

## SWEDEN

### IN SWEDEN A STRATEGY OF NON-CONFINEMENT

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Sweden has been an exception in the way it has handled the Covid-19 pandemic. Primary and secondary schools have remained open, teleworking is only recommended, cafes and restaurants are open. In a confined Europe, daily life in Sweden continues normally more or less. The main argument for the authorities' decision, which appealed to individual responsibility, is the idea that we are running a marathon, not a sprint. We will therefore have to resist in the long term in order to develop collective immunity.

From abroad this strategy has often been criticized as irresponsible. However, the judgment should be qualified. The Swedes have received the same recommendations as elsewhere, i.e.: respect barrier gestures, avoid social interactions, stay at home at the slightest symptom or sign of infection and protect vulnerable people. Moreover, high schools and universities have been closed and gatherings of more than 50 people have been banned. The fundamental difference lies in the manner in which the restrictions have been applied: rather than resorting to coercion, the authorities have appealed to citizens' civic sense.

#### **Why is the approach in Sweden unique?**

The explanation lies in the combination of the independence of public agencies - including the Public Health Agency - and the high level of public confidence in them, which, according to a survey carried out at the beginning of April, was 80%. While the Swedish government defines the

mandate for the tasks of public agencies - for example, by determining their objectives and budgets - ministers are not allowed to intervene directly in their day-to-day operations. This is a tradition enshrined in the Constitution, which is now being implemented. The Public Health Agency is the main authority responsible for the management of Covid-19. It is therefore expected that the Prime Minister and his government will follow its recommendations, which to date, they have done to the letter.

#### **Is this method working?**

At the time of writing, the country, with a population of 10 million, has 13,822 confirmed cases and 1,511 deaths, including 897 in Stockholm, the city most affected by the virus, with other regions having so far escaped the epidemic. In contrast to other Member States, deaths in old people's homes count in the official figures; in fact, half of all deaths have occurred there. Although it is too early to make estimates, since Easter there has been a slight tendency for the mortality curve to stabilise and a significant drop in cases requiring intensive care.

Compared to other Scandinavian countries that have opted for more severe restrictions, Sweden has reported a much higher death toll (e.g. there have been 4014 confirmed cases and 98 deaths in Finland. But despite this, the Health Agency does not wish to change its recommendations, which it considers to be well followed by a large majority of the population.

Hence, the Health Agency has even suggested that its advice has sometimes been too strictly interpreted. For example, many sports clubs have, on their own initiative, cancelled activities for children, prompting the Director General of the Health Agency, Johan Carlson, to urge them to reconsider such measures, which

would cripple society and thwart overall public health objectives.

Nevertheless, the epidemic has revealed some shortcomings in the current organisation of society, in particular the integration of immigrants. Among the Covid-19 cases, foreign-born people are over-represented. A large proportion of those who have been granted asylum (more than 400 000 people between 2010 and 2019), do not master the language and therefore do not understand the authorities' instructions. In Stockholm, residents of foreign origin account for more than 40% of confirmed cases. It took several weeks before information campaigns in different languages were put in place. As in many other countries, the crisis also revealed a lack of preparation, particularly in the medical equipment sector. In 2019, the country had 526 intensive care beds, or 5.8 per 100 000 citizens, the second lowest rate in Europe after Portugal. The regions, on which the health system and the hospital network depend, responded quickly and have doubled the number of intensive care beds in less than a month. At the time of writing, there were 544 patients in intensive care and 500 places were still available.

In contrast to Iceland, the other Nordic country that has implemented more flexible confinement measures, the number of tests carried out in Sweden remains low (6.4 per 1000 inhabitants). However, the government announced on 17 April that large-scale population screening would be implemented in the coming weeks, citing a capacity of 50,000-100,000 tests per week. While the tests are to be reserved for inpatients and health care workers, they will also be available for people in positions deemed "essential" to society - such as police and fire-fighters - so that they can return to work faster after showing symptoms.

The Löfven government (supported by a centre-left coalition between the Swedish Social Democratic Workers' Party (SAP) and the Green Environment Party (MP)) has opted for a realistic discourse on the economic consequences of the crisis. It has warned that a large number of companies would inevitably go bankrupt and that a serious economic crisis would be unavoidable after the health crisis. To mitigate the economic damage, the government has presented a number of measures, particularly for the benefit of municipalities and regions. In addition, the government has presented crisis management packages worth several hundred billion kronor relating to various aspects of the economy, including the government's assumption of the full cost of sick leave pay and the costs of temporary layoffs worth 300 billion kronor (around €28 billion). In addition, should the Public Health Agency make stricter recommendations, Parliament has adopted a law allowing the government to take decisions to close shopping centres, ports, restaurants and bars with immediate effect, without the need for parliamentary approval. This law, which came into force on 18 April, can be applied until 30 June. The percentage of Swedes trusting the executive increased from 26% (a historically low rate for a SAP Prime Minister) to 47% in just one month.

This paper shows that the decisions taken by the Swedish government are intrinsically linked to the country's system of political administration. Certainly, in the coming weeks and months, when the latest available information and data will allow for comparative analyses, the question will become more acute as to whether the Scandinavian kingdom has chosen the right strategy to fight the pandemic.

*Hjalmar Haglund, Swedish editor,  
Monday Newsletter, Le Grand Continent*