic citizens would not have to apply for work permits

(or residence permits) in other Nordic countries. During the first Nordic Council session in the autumn of 1953 a recommendation was made to the governments for creating a common labour market. Consequently, the next year Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland signed an agreement to confirm this. As in many other cases of Nordic cooperation the first steps had already been taken some years in advance, as Sweden during the Second World War had removed work permit rules for Danes and Norwegians in order to help them settle as war refugees, but also to get the full benefit from the influx of workers. Right after the war this practice was formalised in an agreement between Denmark and Sweden. Norway and Finland would not be ready for such a step at that point due to war recovery concerns being judged to be first priority, but as seen they would join some years later.

The free movement of labour, as installed between four of the five countries, was a significant step. An estimated one million Nordic citizens migrated between 1951 and 1976, and 25 per cent of them are estimated to have obtained citizenship of their new country of residence (Wendt 1979, p. 150). As stated by the Danish MP Kaj Bundvad the wounds of the traumatic experiences between the Nordic countries during the war had now been healed, and “Norden has now been opened to the Nordic youth” (see Wendt 1979, p. 150). The feeling of a new start for Nordic cooperation and actual integration has maybe never been stronger than at that moment. A bright future seemed to be ahead, and that would in many ways be the case for the decades to come.

These decisions would spark the massive work-related migration from Finland to Sweden especially during the period 1960–1975, when an estimated 400,000 Finns moved west to Sweden (Reinans 1996, p. 69). During the peak in 1969–1970 a total of 80,000 migrants came from Finland to Sweden, but after that the trend shifted towards many moving back. In total over half a million Finnish citizens migrated to Sweden during the second half of the twentieth century, creating a new Swedish minority group, the Sweden-Finns (Junila & Westin 2006, p. 27). The Swedish job market and housing programmes, like the so-called *miljon-programmet* (1965–1975), often made it easier and in many ways more attractive to move to Sweden instead of moving within Finland. The Nordic passport free zone and the common labour market made this migration resemble internal migration rather than moving from one country to another. The cultural factors and language challenges are another story that will not be dealt with here, but all these political decisions by the Nordic governments created new dynamics, which affected the whole region.

Aside from migrants seen as “desirable” – working age job seekers and tourists – the Passport Union enabled a greater freedom of movement also to people who would previously have been seen as “undesirable” and most probably denied entry at the borders of the different Nordic countries. Questions over social control, vagrancy and crime led to efforts by the Nordic Council to deepen cross-border police cooperation. The movement of many Finnish *Kaale Roma*, impoverished by discrimination and structural change, into Sweden raised concerns with racialised undertones among Swedish social authorities (Tervonen 2016, pp. 135–7). The regulations of the passport free area meant that Nordic citizens returned or deported from another Nordic country were often able to return unhindered, leading to debates in particular on the repeated removal of Finnish citizens who were alcoholics, homeless, or arrested for crimes from Sweden and Denmark.

BETWEEN NORDEN AND SCHENGEN

The Schengen Agreement of 1985 on passport free travel between five EC countries was supplemented in the 1990 Schengen Convention aiming at abolishing internal border controls. In 1994 Denmark applied for observer status in what in 1995 was to be named the Schengen Area, which was already a fast forward process to incorporate the Schengen cooperation into EU structures. The EU Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 came into effect in 1999 finalising the incorporation of the Schengen Area into EU legislation. All five Nordic countries joined the Schengen Area in 2001. However, Greenland and Faroe Islands remained outside (on the Nordic region and EU, see also Chapter 23).

Already in 1994–1995, simultaneously with the Nordic EU referendums and the accession of Sweden and Finland to the EU, the process of dealing with the challenges to merge EU and Nordic passport and border control free zones came onto the agenda. These were years that later have been described as the low tide of Nordic cooperation (Strang 2016, p. 3), a period of renegotiation and even voices declaring that Nordic cooperation had ceased to be relevant and that it would be absorbed into European integration (Browning 2007). The dramatic and close referendum outcomes, and the fierce campaigns for and against, added to the sense of a time of change. The process of merging the Nordic Passport Union and the Schengen Area, somewhat paradoxically, came to be a process where the established Nordic free movement was largely preserved despite the different outcomes of the three national referendums. In a way it was a victory for the yes side, despite that it had lost in Norway.

That Denmark early on gave the signal that it was going to pursue full entry to Schengen set a condition for the other Nordic countries. One main argument for Denmark was the concern over the negative effects a passport border with Germany would bring. This forced both Sweden and Norway to take the Danish stand as a starting point for their own decision. A Swedish no to Schengen would mean a hard border in the Öresund region, at that point already seen as one of the future key transnational regions that would embody EU's "Europe of the regions" strategy (Stadius 2018, p. 199). In that context having Denmark in Schengen and Sweden staying outside would not look as a very affirmative stand from Sweden, a recent new member of the union. Significantly, the construction of the Öresund bridge began in 1995 at the very same time as the Schengen question was on the agenda.

From a Norwegian point of view a Swedish but not Norwegian membership would mean a hard border over the long Swedish–Norwegian border. The Swedish government position was obviously tied to the recent admission into the EU, but away from the limelight, communication between the Nordic prime ministers started in the autumn of 1994, leading up to Sweden and Finland applying for Schengen membership half a year later. All three Nordic EU member states had included a passage in the agreement to commit to preserving the Nordic passport free zone. This facilitated the EU accepting both Norway and Iceland as part of the Schengen Area in 1996 with separate cooperation agreements. In practice this meant that the final step of merging the European and Nordic passport free zones had been taken, and its implementation started in 2001.

As Hans E. Andersson has shown, there seemed to be no specific need for justifying Nordic cooperation as part of the Schengen debate in any of the countries. He gives the example of when the Danish minister of justice, Bjørn Westh, informed the parliament about the Schengen application, the wording concluded that this new cooperation should not inflict major harm with regard "to our Nordic neighbours" (H. E. Andersson 2000, p. 239). Even if the future of

Nordic cooperation was debated and questioned in these years, the Danish minister did not justify Nordic cooperation in any way, but rather saw it as something self-evident according to Andersson.

In Sweden the Schengen question did not receive that much attention in the political debates. Like in the other Nordic countries there was some opposition, mainly from the New Left and the Green Party, but after Denmark had taken a positive stand for joining Schengen, the option of trying to keep the entire Nordic region outside was not realistic anymore. Therefore, the arguments voiced by the opposition, mainly regarding entering joint European police and asylum policies, did not cause much stir in the Swedish parliament, since the opposition failed to present any concrete alternative (H. E. Andersson 2000, p. 247). The introduction of the argument of joint crime-fighting synergies was a somewhat new element in the mid-1990s debate in Sweden and was used actively by the government and other pro-EU parties as an important justifying factor.

In Norway the situation was different, since joining Schengen after the decision to stay outside the EU would not seem like an obvious option. However, the actual situation was quite the opposite. Just a few months after the No-side's victory in the referendum, Norway's government started negotiating a Norwegian membership. The main argument was to preserve the Nordic passport free zone. This reflects the unquestioned status of free movement between the Nordic countries, and despite a certain national pride being invested in the rejection of joining the European Union, soon all practical issues of staying outside the Schengen Agreement became apparent. A hard border with Sweden would have been unfortunate in many ways. Many politicians who had been against EU membership also voiced their discontent over a possible attachment of Norway to such an instrumental part of the EU integration structure, hinting at a sneak in of the country into the EU in the making. In the final government proposal, the crime-prevention argument was taken up, like in Sweden, even if later research has presented the assumption that preserving the Nordic passport free zone was the actual main motive (H. E. Andersson 2000, p. 245).

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF REBORDERING

The merging of European and Nordic passport free zones has produced patterns of continuity, change and ambiguity. There has been continuity in the sense that the rights of Nordic citizens to cross borders, move, resettle, take up residence and work remain uniquely strong in the Nordic region. At the same time, there has been a profound transformation in the politics of migration, ending the relatively apolitical striving towards “invisible” Nordic and European borders. Instead, debates on migration have become a driver of surging populism in each Nordic country, and the whole region has moved towards increasingly restrictive policies on migration and particularly asylum. Pre-Schengen worries over a hard border dividing the Nordic region have been replaced by fears over ostensibly “leaking” or “uncontrolled” borders. Finally, there is ambiguity, as the national, regional, and European levels of bordering have proven to be a volatile mix. From the so-called migration crisis of 2015 to the COVID-19 pandemic and to the Russian weaponisation of migration from 2023 onwards, it is not clear how much influence, or indeed relevance, the Nordic Council and Nordic cooperation more broadly continue to have in relation to the politics of borders and migration.

Schengen membership meant a dramatic rescaling of borders as Nordic countries joined an area with around 448 million European citizens. Through the EU's externalisation policies and deals with third countries, they were connected with an extended border zone stretching from sub-Saharan Africa to Central Asia. The collapse of the communist regimes and the EU's eastward expansion from 2004 onwards also closely linked the Nordics with countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Yet lingering East/West divisions were evident in Nordic concerns over possible large-scale migration from the new member states at the time of the expansion, leading some countries (e.g. Finland) but not others (e.g. Sweden) to impose transition periods delaying the entry of the citizens of the new member states to the scope of free movement (Lakka 2018). A more profound dividing line has formed in the post-Cold War era between the countries of the so-called Global North and South. Racialised fears of "floods" of asylum seekers from the latter have emerged as a central issue motivating a shift from regional debordering to a global rebordering. This has in the 2000s led to the periodic emphasis of national solutions alongside European decision-making, and the return of internal bordering.

A harbinger of this change in the Nordic context was the so-called Danish "passport affair" in 2011, in the context of the Arab Spring and Danish worries over asylum seekers' irregular movements. In March 2011, *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* reported incidents in which the Danish police demanded passports from all "foreign looking" travellers in the Öresund train, whether they were Nordic citizens or not. The issue was raised at the Nordic Council but largely brushed aside by the Danish government. It became more serious when Løkke Rasmussen's centre-right minority government proposed a plan to reintroduce border controls on the German and Swedish borders. There were again voices of protest at the Nordic Council, but to little effect. However, the Danish government could not ignore the strong reactions by Germany and the European Commission. Under a threat of serious consequences over infringement of the Schengen treaty, Rasmussen's government was forced to back down and scrap its plan in 2012 (Munkøe 2012; Tervonen 2016).

The Danish passport affair thus remained politically and temporally limited. However, it pointed to the growing pressures on free mobility both within Norden and wider Europe. It also exposed the diminished political weight of the Nordic Council in matters related to migration and borders. While clear violation of the Schengen rules proved impossible for the Danish government, disregarding the Nordic Passport Union – including plans over a "Greater Copenhagen region" based on borderless Öresund – appeared a secondary concern (Munkøe 2012; Tervonen 2016).

The 2011 affair also highlighted Öresund's role as a bellwether for changing intra-Nordic border politics. The same Swedish–Danish crossing that had motivated a postwar push to remove border obstacles became the place where the borderless Norden began to unravel. In 2014, this was still not evident, and a Freedom of Movement Council (*Gränshinderrådet*) was founded to solve hindrances to free movement within the Nordic region. The flow of events was moving in a very different direction, however. The European "refugee crisis" in 2015 brought more than 150,000 refugees to Sweden by November, prompting the Swedish government to reintroduce intra-regional border controls. This was in principle allowed by the Schengen acquis "in the event of a serious threat to public policy or internal security", and the political turmoil in Europe meant there was little pressure from Berlin or Brussels this time.

In January 2016, Sweden began requiring carriers to perform identity checks on the Danish side of the Denmark–Sweden border, with queues lining up for identity checks to board the Öresund train from the Copenhagen airport. Additional border controls took place on the

Swedish side, with the police monitoring all modes of transport arriving from continental Europe and stopping anyone without valid travel documents. Denmark and Norway followed Sweden in late 2015 and early 2016 in reintroducing internal border control between the countries. Finland and Norway further restricted the entry of asylum seekers who were temporarily allowed by the Russian authorities to cross their borders without visas.

Before 2015, notifications by Nordic countries to the European Council of temporary border control measures on the internal Schengen–Nordic borders had been strictly short-term and connected to temporally restricted events such as the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen (7–18 December 2009) or the terrorist attack on the island Utøya in July 2011. After 2015, the exception became the rule, and temporary border controls morphed into increasingly permanent ones (Skaarup 2021). While the grounds for country-by-country justifications for maintaining border controls have changed over the years, at the time of the writing of this chapter (May 2024) border controls are still in place in Sweden, Denmark and Norway, which have all notified the European Commission of yet another round of extensions of border controls until November 2024 (European Council 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic followed the so-called refugee crisis in 2020–2023. Differences in containment policy and the epidemiological situation between Nordic countries paved the way again for intra-regional travel restrictions, such as the one the Finnish, Norwegian and Danish governments imposed on travellers from Sweden in 2020. Although the COVID-19 restrictions were relatively short-lived, they once again offered a powerful indication of the symbolic and practical return of national borders within the region.

In 2016 and again from 2022 onwards after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, events on the Finnish and Norwegian border with Russia have produced new questions with broad implications for both Nordic and Schengen borders. Russia has allegedly used asylum seekers as a tool of destabilisation policy, and after over 1,300 migrants from third countries entered without proper papers, Finland temporarily closed its border. Finland thus finds itself in a position potentially not unlike that of other EU bordering countries facing difficult questions concerning irregular third country migrants, with a potential to also complicate the politics of intra-Nordic borders further.

After several “crises”, the future of Nordic cooperation in relation to migration and borders is in flux. In the Norwegian case after 2015, Brekke & Staver (2018) have referred to a “renationalisation” of migration politics, while emphasising the non-linear trajectory of the Europeanisation of migration politics. In the context of significant challenges faced by the Schengen Area, it is far from clear what scope there is for future Nordic cooperation on borders that are simultaneously Europeanised and re-nationalised while retaining shared Nordic characteristics – and a potential for rapid change.

CONCLUSION

The Nordic passport free zone introduced during the 1950s stands as one of the main achievements of the Nordic Council in its early years. The ground for this reform had been prepared in many ways previously during the interwar period. Free movement was tightly connected to the creation of a common labour market in the Nordic region, and as such had a great impact on Nordic societies during the Cold War period and beyond. The established Nordic cooperation structures were voluntarily merged with the creation of the European Schengen Area

during the 1990s. This process was not met with any significant opposition and manifested a positive belief in the possibilities to harmonise European and Nordic cooperation. The challenges presented to the open borders after 2010 and the reverses experienced by single Nordic states in respecting this agreement, have put the Nordic passport free zone under pressure. The general atmosphere of promoting debordering policies has lately been challenged by an increasing political narrative and actions promoting rebordering.

NOTE

1. The chapter is written as part of Research Council of Finland funded projects, funding decision numbers 347906 and 353311.

ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

The archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Helsinki (MFA).

20 C2. Nordic countries, VI 1960–1964. Finnish agreements with other countries on passports, visas, and work permits.

20 C3. By country. A-Nordic countries. Finnish agreements with other countries on passports, visas, and work permits.

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