

*Mind Rather Than Heart in EU Politics***Highlights**

- ★ The Swedish decision to enter the EU was not based so much on the hope of gaining something, but rather on the fear of being left out if it did not. It was probably the desire for a 'negative safety' that made the Swedes vote in favour of the EU as the alternative cost would probably have been too high.
- ★ Many think that their cutting-edge welfare system and high living standards could be lost as a result of deeper EU integration. This hesitancy towards the EU explains a relative knowledge discrepancy on the EU in the country. Overall, Sweden displays both a degree of satisfaction with its current level of integration (especially its non-membership to the Eurozone) and a diffuse euroscepticism across the society.
- ★ To strengthen the EU's image in Sweden requires concrete projects, rather than abstract symbols. A stronger Common European Asylum System would be a prime example of such a project. Overall, any policy from the EU which would positively affect Swedes could decrease scepticism.

Building Bridges project

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available [here](#).



About the author

Aras Lindh Aras Lindh works as an analyst at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI), and is specialised on Swedish EU policy and the EU institutions. He holds a MSc in political science from Stockholm University.

About Building Bridges

Called “Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union”, the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others’ from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: <http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges>.



This project is supported by the Europe for Citizens programme of the European Union.

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the EU?

Being a relatively new member state in the EU, the Swedish decision to join the union in 1995 can probably best be described as a pragmatic move, made by the mind rather than the heart. It was not as much the hope of gaining something that led to the decision, but rather the fear of being left out if it did not. As it was only two decades ago, it is relevant to say something about the context in which Sweden entered the EU.

In the early 1990s, Sweden suffered from its to-date most serious financial crisis since the 1930s. Due to the fixed Swedish currency, the banking and housing sectors seriously suffered from the crisis. The GDP decreased until 1993 and investments in the Swedish economy were few and far between. It was in this context that a plan for Swedish EU membership was launched as part of a larger crisis package to stabilise the Swedish economy. It was, however, not an obvious step for Sweden to take. In the referendum on EU membership, 52.3% of the population voted in favour of an accession, while 46.8% voted against. Being an export-dependent country, the yes-side argued that access to the single market would give renewed energy to the Swedish economy while critical issues to Sweden, such as keeping its neutrality policy, would not be affected.

Sweden has historically based its foreign policy on the principle of non-alignment in peacetime and neutrality in wartime, which adds to the reasons why it did not apply for membership earlier. In the new geopolitical situation that evolved after the Cold War, it was now possible to move towards the EU, officially without its neutrality policy being affected. Whether or not Sweden has maintained its non-alignment policy can of course be discussed.

Although not a member of NATO, Sweden participates in it through the Partnership for Peace programme for non-members. In fact, some would even argue that investments in the EU are a way to compensate for the fact that Sweden is not a member of NATO. As Sweden is not a member of the G20 or the UN Security Council either, the EU is today the only foreign policy arena it has access to.¹

In short, the Swedish decision to join the EU was pragmatic rather than ideological. It was probably the desire for a “negative safety” that made the Swedes vote in favour of the EU as the alternative cost would probably have been too high. This position has been maintained to this date – the current Centre-Left Swedish government’s position towards the EU is still characterised by half-hearted pragmatism. Sweden is usually critical to supranational mechanisms, but being one of the largest recipients of asylum-seekers per capita in Europe, its pragmatic position was clearly displayed when it welcomed the decision to redistribute another 120,000 asylum-seekers in addition to the previously agreed 40,000 around the 28-nation bloc, against the will of Hungary, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia.

The Swedish self-image is based on being a well-developed country with a cutting-edge welfare system and high living standards. Many Swedes think this could be lost with a deepened EU integration. The resistance to it is, accordingly, relatively high. Joint EU symbols, such as the EU flag or the EU anthem, are not considered to be Swedish symbols by the public.

This being said, there are policy areas important to Sweden where it would like to seek a deepened cooperation among the EU member states. In *Sweden’s overall priorities in the EU 2015*, the government emphasises the need to cooperate at European level in order to tackle

unemployment, the labour market, an ambitious climate, energy and environmental policy, the asylum system and equality.² These priorities are strongly rooted in time. Sweden received twice as many asylum seekers in 2015 compared to 2014.³ It pushed for a strongly supported agreement during the COP21 negotiations in Paris, and it has managed the financial crisis in 2008 better than many other European countries.

Do you think that the EU appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?

As regards the EU, there seems to be quite a large knowledge discrepancy between the wider Swedish public sphere that has relatively little knowledge about the EU, and the state authorities, which are well-known for their high level of knowledge and expertise. There is an explanation to this paradox, related to the same discussion that preceded the Swedish accession to the EU. The pragmatic and hesitant accession keeps the public commitment to the EU limited, although the single market and free movement are often taken for granted. At the same time, the Swedish state bureaucracy is well-developed and resourced with a high level of proficiency, which has given it advantages when working on EU issues.

The debate on the European Union in national media is sparse, which adds to the low level of clarity among the Swedes. This was embarrassingly obvious during the 2014 elections to the European Parliament. Several topics in the election campaign that were brought up and widely discussed actually belonged to the competency of the Swedish Parliament and the Swedish government or other institutions, such as whether or not Sweden should join the EMU, leave the EU or work for a change in the EU treaties.⁴

Moreover, in terms of clarity, it is worth highlighting that Sweden is among those countries that pay more to the EU than it receives. Signs of, for instance, infrastructure projects that have been funded with the help of the EU are rare in Sweden, which makes the EU less visible to the Swedes in general. History seems to be another important factor. Unlike many European countries that have an authoritarian past, the EU flag and other EU symbols do not function as a guarantee of democracy in Sweden, as it already has a long history of being one.

An embedded scepticism towards the EU, perhaps due to Sweden's geographical position, can be seen among the Swedes, who frequently perceive the EU as something distant and bureaucratic. The so-called 'adult liberal education associations', which are often tied to civil society, such as the left movement's ABF, have historically played an important role in fostering awareness about contemporary issues in the Swedish society. They have, however, shown little interest in the EU, most likely as they are connected to political parties (see below), which clearly shows that the lower the engagement, the less effective the knowledge-building process consequently becomes.

Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country both politically and economically?

Asked about their preferred level of integration, there are certainly differences in the view among the eight dominating parties in Sweden. These differences are, however, not very far from one another, and most parties seem to be quite satisfied with the level of integration Sweden has today. There are only few exceptions to this; while the Liberals (ALDE Party) are pushing the most towards deeper integration,

and even talks about federalism, only the Leftist Party (GUE/NGL) would, eventually, prefer a “Swexit”. The Greens (Greens/EFA) and the far-right Sweden Democrats (EFD) are the ones arguing most for less integration, although from different standpoints.

The pragmatic stance Sweden took when it joined the EU is still present. The support for joining the EMU is very low. In a Eurobarometer from 2014, 77% of Swedes actively opposed the euro, a probable explanation for this is the fact that 97% of the Swedish respondents in the same survey claimed they were satisfied with their standard of living.⁵ Other factors such as the financial crisis in 2008, probably add to the scepticism, especially as Sweden was not directly affected by the crisis, assuming the reason for this was because it stood outside the Eurozone. Sweden does not, in principle, object to the Eurozone integrating and cooperating further, but although the interest to join is low, the Swedish government still does not want to risk losing influence, which was clearly illustrated when it signed the Fiscal Compact in 2012.

Moreover, the Swedish Parliament has, in recent years, been one of the most active Member States, alongside the United Kingdom and Austria, in using the principle of subsidiarity in European Commission legislative proposals to make sure that decisions are taken as close to the citizens as possible.⁶ Indeed, the number of Swedish reasoned opinions decreased in 2014 to two, from nine in 2013, but this should, according to the Commission, be seen in light of an overall decrease in the number of legislative proposals towards the end of the term of its office in 2014.⁷

As mentioned above, the Swedish self-image of being a well-developed country with a great welfare system is, perhaps naturally, affecting

the stance of its political parties on EU integration. However, there are exceptions to this. The current coalition government, led by the Social Democrats (S&D) and the Greens (Greens/EFA) has – in line with Sweden’s traditional mainstream view on the EU – suggested deeper EU integration, but only in core policy areas for Sweden, where it is obviously dependent on the other member states. Trade, a common asylum system, immigration, climate and energy policies are examples of such core policy areas where deeper integration is preferable from the Swedish government’s perspective.

The Swedish pragmatism also brings another dimension to Swedish ambitions for integration. Sweden tends to seek cooperation on the level it thinks its ambitions can best be fulfilled. Sweden has, for instance, a long history of cooperation with its Nordic neighbours, which sometimes makes the relevance of the EU limited from a Swedish perspective. Sweden is also part of the so-called *Northern Future Forum*, which is an annual informal meeting between government representatives and the business community in the Nordic and Baltic countries along with Great Britain. It can indeed also be perceived as a way of building alliances among like-minded EU members of this group.

According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among your national citizens?

In the case of Sweden, it is clear that flags, songs and other symbols will hardly have any impact at all in strengthening the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere. What matters to the Swedes in general is rather *realpolitik* – a stronger Common European Asylum System (CEAS) would be the

best example in this regard. In 2015, Sweden received almost 163,000 asylum seekers according to the Swedish Migration Agency, compared to 81,000 in 2014.⁸ Swedish politicians have proudly presented their country as a humanitarian superpower ever since WWII, and they have tried to stand by those principles even at a time when other member states have not, and when the Dublin regulation on asylum seekers has been put aside. This unsustainable situation has recently forced the Swedish government to ultimately make a U-turn in its asylum and migration policies, now only committing to a minimum-level according to EU rules and other conventions of public international law. The Swedish Prime Minister has, on several occasions, stressed the importance of finding common solutions to common problems at the EU level, which can also be applied to other policy areas where Sweden is dependent on the EU, such as trade (being an export-dependent country) and climate.

examples of things that can be achieved on the EU level. However, interest in the Erasmus exchange programme has decreased for the first time (see Figure 1),⁹ which can be at least partly explained by domestic factors. The ever more competitive Swedish labour market has come to make people question the value of exchange semesters in Europe, as many students might fear it is simply a waste of time. From this, an overarching 'rule' can be identified; when the domestic situation becomes somewhat uneasy, external opportunities become less prioritised. Another example illustrating this unofficial rule can be found by looking at the Swedish government's decision to temporarily reinforce border controls, officially in order to regain control of who enters the country. The single market and the Schengen Area are usually what matters the most to Swedish people,¹⁰ but when the inner balance gets destabilised, support for traditional EU symbols such as Schengen immediately decreases. In a recent Eurobarometer survey, immigration and

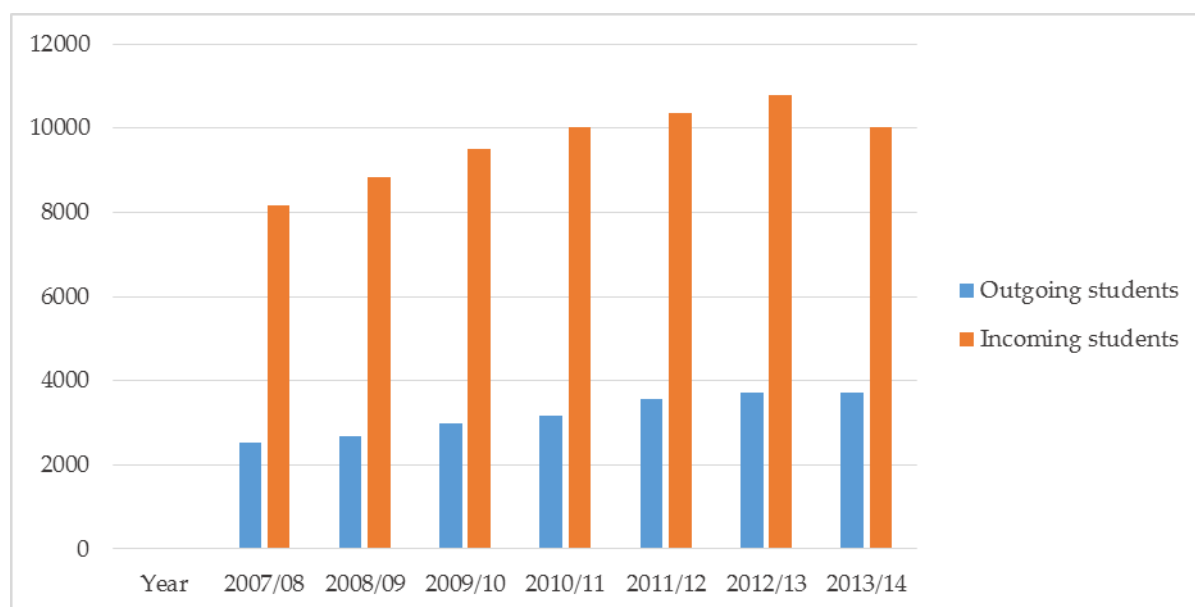


Figure 1 Outgoing students from/incoming students to Sweden within the Erasmus programme between 2007/08 and 2013/14 (source: European Commission)

Erasmus and other similar reforms have traditionally been portrayed as positive

unemployment were considered the two most important issues among Swedes.¹¹ The resistance towards the decision to temporarily

step away from Schengen was very limited, although the border-free environment is usually what Swedes appreciate the most.

In order to enhance the notion of belonging to a common European sphere, the need for common platforms for EU debates has often been stressed. The internal EU debate in Sweden is very low, and views from other member states within this debate are almost non-existent. Whether or not such a debate would enhance this notion is contested. What used to be the case a decade ago does not necessarily need to be the case today. What can still be said, however, is that Swedes prefer to see actual advantages that come from the EU, which is often perceived as something bureaucratic located in continental Europe, and which Sweden only has limited access to. Accordingly, political reforms that would affect the average Swede in a positive way can make the scepticism decrease. Abolished cell phone roaming fees, for instance, is a good example where the understanding for what the EU can bring, and the notion of belonging to a European sphere would increase.

Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the legitimacy could be measured in output terms. This, however, requires that there are politicians and journalists who would give the EU credit when credit is due, which today is too rarely the case. When the EU decides on something that would affect Swedish citizens positively, national politicians tend to present it as a negotiation success, while the EU is most often blamed for negative decisions. The Swedish exemption from the EU's relocation scheme agreed in September 2015,¹² whereby 160,000 asylum seekers are to be relocated proportionally among the member states, serves as a recent example of a situation that was portrayed as a governmental negotiating

success.¹³ Similarly, the Swedish parliament intentionally delayed the implementation of the Data Retention Directive by almost seven years until Sweden was fined for not implementing it.¹⁴

To conclude, the Swedes need to see tangible benefits as a direct result of their EU membership. Only then would the notion of belonging to a common European sphere increase. Abolished roaming fees and benefits for students, such as the Erasmus exchange programme are both good examples. Otherwise, there is an imminent risk for decreased legitimacy, not least with new generations growing up. It is important that such reforms take place on a regular basis, as most reforms would be perceived as something temporary and the positive effect would quickly fade away.

Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?

Sweden has a somewhat schizophrenic view of the EU. It likes to cherry-pick from the EU policy buffet: it does not want to join the EMU but is less hesitant towards the banking union, not least as Swedish banks are closely integrated with the rest of Europe.¹⁵ Yet, there is a fear that the decision-making in the banking union will be based on the European Central Bank's board. On the other hand, Sweden sometimes tries to elevate issues to EU-level for national purposes, such as in the case of immigration and environment policies, while merely suggesting the possibility of common EU taxes would set alarm bells ringing in Sweden. These examples clearly demonstrate Sweden's overarching view of the EU. It can therefore be concluded that there is no guiding principle to the Swedish position. It is either Swedish core issues, such as trade and

immigration, or Swedish pragmatism (i.e. situations where Sweden alone cannot solve a common challenge) that determine when policies tend to get elevated to the EU-level. For example, when joining the union, it was virtually impossible to suggest a commitment to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Yet, to a somewhat limited extent, the situation today is different and the support for the CFSP is relatively strong. Sweden is a strong advocate of a strong European Global Strategy to guide the CFSP and Common Security and Defence Policy. Sweden is now also open-minded about the prospect of using EU delegations abroad for consular purposes, but only in places where it has no national delegations itself.

To elevate an issue to the EU-level is often a stepping stone for politicians who seek leverage. The EU is used as a tool whenever it is considered pragmatic for national policies. In policy areas where Sweden considers itself to be a forerunner, such as on climate and environment policy, immigration policy and equality, it tries to reach out as far as possible.

A dominating view, however, is that Sweden is only a small country in northern Europe with limited options to influence wider policy matters. The mainly intragovernmental structure of the EU and the need to reach consensus adds to the Swedish perception that it is often difficult to affect the EU policy-making structure.¹⁶

To conclude, the utility of EU cooperation needs to be demonstrated almost immediately in order to better legitimise the EU. The overarching view, along with the cherry-picking, shows that Sweden most likely will not invest in complicated issues that would take 20 years to implement. It is, probably, this view that prevents the EU's legitimacy from growing stronger in Sweden, as the large principal policy areas are consequently being avoided, either due to Sweden's half-hearted engagement or due to the difficulty of affecting the EU level. If such issues would better legitimise the EU, it is accordingly necessary that the EU does not become a political battlefield for national interests, but rather promotes common European interests.

Endnotes

1. Björn Fägersten, "Swedish EU leadership or why beggars can't be choosers", *ECFR Blog*, 2 March 2012, <http://www.ecfr.eu/>.
2. Swedish Government, "Regeringens övergripande prioriteringar för EU-arbetet 2015", Stockholm, 26 March 2015, <http://www.regeringen.se/>.
3. Swedish Migration Agency, "Nästan 163 000 människor sökte asyl i Sverige 2015", Press release, 1 January 2016, <http://www.migrationsverket.se/>.
4. Linda Berg, "Partierna har ofta fel fokus i EU-valrörelsen", *Göteborgs-Posten*, 24 May 2014, <http://www.gp.se/>.
5. European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer, No. 81, Spring 2014, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/.
6. National parliaments in the EU have indeed the possibility to contest a legislative draft based on the subsidiarity principle.
7. European Commission, Annual Report 2014 on Subsidiarity and Proportionality, COM(2015) 315 FINAL, 2 July 2015, <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/>.
8. Swedish Migration Agency, "Nästan 163 000 människor sökte asyl i Sverige 2015", *op. cit.*
9. European Commission, "Erasmus+ statistics 2014 – Sweden", 26 January 2016, <http://ec.europa.eu/education/>.
10. European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer, No. 83, Spring 2015, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/.
11. European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer – Sweden, No. 84, Autumn 2015, <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/>.
12. European Commission, "Commission proposes temporary suspension of Sweden's obligations under the EU relocation mechanism", Press Release, 15 December 2015, <http://europa.eu/rapid/>.
13. Swedish Government, "Government proposes measures to create respite for Swedish refugee reception", 24 November 2015, <http://www.government.se/>.
14. "Riksdagen debatterar om datalagringsdirektivet", *Sverige Radio*, 21 March 2012, <http://sverigesradio.se/>.
15. Charles Duxbury, "Frankfurt Talks Banking Union. Sweden Doesn't Buy It", *Wall Street Journal*, 5 November 2013, <http://blogs.wsj.com/moneybeat/>.
16. Lena Ek, "EU:s regelverk är svårt att påverka", *Expressen*, 19 June 2013, <http://www.expressen.se/>.