Chapter 28

Diaspora Policies, Consular Services and Social Protection for Swedish Citizens Abroad

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28.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to highlight the different ways through which the Swedish state engages with its citizens living abroad, with a particular focus on non-residents' access to social benefits. To do so, we provide an overview of the complex set of laws and regulations that apply to nationals living abroad, thus trying to examine the type of assistance that they can expect from their “mother country” in accessing host country institutions. Our main argument is that the Swedish principle of residence, as a basic requirement for accessing the social welfare system, limits the opportunities of Swedish nationals abroad to access said system both within Sweden and when residing abroad.

28.2 Diaspora Infrastructure and Key Policies

Even though Swedish emigration has been oriented towards different parts of the world, this chapter focuses particularly on Swedish emigrants in the top five destination countries: United States (USA, with 49,200 Swedish citizens), Norway (42,200), Finland (29,200), the United Kingdom (UK, 27,800) and Denmark (19,300 citizens). Formally, a Swedish national living abroad is defined as someone who has had residence outside of Sweden for at least one year and therefore does not have a Swedish address in public records. These nationals are commonly

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referred to as *utlandssvenskar* ('Swedes in foreign countries'),¹ a term that is used throughout this chapter (in plural: *utlandssvenskarna*). This includes Swedish citizens who live temporarily outside Sweden (for work or studies abroad, for instance), those who emigrated with the intention to remain abroad, and the former migrants to Sweden who returned to their countries of origin (or moved to a third country) while keeping their Swedish citizenship.

As explained below, for some social benefits— such as pensions— individuals who do not hold Swedish citizenship have the same status as citizens as long as they have or once had a taxed income in Sweden. Due to the complex nature of Swedish social policies, Swedes living abroad are somewhat of an abnormality to public institutions and the Swedish state does little to support its population abroad (SOU 2017: 5). Non-resident nationals are in most areas seen as protected by their citizenship(s) and their rights as residents of their destination countries. This means that *Utlandssvenskarna* rarely receive any attention in political debates about welfare and citizenship benefits.² In practice, the bilateral agreements between Nordic Countries make it easier for *utlandssvenskarna* in Denmark, Norway and Finland to access their host countries' welfare systems. These agreements also make it easier for Swedes residing in Nordic countries to access Swedish benefits. This becomes evident when comparing their situation with the one of Swedish nationals residing in other major destination countries like the USA (as a non-European Economic Area (EEA) country) and even the UK. However, the discussion in this chapter will show that nationals abroad do not have, by all means, equal access to social protection as resident nationals have.

28.2.1 *The Swedish Diaspora and Its Relations with the Homeland*

Historically, the major restructuring of the Swedish society during the nineteenth century, as well as the doubling of Sweden's population during the same period, had a number of consequences for the society in terms of poverty, unemployment, housing shortages or emigration, for instance. One of these was the massive emigration of 1.4 million people between 1860 and 1930 (SCB 2019) which, to a large extent, through business relations and continued migration, was paving the ground for the development of a large contemporary overseas diaspora of Swedish citizens in the USA (Tallgren 2000). During the 1930s, Sweden experienced significant changes in its migration flow. After many decades of being a large sending country, Sweden

¹A note about terms and translations. Most translation between Swedish and English is taken from official sources when available and done by the experts when unavailable. Governmental agencies is named both in Swedish and in English. Swedish words is put in italics.

²An exception may be the (conservative) Moderate Party (*Moderata samlingspartiet*) which has an international division dedicated to *utlandssvenskarna*. The moderate party has a well-known stronghold among the Swedish nationals abroad (Oscarsson 2016).

shifted to becoming a country that increasingly experienced immigration (SCB 2019). This did not imply that migration from Sweden to destination countries like the USA had ceased. With the development of modern Sweden after World War II, not only did the country grow economically but it also internationalized, which means that Swedish citizens had continued to emigrate for purposes of work, business-trade, development, returning migration and residential tourism. Consequently, the presence of Swedish citizens in European countries has significantly increased in recent years. In parallel to these evolutions, the consolidation of the collaboration between the Nordic countries— through the Nordic Council (from 1952) and the agreement of a common labour market and free movement between the countries (1954)— has also created favourable conditions for the emigration of Swedes to neighbouring Nordic countries such as Denmark, Finland and Norway.

With this brief history in mind, this chapter intends to look at how the Swedish state engages with its citizens abroad, with a particular focus on social protection. To discuss this relationship between the state and its diasporic population, Gamlen (2008) uses the notion of “emigration state”. While arguing for a view that acknowledges a diversity of different policies, Gamlen looks at how “different state mechanisms shape different non-resident groups into diasporic members, and these members in turn influence the development of pieces of the state apparatus” (ibid: 852). This implies that states and diasporic populations are “co-constituting” each other and that “emigration states are assembled very differently” (ibid.). Looking at the Swedish case through this lens, we argue that the Swedish policies towards the nationals abroad may, at best, be labelled as “disengaged” or “incoherent”.

28.2.2 *Diaspora Infrastructure*

Looking at the public actors that shape Sweden’s relations with its diaspora, the Swedish Migration Agency (*Migrationsverket*) is in theory responsible for Swedish migrants living abroad. In practice, however, this agency is almost exclusively focused on (foreign) immigration to Sweden and, to a certain degree, on return of foreigners to their country of origin as well as ‘deportation’ of asylum seekers with rejected applications. In Sweden, no other department or sub-department is fully dedicated to the issues of immigration and emigration and no other public unit has any specific responsibility for the protection of Swedish nationals residing abroad. Instead, all Swedish authorities potentially have to engage with the protection of *utlandssvenskarna* in the areas that concern their prerogatives. This means that in the area of social protection, Swedish nationals living abroad have to deal with the same general welfare institutions as resident nationals whenever they claim benefits in Sweden.

A key feature of the infrastructure available to Swedish nationals is the consular network. Sweden maintains 98 embassies, consulates and representatives (on a professional level) and about 350 honorary consulates around the world administered and operated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Some of these consulates are also

in charge of the interests of nationals residing in neighbouring countries. In major destination countries for Swedes abroad— Norway, Denmark, Finland, the UK and the USA—, the infrastructure largely consists of an embassy and one or several consular offices that are providing services to the *utlandssvenskarna*. In Norway, for instance, there are 12 consulates (honorary or otherwise) located across the country in addition to the embassy.

Next to this rather limited infrastructure, the last noteworthy institution is the Swedish institute. This institute is a public agency that promotes the interests of Sweden around the world and which— in this framework— sometimes interacts with citizens abroad, as explained below.

28.2.3 *Key Engagement Policies*

Formally speaking, there are very few explicit exclusions of *utlandssvenskarna* from the Swedish public life. Yet, the residence criteria attached to many policies de facto excludes citizens abroad from the realm of policies. The lack of ad hoc policy response to their needs therefore often leaves Swedes living abroad without answers for their specific needs in the area of social protection. For this reason, in absence of explicit policies, non-state actors such as the Swedish Church (which was a State Church until 2000), the Nordic Assistance and SOS international often serve as substitutes for the state to respond to their needs (c.f. Olsson 2018).

The Swedish Constitution (*Regeringsformen*) entails electoral rights in national elections for the Swedish Parliament (*Riksdagen*) to any citizen who is, or at some time has been, registered as resident in Sweden provided that the person is included in the electoral roll. This includes the right to vote in national referenda (SFS 1979:369), but not in regional and local elections (county and municipality) and in local referenda (Bernitz 2013). To register to vote as a national living abroad, one needs to update her/his address with the Swedish Tax Agency once every ten years (excluding the first ten years, when this is done automatically). They can vote either in polling stations in Sweden, by courier, by post or sometimes in polling stations set up in embassies or consulates.

Beyond electoral rights and the possibility to maintain dual nationality after emigration, most of the concerns from the state level are focused on maintaining the safety of Swedish nationals abroad in cases of personal or larger-scale emergencies (SFS 2003:491). Consular units offer different services including emergency repatriation, short-term loans, help to contact host country agencies that can provide assistance and help contacting relatives or insurance companies in Sweden. However, most of these services are designed primarily for tourists and short-term visitors and rarely focus on the needs of *utlandssvenskarna*.

Education is a clear exception to this limited engagement of Swedish authorities with their nationals abroad. Sweden funds schools in Swedish in 11 countries and supports five Swedish sections in international schools. This exists in addition to completely private and foundation-owned schools as well as the distance-education

open to all Swedish citizens and residents. The National Agency of Education (*Skolverket*) also offer supplementary Swedish courses for children abroad who normally are attending local schools in the host country. In the UK, for instance, the National Agency of Education also runs a school in London and offers complementary education in Swedish in at least four English-language schools.

Another area with a larger degree of engagement is culture. Public authorities provide funds to non-state actors to showcase Swedish culture audiences abroad that are not necessarily Swedish citizens. As noted above, *Svenska institutet* promotes the interests of Sweden in the fields of culture, education, science and business. In this capacity, *Svenska institutet* often collaborates with Swedish consulates and embassies across the world and develops projects that involve individuals or organizations among *utlandssvenskarna*.

28.3 Diaspora Policies and Social Protection in Sweden

According to a report commissioned by the Swedish government, the general impression shared in Sweden about the way it deals with its diaspora is that the country lacks a central policy regarding its nationals abroad (SOU 2017). The legal framework is often considered confusing and not updated which led to the publication of an official investigation in 2017 (ibid). This investigation attempted to summarize the situation for Swedes abroad and it suggested changes to the Swedish legal code in 14 areas (ranging from changes in laws governing unemployment insurance to the law regulating citizens' registration at the Swedish Tax Agency).

Similarly, Sweden's consular network is complemented both by the consular network of other European states and that of Nordic countries which benefits Swedes abroad in certain conditions. However, as mentioned earlier, Swedish consulates are with, a few exceptions, the primary institution by which Sweden specifically responds to the needs of nationals abroad.

First, the consular network has the mission to inform citizens abroad. In practice, the consular network also informs about access to social security or pensions, even though there is no explicit mandate to do so. Similarly, while consular offices do not issue passports or drivers licenses themselves, they can mediate certain services that facilitate such requests. Secondly, consular assistance materializes in help with logistics and contacts in cases of crisis (calling insurance firms, lawyers, relatives in Sweden, etc.). Such service is provided free of charge, but tends to focus on short-term situations, such as health emergencies, issues with law enforcement, crime or natural disasters, as opposed to more structural or long-term difficulties that citizens residing permanently abroad may face (SFS 2003:491). Thirdly, Swedish consulates do offer economic assistance to their citizens abroad in case of emergency, although this service is provided only when all other options are exhausted. In such cases, a repayable loan can be arranged (the cost for such a loan is 600 SEK or 60 EUR) which has to be repaid within a month. Fourthly, as in other EU Member States, Swedish consulates help repatriate the remains of deceased nationals to

Sweden. In this regard, the assistance varies depending on the circumstances, but is mostly done by helping the Swedish Tax Agency to register the death, contacting officials in both countries, contacting family in Sweden and arranging transport. However, the consulates are acting only as mediators and facilitators of such transport as all costs involved are covered by the insurance company or the family of the deceased.

Beyond these basic consular services, Swedish institutions do not develop ad-hoc services for nationals abroad, which in turn entails that they need to interact directly with the same institutions as resident nationals. One of the most common and most important contact within the Swedish state is the Swedish Tax Agency (*Skatteverket*) that, in addition to being the administrative unit for taxes, also keeps the public records in which it is indispensable to be registered to access most Swedish benefits. *Skatteverket* is in fact a key authority for nationals abroad as it often serves as a gatekeeper to other units of the Swedish welfare system. *Skatteverket* is also the authority where individuals file their foreign addresses for tax reasons and eligibility to pensions, for instance.

Before moving to specific social protection areas, this brief description showed that consulates tend to serve primarily the needs of visitors and tourists. This sometimes creates resentment among citizens residing permanently abroad who feel neglected. In fact, there is no other official state department serving the specific needs of Swedish nationals abroad and no centralized information system helps non-resident citizens in accessing Swedish social benefits. For this reason, *utlandssvenskarna* might be eligible for non-state organizations in the destination country such as the Swedish Church. In practice, the Church and private associations often become key actors to accessing information on welfare entitlements (Olsson 2018).

28.3.1 Unemployment

The Swedish Public Employment Service (*Arbetsförmedlingen*) is the governmental agency responsible for registering the unemployed and providing support in finding work. Unemployment benefits are, however, applied for at the unemployment insurance (*Arbetslöshetskassan*) that in most cases is administrated by unions (though some limited public options exist). To access unemployment benefits from these insurances, a basic requirement is the registration with the Public Employment Service and that the individual demonstrates that they are active in seeking work. Another requirement is to have previously worked and contributed into these systems. The Public Employment Service (or any other state actor related to unemployment) does not provide any particular information to nationals living abroad on how to access unemployment benefits in their respective country. Hence, Swedish nationals abroad are not, in this sense, receiving any collective guidance on how to access unemployment benefits.

As a significant share of the Swedish population residing abroad lives within the EU, rules on portability of unemployment benefits is the cornerstone of Swedish policies in this area. Additionally, individuals also have the possibility to seek approval of the Public Employment Service for support abroad by covering potential gaps during the transfer of benefits from one country to another. Beyond the EU framework that provides for the portability of unemployment benefits, an important, but partial, exception to the principle of residence in Sweden to access unemployment benefits concerns Swedes residing in the Nordic Countries. Individuals applying for *Arbetslöshetskassan* in Sweden after having lived in one (or several) Nordic countries, can, in contrast to other countries of residence (including EU Member States), use their income from that country to determine their unemployment insurance (if they are eligible) if they maintained membership in a Swedish *Arbetslöshetskassa* during this time. They can also use work in a Nordic country to fulfil the necessary work-requirements for joining *Arbetslöshetskassan* if they earlier worked in the same industry and worked in that industry abroad provided that their return to Sweden happened within five years after moving abroad.

Beyond access to benefits, the other kind of services catered to the unemployed, such as job training or courses, are generally not targeting Swedes living abroad. There are some regional exceptions. One example is *Grensetjänsten*, a Norwegian-Swedish cooperation funded by the European Regional Development fund, mostly active in the border regions of the two countries that helps coordinate agencies of the two states and assists unemployed people to find work (among other things). The information service centre *Øresunddirekt* (funded by various local public agencies and the Nordic Union) is another example. The centre has a service that conveys public information from the authorities to citizens and the business community in the Öresund region (the strait and border between Sweden and Denmark). For Swedish citizens it provides a guide for accessing the Danish labour market and navigating the Danish welfare system.

28.3.2 Health Care

Försäkringskassan (Insurance Desk, i.e. Social Insurance Agency) is the governmental agency that is in charge of the administration of the public health insurances, while also providing information about the rules and procedures for all residents, visitors, immigrants and nationals abroad. For the latter category, however, its mission consists mostly in the provision of information.

Healthcare insurance in Sweden is universal, funded by taxes with a cap on healthcare expenses for publicly funded healthcare. When it comes to *utlandssvenskarna*, a difference must however be made between access to healthcare in Sweden, access to care in the host country and access the benefits related to long-term illness.

For a national living abroad, access to healthcare in Sweden (for instance, during a temporary visit to Sweden) is guaranteed, but the cap on expenses is not part of that guarantee. The situation varies depending on the country in which the

individual resides. Whereas the European health insurance card determines the conditions of access of Swedes residing in the EU, Swedish nationals residing in non-EU countries are dependent on the existence of agreements between those countries and Sweden. For instance, thanks to regional cooperation in the area of health, Swedish nationals residing in one of the Nordic countries who are covered by that country's public insurance do not need to provide a European health insurance card but instead only a form of identification and their current address. This practice means that access to healthcare in Sweden is a quite uncomplicated and less expensive affair for the Swedish nationals living in the EU or the Nordic countries, but more expensive if a person is residing, for instance, in the USA. However, as the recent Government Inquiry of 2017 (SOU 2017:5) has identified this a problematic area for citizens abroad, reforms may be adopted in the future.

Looking now at Swedish citizens' access to their host country healthcare system, a similar distinction needs to be done between those covered by international agreements and those who are not. Swedes circulating within the EU or moving to another Nordic country benefit from those regional provisions which do not apply to Swedes residing elsewhere. In addition, the bilateral social security agreement between Sweden and the USA also includes provisions on healthcare.

Beyond these provisions on access to the home and host country healthcare system, the consular network offers a number of services in acute and life threatening situations. The first type of support consists in contacting relatives and helping citizens abroad in their bureaucratic dealings with the healthcare system of the host country and the insurance administration. The consular office may also provide some support and assist in translation or interpretation (although this is not a requirement). Secondly, as stated earlier, consular authorities can provide short-term repayable loans to facilitate either repatriation or treatment when all other options are exhausted.

28.3.3 *Pensions*

The public pension in Sweden is three-fold: the guaranteed pension, the income-based pension and the premium pension. The governmental institution that manages and pays out the national retirement pension while also providing general and specific pensions-related information is *Pensionsmyndigheten* (the Swedish Pensions Agency). The agency offers a special service to individuals living abroad via their website (www.pensionsmyndigheten.se) and a special line dedicated for calls from abroad. As in most EU Member States, Swedish pensions are portable depending on the existence of agreements with the host countries and the type of pension to transfer.

To access the pension as a resident abroad, the individual first needs to submit his/her new address to *Pensionsmyndigheten* for registration. The agency will then send a life certificate, which is required in order to receive the pension. This certificate, in turn, has to be approved and stamped at one of the following institutions/

organisations abroad: Swedish embassies or consulates, the Church of Sweden, a foreign social security institution, a public notary, a foreign police authority, or a foreign record-keeping population authority. In the countries discussed in this chapter, there are several consular offices and churches in different locations that can provide such service for the life certificate. After approval, the certificate needs to be sent back to the Swedish Pensions Agency once a year. There is also an option to send the certificate online to *Pensionsmyndigheten*. This authority also cooperates with several of the foreign equivalent agencies in major host countries. In the case of Nordic countries, the UK, the USA, Germany and Poland, it is expected that their pension institutions automatically send a life certificate to the Swedish agency without involving the resident in question.

28.3.4 *Family-Related Benefits*

Försäkringskassan is also the public agency responsible for the administration of family benefits. The general rule for family benefits in Sweden follows the EU Regulation (2004) regarding the social security of EU nationals. This Regulation grants access to family benefits for EU nationals working in Sweden and conversely, access to family benefits to Swedish citizens residing in another EU Member State. In Sweden, having the residence in the country is the main requirement to be eligible for maternity or paternity leave, parental benefits, child allowance, care of a sick child or special housing allowance. Short stays abroad under one year are permitted for individuals who receive such benefits from Sweden. Individuals working outside Sweden and residing in this country, are however usually *not* eligible for these benefits, but should receive benefits according to host country's rules and regulations. There are a few exceptions though, such as if only one of the parents works but the family resides abroad (then the benefits will depend on where that parent works). The overriding principle for what types of benefits are available for Swedish nationals is then the country of residence.

This means that for Swedish nationals living outside the EEA, there is almost no right to receive benefits from Sweden except if they work for a Swedish employer. *Försäkringskassan* provides only general information on how to act in these cases. There is no public support for nationals living abroad in how to navigate the host country system. Instead, this support is often available through large migrant associations and the Swedish church.

Beyond benefits, Swedish authorities perform a series of bureaucratic tasks in family-related matters. For instance, Swedish nationals who have children born abroad need to register the birth and name of the children with the Swedish Tax Agency. This is done by submitting a form (including, among others, the name of the child and parents, information on civil state, the gender of child, etc.) along with a copy of the birth certificate, parents' passports, the pregnancy certificate, the proof of fatherhood (if a father is to be registered) and the proof of marriage, if applicable.

This registration is necessary for the parents to be eligible for Swedish benefits (upon return) and for the child to get the Swedish citizenship.

28.3.5 *Economic Hardship*

The guaranteed minimum benefits in Sweden are called *försörjningsstöd* (subsistence support). Such benefits are administered by the social service of the local municipalities (*Socialtjänsten*). They are decided upon by a case-to-case basis, but residence in Sweden is, again, a key requirement. While rare exceptions apply, this form of support is thus completely unavailable to nationals living abroad.

In cases of acute economic hardship, consulates can help with the repatriation of nationals back to Sweden or via the above-mentioned short-term repayable loans. It should be noted, however, that in those difficult situations, the Swedish church is often a more apparent presence than state actors (Jeppson Grassman and Taghizadeh Larsson 2012). Volunteers in local parishes of the Swedish church abroad are often engaged in supporting citizens in difficulty via economic aid, translation-help or support in dealing with the host country bureaucracy. Similarly, the deaconry of the church are sometimes organising soup kitchens, doing home-visits even care to those in economic hardship or suffering from life-crisis as well as organising repatriation to Sweden (Jeppson Grassman and Taghizadeh Larsson 2012). Overall, because of the limited and conditional engagement of the state in those situations, the Swedish church and occasionally large diasporic social associations in host countries may assume some of the responsibilities to care for the ones in need (Olsson 2018).

28.4 Conclusions

The general principle underlying the right to access public assistance and social support in Sweden is the country of residence. This principle is well in line with the EU regulations as well as the agreements of labour market and social welfare between the Nordic countries. The welfare system and other arrangements for social protection are based on public population records and only exceptionally they address the needs of *utlandssvenskarna*. A noticeable exception to the focus on residence are the EU and Nordic provisions on social security cooperation which guarantee a more favourable treatment to Swedes circulating in these two areas. In that sense, it can be argued that the EU framework and the Nordic cooperation form the backbone of Sweden's engagement for citizens abroad in the area of social protection.

As we have shown, national agencies like *Skatteverket*, *Försäkringskassan* and *Pensionsverket* facilitate access to information regarding the social protection of nationals abroad. In spite of this, the Swedish engagement with its nationals abroad

could however be described as rather limited and modest in the field of social protection. Nationals living outside of Sweden have been targeted with special rules and arrangements only exceptionally. In most cases, they are left to solve their needs individually by consulting the respective agency or the consulates. This, in turn, pushes citizens abroad to seek support in less formalised ways via the church or not-for-profit organizations (Jeppson Grassman and Taghizadeh Larsson 2012; Olsson 2018).

To conclude, this chapter shows that much of the social protection granted to Swedish nationals residing in Sweden is not in any direct sense extended beyond its borders. The state policy towards its citizens abroad generally tries to “integrate” its nationals abroad, rather than encouraging and “building” them as a diaspora. Providing services for non-resident nationals does not currently represent a major concern for Swedish state actors and at least not to any significance for the long-term nationals living abroad. Overall, the political disinterest to engage with the nationals abroad from the Swedish state is apparent. In line with Gamlen’s work (2008), this indicates that Sweden is rather a “disengaged” and “incoherent emigration state” (Gamlen 2008).

In recent years, there have been policy evolutions and efforts to understand better the difficulties met by citizens abroad. Issues regarding pensions, voting rights, consular aid and healthcare are increasingly subject to public inquiries and some steps are already taken to address them. Most notably, the Swedish government decided in 2014 to commission an official inquiry on the state of social welfare as seen through the lenses of international mobility. The commission was named after its main purpose— *Utredningen om trygghetssystemen och internationell rörlighet* (The inquiry of the social security systems and international mobility)— and its report of 2017 examined in detail how the Swedish welfare system deals with the *utlandssvenskarna*. The commission identified numerous areas where policy improvements could be made (SOU 2017) and its report is an additional indication that a new political interest for the issues faced by Swedish nationals living abroad may lead to policy reforms in the future.

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