



NORTHERN HIGHLIGHTS : SCANDINAVIA'S CONTRASTING RESPONSES TO CORONAVIRUS

By Claire GUYOT



ABOUT THE ARTICLE

From the vantage point of an outsider, Scandinavia might convey the impression of a lump of minute, homogeneous countries. The region remains famous for desert places, snow, breathtaking landscapes, heavy coffee drinkers and high living standards. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden might show similarities and intertwined pasts, but each of these countries holds unique national features. One stupendously blatant and recent evidence of this particular fact is their grappling with the unprecedented sanitary crisis following the Coronavirus outbreak.

When contamination waves gradually hatched in every nook and cranny of our planet, the sanitary threat was not construed as such by everyone. Some Nordic countries rolled out proactive measures with neither delay nor demur, while others hemmed and hawed before initiating the fight. Interstate disparities give us the latest reminder that, when faced with crises, Europe is still divided — even amongst purportedly akin countries. As all ventured into uncharted territories, the first half of the year two-thousand-and-twenty saw a revived comparison across the *Norden*. Many of us are currently wishing for a fast-forward to the post-pandemic era. However, it now seems essential to ponder the diverse strategies deployed in the Nordic region: not only will this analysis give us insightful cultural knowledge, but also will it teach us invaluable lessons for the future unfolding before us.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Les Jeunes de l'IHEDN.

Discrepancies in the acknowledgement of a dreadful and uncertain omen

China was already embroiled in a plight back in January whilst the rest of the world witnessed what was in fact a foreboding health situation. International reactions ranged from deep apprehension to strong disbelief. Some countries' confidence knew no bounds: they guilelessly did not believe this health crisis could spread elsewhere – or, if it did, it would all be fine.

How Iceland outplayed Coronavirus

Iceland did not dare gamble that the virus would not quietly worm its way in the country. Local authorities kept abreast of the evolution of the situation some seven thousand kilometres away. They perceived it as a prescient warning, prompting them to start preparing, even before the first known case was identified within the country. The Icelandic Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management went the whole hog to be ready in case somebody tested positive. For this reason, at the end of February, Ævar Pálmi Pálmasson, police superintendent in Reykjavík, was assigned to lead the team that would track down every person who might have been in contact with an infected individual. Additional medical gear was ordered for hospitals and a group of three people was formed, whose paramount duty would be to head Iceland's response to Coronavirus. The trio was composed of Víðir Reynisson, a policeman, Alma D. Möller, a doctor, and Þórólfur Guðnason, an epidemiologist. In Iceland, the handling of the pandemic has been entirely led by the public-health authority. They contrived a flawless plan before instituting it and the political sphere assented to it. When they became aware that a man who had been skiing in the Dolomites, Italy, was contaminated, they sleuthed and traced down every person the man had been in contact with upon his return before being diagnosed. Anyone he had closely interacted with for more than fifteen minutes while he kept doing his usual activities such as going to work or running errands was considered potentially infected and therefore mandated into a fourteen-day isolation.

The virus began its rampage across the country, and the tracing team kept expanding too. The tight-knit country enforced a light lockdown compared to other nations. Its moderate restrictions consisted in closing merely certain sorts of businesses, demanding social distancing and practicing tests galore. Indeed, the country governed by Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir resolved to wide-scale testings. These were not just performed on people with high risks of contagion — that is to say, meeting specific travel-related or medical criteria — but offered to be carried out on all citizens, may they be asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic. This came to fruition thanks to the Icelandic biotech company

named deCODE Genetics¹, a genealogy database fathoming variations in the human genome correlated with common diseases. Its founder, Kári Stefánsson, offered its facilities to screen the global population in Iceland and not just the citizens who were obviously infected. According to the neurologist turned entrepreneur, assessing the virus' spread by estimating casualties based only on the figures of obviously infected people would not be enough. Understanding and therefore controlling the virus required to know its distribution on a larger scope. This is how deCODE unveiled a plethora of cases that would have been ignored otherwise. Strict preventative measures melded with far-reaching testing, tracking and isolation precluded the country from imposing a stringent lockdown².

Finland, a country girded for disasters

Our journey throughout the Nordics now leads us to a country that was also quite ready to cope with the virus: Finland. The Land of a Thousand Lakes even became known as “the prepper nation of the Nordics”³, an expression coined by Magnus Håkenstad. As the scholar from the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies puts it, the country is “always ready for a major catastrophe or a World War III”⁴. Its earnest preparedness leans on a covetable emergency stock of medical gear, military equipment, fuel and food garnered for decades during the Cold War era... and kept intact ever since.⁵ Information on the localization of stockpile warehouses is classified. Authorities solely stated that the current network of facilities where all the supplies are kept all around the country has been in place since the fifties, hence Finland's edge over other nations.

This promptness was combined with a swift action from local authorities: schools and universities were shut down during the second week of March, and borders instantly closed, thus subjecting travels to rigorous restrictions. Last but not least, the Prime Minister for Finland, Sanna Marin, rode on the crest of information networks to guarantee every citizen received information about the virus. These “new nervous systems for our planet”⁶ wielded a significant power in the spread of accountable information. She enlisted influencers to disseminate facts from reliable sources on their social media accounts. By acknowledging that not everybody stayed acquainted with the news, local authorities decided to harness

¹ JOHN Tara, [Iceland lab's testing suggests 50% of coronavirus cases have no symptoms](#), CNN, April 3, 2020

² KOLBERT Elizabeth, [How Iceland beat the Coronavirus](#), The New Yorker, June 1, 2020

³ PRYSER LIBELL Henrik and ANDERSON Christina, [Finland, 'Prepper Nation of the Nordics,' Isn't Worried About Masks](#), The New YorkTimes, April 5, 2020

⁴ [Ibid.](#)

⁵ [Ibid.](#)

⁶ U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's [speech](#) on Internet freedom, U.S. Department of State, January 22, 2010

the power of digital platforms and get everyone to #FlattenTheCurve⁷. With a population comparable to other countries hardly hit by the pandemic, Finland managed to contain the virus in the nick of time.

Norway's early reaction

Our third stop takes us to the Land of the Midnight Sun. Norway also shone by its brisk mastery of the situation. In an interview with journalist Christiane Amanpour⁸, Prime Minister Erna Solberg explained what induced Norway in having the situation under control relatively quickly. First and foremost, the throngs of people who came back ill from abroad were monitored very closely, in particular those who had been on holidays in hot spots like Northern Italy and Austria. Plus, as soon as people who had not visited these countries presented symptoms, Norwegian authorities shuttered schools, fitness centres and businesses involving person-to-person contact – bars, hair salons, restaurants. Concerts and sports events followed suit. Private outdoors gatherings were limited to five people. Children were advised not to have more than one or two stable close friends. A fourteenday quarantine was imposed upon people who had been out of the Nordics before the end of February — myself included. I started calling Oslo my home at the beginning of March and I was able to witness how drastically the situation shifted overnight. Dismay and social distancing forthwith pervaded every ghostly silent street of the City of Tigers. Public transportation saw its capacity dwindle by fifty per cent, a rush of panic depleted supermarket shelves, corporate offices became practically void and video meetings replaced face-to-face interactions. Still and all, some of the activity continued and not all shops closed down.

Scientists were at the forefront in all the decisions, as far as lockdown measures and the right remedy were concerned. Masks have never been mandatory, except in airports and airplanes. If you wear one to go out because you feel ill and might contaminate people, then it is considered that you probably should not be out at all. Norway got involved in prominent projects to boost research and development on a possible inoculation. The country opted to sponsor a large program in tandem with the World Health Organisation to suss out the type of medicine that could cure the disease or, at least, curtail its impact. This scientific research has opened new vistas to ensure the country will be equipped with vaccines in the foreseeable future. In the following months, Norway smoothly segued into a lockdown exit by cautiously lifting restrictions step-by-step: private gatherings could bring ten, then twenty people together, borders reopened with one or two consenting neighbouring countries, and schools restarted their activity on a modified schedule. What ensued was a return back to a new normal, rife with social distancing and antibacterial lotions. Scentsitive people beware...

7 WITTENBERG-COX Avivah, [What Do Countries With The Best Coronavirus Responses Have In Common? Women Leaders](#), Forbes, April 13, 2020

8 AMANPOUR Christiane, [Norway says it has the virus 'under control'](#), PBS, April 8, 2020

The Danish precautionary tale

Let us now take a detour and gently swerve towards Denmark. Just like Norway, Danevang instilled preventive measures from the outset. Right after its first death caused by the Coronavirus, Danish Parliament enacted an emergency law giving public health authorities the ability to hold much sway. Non-residents and foreigners without any working contract in Denmark were barred from entering the country. A general lockdown came into force on March sixteenth, following a speech by Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen: schools, public places like non-essential stores, places of worship, cinemas, and administrative establishments were ordered to close down. Outings were not subject to restraints. A plan to allay these restrictions in a regulated and gradual manner was conjectured under the conditions that the population kept on heeding the general recommendations on the conduct to adopt and that the number of hospitalized people plummeted or, at least, did not vary.

By gradually alleviating societal restrictions, the action plan evolved from a suppression strategy to what health experts call a mitigation strategy, through which the outbreak would be brought to a halt. This staved off a disastrous impairment on the health care system. A widespread testing campaign began in April under the leadership of the research institute *Statens Serum*. Health Minister Magnus Heunicke presented it as "the most effective way that we can stop the spread of the infection."⁹ Only at-risk people or those showing acute symptoms were hitherto tested because there were not enough tests for the entire population¹⁰. Denmark became the first country to reopen schools, small businesses and stores. It successfully kept a tight rein on the virus' spread thanks to a firm approach that precluded hospitals from getting overburdened.

Sweden: freedom over lockdown

We shall now explore our last kingdom on the Scandinavian list. Unlike its brethren, Sweden resolved to address the Coronavirus very flexibly. Quite soon, its cognomen turned from "the elongated country" to "the land without a lockdown". Authorities chose to try and contain the virus' propagation by relying on voluntarism, a concept endorsed by many Swedes. Believing in civic responsibility and respect for health measures buttressed the Swedish approach. It is construed as essential to have faith in citizens while basing the fight against the virus on free will rather than coercion. Introducing a strict lockdown was seen as excessive, even preposterous. Banning normal day-to-day activities was deemed unnecessary, following the general guidelines sufficient and prohibitions not needed. Instead of a strict lockdown, people were advised to observe social distancing behavior and there was not any mandatory closure of gathering places. Public transportation kept being available as usual. As long as there was no

⁹ MILNE Richard, [Denmark to test everyone with Coronavirus symptoms](#), Financial Times, April 20, 2020

¹⁰ MARIN Cécile, [Europe Versus Coronavirus - Putting the Danish Model to the Test](#), Institut Montaigne, May 12, 2020

proof that the contaminations would ratchet up among young people, health authorities did not recommend to revamp schools. Students were enjoined to regularly wash their hands and refrain from having close contact with one another. Nurseries and playgrounds stayed open.

Some issued warnings regarding what they called a treacherous experiment: if these tendencies and habits were allowed to go uncurbed, a cumbersome strain would cast a blight over the health system, not apt at coping with such pressure. Others called it the Swedish freedom — freedom of movement being legally guaranteed by the country's Constitution. By keeping many parts of its society open, the Scandinavian outlier chose to trust people's cultural sense of self-discipline, even though there were already confirmed cases in January and deaths in March. Later on, Sweden slightly tightened its measures, but the number of victims had already hit a staggering threshold : one-thousand-and-eight-hundred new cases were confirmed on June twenty-fourth, which was the country's highest number of new cases in a single day at the time¹¹.

We are now done examining the distinctive schemes launched by these formerly difficult-to-tell-apart countries. Irrespective of value-based judgement, these discrepancies echoed the ways each nation is ruled, by emphasising the different relationships between government and administration authorities. It is now time to peruse the roots of it.

What underlies those different strategies ?

Responses shaped by national cultures

Iceland was ready to activate its crisis management mode at one fell swoop. Over the years, its emergency system has experimented several natural catastrophes – remember the volcanic eruptions at Eyjafjallajökull exactly ten years ago – and proved to be a well-oiled machine. This is one reason for the country's readiness. Health officials could easily reckon on proficient infrastructures and potent communication channels. The Icelandic model is attuned to its sparse population of approximately three-hundred-and-sixty-four-thousands, and to the size of the country. Social cohesion is easily attainable. The island country is besieged by harsh environmental conditions. Its denizens form a close-knit community who regularly keeps in touch with relatives, friends, neighbours... Moreover, as Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir puts it: "Iceland has a history of a socially liberal culture [...] in this case, it means to trust, not to force. We have no tradition of militarism or an army. We ask for cooperation, rather than force it"¹². A wide sense of trust and solidarity is deep-ingrained in local culture. Yet, she is

¹¹ *Number of new coronavirus (COVID-19) cases in Sweden since February 2020, by date of report*, Statista, June 30, 2020

¹² FANNDAL Thor, *How Iceland turned into the world's biggest study of Covid-19 - and what it's teaching us*, *The Telegraph*, April 4, 2020

careful in not claiming the country has triumphed over the virus, even at this juncture. It was quite plain at an early stage that scientific and medical experts should be at the forefront of this crisis management. Politicians bolstered scientists' efforts without getting in the way.

Conflicting blueprints arising from diverse administrative set-ups and historical experiences

As for the rest of Scandinavia, Eastern administrative traditions are at loggerheads with the Western ones¹³. In Finland, ministerial agencies are small and administrative authorities rule independently. Still, Prime Minister Sanna Marin played a predominant role and directly addressed citizens several times, but she regularly underlined that her decisions adhered to the recommendations of *Terveystieteiden tutkimuskeskus* – THL, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. Moreover, as a well-prepared nation, Finland only had to tap into its enviable supply of long-kept equipment.

The land of five and a half million inhabitants has always been prepared for the worst. Why? First of all, its location makes it fairly vulnerable: the Russian juggernaut is a close neighbour, and the vast majority of its trade is transferred through the Baltic Sea. The country depends on the maritime traffic and security conditions in the Baltic¹⁴. A unique cultural aspect may also account for Finland's readiness: *Sisu*, a term employed by Finns themselves to depict their national characteristics. Without any equivalent in the English language, this concept embodies perseverance, courage and decorum undeterred by adversity that is more demanding than usual¹⁵. This backbone is the result of a history bristled with tumultuous fights over the last century and might be a valuable explanation for the country's current crisis response.

In the Western part of Scandinavia, the political sphere is more directly in charge of the population, and has primacy over any other kind of administration. In Norway, the Prime Minister acted as a front figure and used television to hold regular press conferences. Erna Solberg even dedicated one exclusively to answer children's questions¹⁶. Norway also suffered from the Second World War, a gruesome experience that gave predominance to the responsibility of the human being. The administrative setup is quite similar in Denmark, where politicians can easily wield their power in order to react quickly and even overrule expert authorities. The Prime Minister spearheaded the handling of the crisis and was the national front figure at national press conferences. The Danish government was very quick at imposing

13 STRANG Johan, [Why do the Nordic countries react differently to the covid-19 crisis ?](#), Nordics.info-Aarhus University, April 6, 2020

14 PRYSER LIBELL Henrik and ANDERSON Christina, loc. cit.

15 SMIRNOVA Olga, [Sisu : The Finnish art of inner strength](#), BBC, May 7, 2018

16 WITTENBERG-COX Avivah, loc. cit.

restrictions and closing its borders although epidemiologists from the *Sundhedstyrelsen* – the Danish Health Authority – claimed it was unnecessary.

Different sources of expertise

In Sweden, the political administration appears akin to Finland, but its approach to the virus was much more lenient. This is also the result of a deep-rooted cultural legacy and history. In Sweden, citizens are not used to being thrust severe rules upon them, let alone letting others deciding for them, especially when they feel there are not enough justifications for it : “Our culture is quite Lutheran: we go to work and, in general, we behave. We follow recommendations”, says a local¹⁷. Swedish citizens were expected to abide by the recommendations issued by the Public Health Agency of Sweden, *Folkhälsomyndigheten*. Pertaining to the Swedish Constitution, this expert agency becomes the relevant government body, therefore overruling politicians. The adequate experts delivering guidance is a predominant principle in Swedish politics, setting it apart from other countries. State epidemiologist Anders Tegnell gained a predominant role in the crisis, and turned into a trustworthy figure for citizens overnight, especially around April when the number of cases and confirmed deaths soared. The rattling speed of the infection process took everyone by surprise. Yet, Mr Tegnell did not recommend strict bans and reckoned the population should actually become infected faster. He advocated his stance by his now well-known weapon in fighting the virus: herd immunity, although the expression itself was never explicitly uttered. Most restaurants, shops and even cinemas remained open. Gatherings of up to fifty people were still allowed.

Unlike what the expert agency proffered, the health system was not prepared for such an onslaught. Deferrable operations were postponed to make room for additional coronavirus patients. It pushed the system to its limits. It should also be highlighted that since Sweden joined the European Union in nineteen-hundred-ninety-five, “its medical and health care system has been built around ‘just-in-time’ deliveries, with hospitals stocking supplies to last only two or three days”, said Anders Melander, an analyst working for the Swedish Defence Research Agency¹⁸. Moreover, in two-thousand-nine, the State pharmaceutical monopoly was privatised, and no agency was entrusted with the responsibility to take care of national stockpiles. The Swedish economic model is more neoliberal and steered by financial players. The economic aspects have been at the crux of Sweden’s discussions and decisions. Economists have a significant clout in debates, much more than anywhere else in Scandinavia. The historian Henrik Stenius who founded the Centre for Nordic Studies at the University of Helsinki posits the central expertise in crisis situations across the region stems from different sources.

¹⁷ GALLING Steven, *No Lockdown! The Swedish Response to Coronavirus*, Arte, May 12, 2020

¹⁸ PRYSER LIBELL Henrik and ANDERSON Christina, *loc. cit.*

In Finland for instance, historians' and philosophers' opinions prevail, whereas political scientists' consistently predominate in Denmark. In Sweden, expertise emanates from economists. A prosperous economy is hailed as a prerequisite for citizens' good health and welfare¹⁹. Tightening measures would put the country in the doldrums and therefore backfire by putting people's well-being at risk.

A pall of gloom has overtaken the news lately: we are still mourning a spate of tragic losses, while the outcome and the exact end of this crisis stay surrounded by a haze of uncertainty. What posolutely lies ahead is a period riddled with ubiquitous worries and economic turmoil. This crisis displayed what was amiss in many systems, and encourages us to learn from our mistakes. A second wave might be looming ahead, but our hemmed-in spirits are buoyed up by the hope that the apex of the pandemic is behind us. We are still gaining knowledge from all this. While it might be too soon to tell whether one strategy is better than the other²⁰, one could assume the golden trifecta to bear in mind encompasses prevention, swiftness and cooperation. Should a similar situation repeat itself, these three mainstays would not leave us dumbfounded.

Today, the ambition uppermost in the minds of Scandinavian leaders is to avoid anything redolent of past failures. Forestalling a serious bottleneck on the health system is fundamental in not getting caught off guard by such events. Every threat, on any geographical location, should be taken very seriously since ripple effects are apt to occur tremendously fast on a worldwide scale. Multilateral approaches are necessary in tackling long-term consequences of this crisis. At the moment, many countries are preoccupied with their own predicament: the social and economic costs put all our deep-rooted systems at stake. Yet, if there is one thing all of this has taught us, it is that we live in a world so globally interconnected that aloofness cannot be the solution. In times of affliction, the Nordics might not introduce the same resolution programs. Regardless of their choices, they constantly show a genuine aspiration to learn from one another and therefore be better prepared in the future. Corroborating collaboration, at the Nordic level, but also within the European Union and among United Nations, is what will enable us to bounce back more efficiently. Otherwise, we might not be able to walk the talk towards a more sustainable and resilient socio-economic model.

On another note, it cannot be stressed enough how fundamental it is to provide citizens of all ages with the right information. Moreover, the right use of tech and partnerships with relevant stakeholders, from both the public and private sectors can prove to be decidedly successful. The recovery will not be a

¹⁹ STRANG Johan, *loc. cit.*

²⁰ [Norway Wonders If It Should Have Been More Like Sweden](#), *Homeland Securities News Wire*, May 30, 2020

cinch, especially because Coronavirus remains a burgeoning field of study. Every initiative that can help expertise gather momentum should consequently be more than welcome.



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