



# EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

**Sweden** 



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy or be assigned to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on the Nordic countries.



Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Swedish society. It applies culture-general concepts to help



increase your knowledge of your assigned location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment/-assignment training.

For further information, contact the AFCLC Region Team at

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## PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

### What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.



### Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to

focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.



### Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political

or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-



culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### Social Behaviors Across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival,

although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

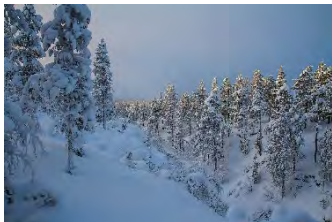
### Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview – how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people who you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.



### **Cultural Belief System**

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and

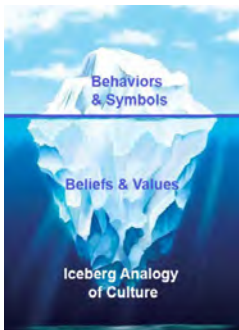
assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad,

right or wrong depends on our deeply held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns



and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.



## Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated /

hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts.

The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.



As you travel through the Nordic countries, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

## CULTURAL DOMAINS

### 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable, or which occurred prior to written language.

The Nordic countries occupy a vast area in Northern Europe and the far North Atlantic, comprising Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Also included are the autonomous Faroe Islands, Greenland (both part of Denmark), and Åland (Finland). Until about 12,000 years ago, ice covered the region, preventing human habitation. Archaeological evidence suggests the first humans migrated from the Southwest and East to settle the area as early as 11,700 years ago. The inhabitants used stone tools for millennia and primarily lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers, traveling inland and along the coast by foot or boat.

Around 4000 BC, the inhabitants of the southern portion of the region began raising livestock and farming, practices that slowly spread northward and later benefitted from the introduction of metal tools. As trade increased, items ranging from the British Isles to the Roman Empire based in present-day Italy had appeared by about 500 BC.



Around 763 AD, Vikings from Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) began using their expert seafaring and navigational skills to plunder and found settlements across the region and as distant as present-day Russia and Turkey. In the 10th century, the Vikings established settlements in Greenland. Notably, Norse Icelander Leif Erikson was

likely the first European to reach the Americas, when he arrived in Newfoundland in present-day Canada, in 1003.



Meanwhile, by the 10th century, kingdoms in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden had emerged, and Christianity began to take hold in the region, which helped unite hitherto separate settlements. In subsequent centuries, the Swedes gradually moved eastward, settling present-day Finland, while the Norwegians took control of the Faroes, Iceland, and Greenland. In 1397, the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish kingdoms merged to create the Kalmar Union, first led by King Erik of Pomerania. While this Nordic kingdom was cohesive in its initial years, its dominance by Denmark and Sweden and the internal strife between its constituent peoples ultimately led to its dissolution in 1523.

During subsequent centuries, the kingdoms fought violent wars for control of the region, though Sweden was often the victor and became a major European power, controlling much of the territory around the Baltic Sea. In 1809, Sweden lost Finland to Russia, though it gained control of Norway from Denmark in 1814. For the average resident, life in the 19th-century Nordic region was characterized by poverty, and many emigrated to the US. However, by the latter half of the century, industrialization had proliferated, with significant growth in mining, heavy industry, and shipbuilding across the region.

Norway, Finland, and Iceland all gained independence in the first half of the 20th century, though the Finns endured a civil war after declaring independence from Russia in 1917. Adjacent to more populous, powerful countries, the Nordics had to balance competing demands during several tumultuous decades. The Nordics remained neutral during World War I, after which democracy became embedded across the region. During World War II, Nazi Germany occupied Denmark and Norway and traversed Sweden, which remained neutral. The Soviet Union attacked Finland, which fought two brutal wars against its neighbor before demanding that previously allied German troops leave the country in 1944. Meanwhile, Iceland, the Faroes, and Greenland were primarily under British and US control. Although



Iceland had achieved sovereignty in 1918, it became a republic after gaining formal independence from Denmark in 1944.

After the war, the Nordics sought greater regional integration and entered a period of sustained economic development, becoming increasingly globalized while balancing shifting geopolitical affairs. Each country joined the United Nations and Nordic Council, as well as a joint labor market and passport union. With their proximity to the Soviet Union, Finland and Sweden remained neutral, while Denmark, Iceland, and Norway joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO, a political and military alliance among more than 30 nations that promotes its members' security through collective defense). Meanwhile, labor movements and social-democratic political parties gained increased clout, aiding in the creation of welfare states in which



governments provided their citizens significant social services, such as quality education and medical care.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the Nordics became

increasingly prosperous, and their citizens experienced some of the world's highest living standards. The countries are generally advocates for democracy, free trade, and human rights, in part because their economies and societies are deeply integrated in the global order. In recent years, the Nordics have experienced more varied coalition governments and sought closer integration with the West, as Sweden and Finland renounced neutrality in the aftermath of Russia's invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. All the Nordic countries are stable, well-run democracies. A single-chamber parliament led by a Prime Minister (PM) is the highest political authority in each country. Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are constitutional monarchies, while Finland and Iceland are republics with directly elected

Presidents. Although the roles of the monarchs in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are largely ceremonial, the Presidents of Finland and Iceland wield some executive power.

After most elections, political parties typically form coalitions to acquire and maintain power. Over the past several decades, Nordic governments have pursued broadly common principles, such as universal social rights, ensuring general welfare, equal opportunities for men and women, and full employment. According to an international corruption perceptions index, the Nordic countries are some of the world's least corrupt.

The Nordic countries are members of influential global and regional organizations. While each belongs to a distinct array of organizations, they are all members of the UN, European Economic Area, and NATO, after Sweden was admitted in early



2024. While Denmark, Finland, and Sweden are part of the European Union (EU), only Finland uses the euro currency. On the global stage, the Nordic countries tend to promote peace, democracy, and humanitarianism, although all but Iceland have exported weapons to nations in armed conflict.

The Nordics rely on NATO, the US, other European countries, and international support to defend against external, state-level threats. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and other aggressive acts have heightened regional tensions and consequently dominate the Nordics' security environment. In recent years, the Nordics also have experienced isolated terrorist attacks performed by radical Islamist and far right-wing actors, causing increased calls to strengthen the region's security measures.

The region is one of the world's least diverse, as the vast majority of residents are of Nordic descent. The dominant ethnic group in each country accounts for at least 79% of its total population. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, immigration from other European, Asian, and African nations began to change the region's ethnic makeup, particularly in Sweden and Denmark. In

2014, Sweden began accepting thousands of asylum seekers, many of whom had fled the Syrian Civil War. The protected indigenous Sámi peoples of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and northwestern Russia are also a notable minority group and account for over 65,000 people in the region.

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

Early residents of the Nordic region practiced indigenous religions, venerating deities, spirits, and gods, who they believed inhabited various realms and the natural world. Norse paganism is perhaps the most well-known early religion, featuring mythical



gods, such as **Thor**, **Odin**, and others. In the early 9th century, the region was exposed to Christianity through trade and pressure from Germanic peoples to the south. By the late 10th century, Christianity had taken root in the region after the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish kings converted to the religion.

During the 11th century, many residents practiced both Christianity and pagan beliefs, often worshipping multiple gods. As the ruling classes adopted Roman Catholicism, the religion became entrenched in much of the region until the early 16th century, when the Protestant Reformation swept across Europe. In every Nordic country, the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) became the official state-supported religious institution. Some leaders embraced Lutheranism to confiscate Roman Catholic property, increasing religious institutions' dependence on the state.

Each national ELC retained its grip on religious power as the official state church during subsequent centuries. In Finland, the ELC gained autonomy from the state in 1869, which increased after independence. While Sweden and Norway demoted the

ELC from official to national church in the early 21st century, the ELC remains the official state church in Denmark and Iceland.

Regardless of its official status, the ELC remains the dominant religion in every Nordic country, with membership as a percentage of the population ranging from about 53% in Sweden to 71% in Denmark. Although the Nordics remain primarily Christian nations, a growing segment of the regional population practices no religion. For example, around 30% of Finns and Swedes do not claim to belong to any religious group. Further, rising levels of non-European immigration in recent years have changed the religious makeup of the region. Today, over 5% of the population in Denmark and 8% in Sweden practice Islam, one of the region's fastest-growing religions.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).



Family life and relationships are fundamental elements of Nordic society. Residents tend to maintain deep connections with immediate and some extended family members. Most households are single-person or nuclear (consisting of one or two parents and their children), of whom families usually choose to have just one or two. Relatives tend to live nearby but are not always present in each other's lives, except for major holidays and life events, and more often help with childcare in Iceland than the other countries.

Urbanization has changed family life in recent years, as city dwellers often marry later, cohabit (live in a long-term, unmarried partnership), or become single parents and have fewer children. Consequently, while the traditional family structure remains more common in rural areas, it is often diverse in urban centers. Most Nordic residents live in cities, and urbanization rates vary between about 84% in Norway and 94% in Iceland as of 2023.

While historically marriage was an arranged union between a man and woman, today residents of any gender choose their own partners. Generally, couples spend several years dating, live together, and sometimes have children before choosing to marry. Divorce carries minimal social stigma and is increasingly prevalent among younger generations. Compared to the US, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden had similar divorce rates, while those in Norway and Iceland were slightly lower as of 2022.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that



refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

The Nordics' historically patriarchal culture privileged men as leaders and providers. Since the mid-19th century, women's status and rights have improved. Today, the Nordic countries are some of the world's most gender equal. Generally, their governments have been global leaders that support gender equality in the public and private

realms through extensive laws and guidelines. While a small minority of the region's residents continue to adhere to traditional values – men as breadwinners and heads of household and women as mothers and wives – most inhabitants support equality between the sexes.

Although women hold equal rights under the law, inequalities between the genders remain, particularly regarding economic progress. For example, women earn less than men for similar work, a gap that ranges from around 9% in Iceland to 16% in Finland as of 2022. Moreover, women are underrepresented in managerial roles and take far more parental leave than men, suggesting persistent inequality in household responsibilities.

In the political realm, the Nordic countries have been at the forefront of women's representation. Women were elected to Finland's Parliament in 1907, and in 1980, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir

became the world's first democratically elected female head-of-state as Iceland's President. As of January 2025, women comprise over 44% of each Nordic country's parliament.

Nordic women face relatively high rates of violence by intimate partners, a phenomenon known as the "Nordic paradox" because of the



region's otherwise exemplary gender equality. As of 2014, women in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden experienced higher physical and/or sexual violence by intimate partners than the EU average. Further, a recent study reports that Nordic women believe gender-based violence increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, in part due to delays in their ability to receive support services. Abortion is available upon request in every country.

The Nordics have been pioneers for the homosexual community. In 1989, Denmark became the world's first country to recognize same-sex relationships. Today, same-sex marriage is legal throughout the region. While public opinion in all countries is largely supportive of the homosexual community, discrimination still occurs among some segments of local populations.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

While Danish, Faroese, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish are North Germanic languages that are part of the Indo-European language family, Finnish and Sámi are Finno-Ugric languages of the Uralic family, and Greenlandic belongs to the Eskimo-Aleut language family. The common ancestor of the North Germanic languages is Old Norse, which is related to Old English and most similar to present-day Icelandic. Finnish and Sámi evolved from an early language that people between the Ural Mountains and Gulf of Finland spoke millennia ago. Greenlandic originates from an early Intuit language native to northern North America.

As Sweden and Denmark were the dominant regional powers for centuries, Swedish and Danish served as much of the region's languages of administration, education, and religion. Meanwhile, many inhabitants spoke their indigenous languages at home and in informal situations.



Today, the standard varieties of the so-called Continental Scandinavian languages – Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish – are mutually intelligible, while the Insular Nordic languages – Faroese and Icelandic – are not. Studies suggest that Norwegians tend to understand other Scandinavians better than Danes or Swedes. Although Finnish has many loanwords from Swedish

due to Sweden's centuries-long domination of Finland, the languages are not mutually intelligible. Finnish is more like, though not mutually intelligible with, Estonian, Karelian, and Livonian. In part due to this linguistic divide and the desire to participate in global trade and affairs, English has become an increasingly common *lingua franca*, or shared language, among residents. At least 70% of each country's residents understand English to some extent, a rate that rises to 92% among its youth.

Generally, the region's residents demonstrate respect, privacy, and candor in their communication practices. Across the region, residents usually share personal information only with family or close friends and are reserved when interacting with strangers. They tend to be direct communicators, prefer limited small talk, and take turns speaking, as they consider interruptions rude. Many residents also refrain from raising their voices in public and avoid boasting, as they value modesty. Nordic residents use limited body language and are often comfortable with extended periods of silence during conversation.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health



requirements) or culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Prior to the 16th century, most formal education in the Nordic countries occurred in religious institutions, where Roman Catholic clergy taught religion and basic literacy. The Church sponsored the region's first universities in Denmark and Sweden in the late 15th century. After the Reformation, national governments gained a larger role in education, though religious institutions remained central to schooling. By the mid-19th century, primary school had become compulsory in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, and was common in Finland's urban areas.



In the 20th century, the Nordic countries generally consolidated centralized, student-centric educational systems that supported societal integration in welfare models that were focused on equality and social justice. Basic and secondary education were compulsory and free across all countries, which exhibited some of the world's best educational outcomes.

Today, the Nordic countries invest heavily in education, often at rates higher than in the US. School enrollment is high, and nearly all residents are literate. In a regular global assessment of student performance in reading, math, and science, Finland has achieved some of the world's highest scores, while Iceland ranked slightly above the average of the nearly 80 countries assessed. Though each country has unique obstacles, common challenges to the region's educational systems include recently worsening student performance, shrinking rural populations and isolation, and disparities in educational attainment between majority groups and linguistic and ethnic minorities.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures,

people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Most Nordic residents value punctuality, especially in business settings. They tend to consider being on time as respectful, trustworthy, and efficient. While the daily rhythm is often highly structured around tight schedules during the week, it typically slows significantly on the weekends, and especially Sundays, when many shops and supermarkets close.



Though dependent on the individual, Nordic residents tend to keep a little more than an arm's length of personal space. Residents typically do not touch during conversation and avoid most public displays of affection.

Although traditionally rare, these social mannerisms have become more common in recent years.

The Nordic countries observe various public holidays. Besides the major Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter, residents typically celebrate New Year's Day and historically important dates like independence. In June, many residents also observe Midsummer, which celebrates the summer solstice.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill, and style. Nordic countries' art, literature, sport, dance, music, and pastimes reflect their shared and unique histories, northern geographic location, and modern global trends. Since the Viking era, Nordic craftsmen have been recognized for their textiles, ceramics, wooden toys, and other items that often feature bright colors, nature motifs, geometric designs, or mythical symbols.

Apart from some early inscriptions written in the runic alphabet (a set of letters that represent sounds and concepts), Nordic literary traditions began during the Viking era. At that time, residents wrote oral tales, histories, and mythology in Old Norse, particularly in Iceland and Norway. As the region converted to Christianity, literature became primarily religious in nature and

featured Latin instead of local languages. Subsequent influential authors wrote poems and books in various genres, ranging from poetic realism to Romanticism. Many of their works were in local languages, with Swedish and Danish most predominant. Today, Nordic crime fiction, often characterized by social realism, is one of the region's most globally acclaimed literary genres.

Traditional Nordic music and dance typically explore themes like nature and love. Many folk songs use vocals and various fiddles, zithers, the accordion, and other traditional instruments. Common folk or traditional dances are variants of polka, polska, schottische, and waltz, among others. Today, popular musical genres are classical, electronic, indie, metal, alternative and contemporary rock, pop, hip hop, and **joiks** (Sámi chants).



While the most popular sports vary by country, football (soccer) is prevalent across the region. Other common sports are handball, swimming, cycling, track and field, and tennis. Winter sports like skiing, ice hockey, and ice skating are also widespread. Further, the Nordics have a rich array of traditional sports. For example, Finland's national sport is **pesäpallo** (nest ball), which is similar to baseball, and Iceland's is "trouser-grip" **glíma**, a form of wrestling in which each opponent grabs the other's harness to trip and throw him.

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Cuisine varies across the region based on local products, tastes, and customs, though common staple ingredients are seafood, root vegetables, mushrooms, cabbage, berries, rye bread, oats, cheese, butter, pork, beef, and game, such as elk and reindeer. Traditionally, residents pickled, cured, smoked, or salted many otherwise fresh ingredients to preserve them through the long,

cold winters. Typical flavorings are dill, parsley, horseradish, and caraway. Some common dishes are preserved fish, meatballs, open-faced sandwiches, and hearty stews. In recent years, a culinary movement known as New Nordic Cuisine has combined local, traditional ingredients and recipes with modern techniques, with a focus on purity, freshness, simplicity, and ethics. The Nordic countries consume more coffee per capita than any other region. Popular alcoholic beverages are beer, wine, schnapps, vodka, and aquavit, an herbaceous spirit.



Health in the region has improved in recent decades, as evidenced by rising life expectancies that average at least 81 years and some of the world's lowest infant mortality rates, which have continuously declined. The region's number of physicians per capita has

also steadily risen and is generally comparable to the EU average (4.3), though rates range from 4.4 in Denmark, Finland, and Iceland to 7.1 in Sweden as of 2021. The Nordics' healthcare systems are publicly funded, comprehensive, and tend to rank as some of the world's best. As of 2022, healthcare spending as a percent of GDP ranges around 8-11%, well below the US rate of nearly 17%, despite achieving better health outcomes.

Across the region, non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases, like cardiovascular disorder, cancer, diabetes, respiratory and other illnesses, present the most significant healthcare challenges. In addition to unhealthy lifestyles, other healthcare challenges are aging populations and shortages of medical staff, both of which have burdened national medical systems in recent years.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. It details how countries allocate their resources by sector, trade with other countries, give or receive aid, and pay for goods and services within their borders.

In the 19th century, the Nordic countries began to industrialize, followed by a pivot to services in the decades after WWII. The region's economies grew rapidly in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, in part due to surging exports and the increased extraction of raw materials, such as oil, gas, timber, and minerals. Norway has flourished due to its vast oil and gas deposits and has the region's highest GDP per capita.



Today, the region's economies have large public sectors funded by some of the world's highest taxes. They tend to have stable inflation and exchange rates and integrate with other European economies at varying levels. For example, while all the Nordic countries are members of the European Economic Area, meaning they belong to a single market that enables the free movement of people, goods, and services within this zone, Iceland and Norway are not part of the EU customs union.

Denmark has advanced energy, medical, agricultural, shipping, and information technology (IT) subsectors. Forestry, minerals, and IT are Finland's most significant sources of income. Iceland, Åland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland rely primarily on fishing and fishery products, as well as shipping and tourism. Most of Norway's income is from the extraction of oil and gas, as well as shipping, mineral extraction, tourism, and other subsectors that have made it the region's largest economy. Sweden's economy is nearly the same size as Norway's and the region's most complex. In addition to being home to a diverse array of globally recognized firms, the country exports electronics, machines, vehicles, metals, paper, and various other goods and services.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. The Nordic countries have invested in extensive road networks and efficient public transit systems, particularly in urban areas. While nearly all of Denmark's roads are paved, the other countries have vast unpaved roadways, especially in

remote areas. All the countries except Iceland have electrified train networks and capital-city metro systems. Some residents use ferries, which shuttle commuters, service remote islands,



and connect the region's major cities and nearby countries. Domestic air travel in Finland, Norway, and Sweden is common to traverse long distances.

The Nordics' energy sources are diverse. Oil provides a large portion of the region's energy supply, except in Iceland, whose shares of geothermal and hydropower are vast. The Nordics have ample hydropower, and Finland and Sweden have large nuclear industries. While Denmark has some oil and gas reserves in the North Sea, as of 2024, Norway is the region's only net energy exporter, given its extensive production of oil and gas.

The Nordics have some of the world's fastest and most reliable Internet connections, and well over 90% of residents are Internet users. Mobile phones are extremely popular, particularly among the younger generations, with at least 111 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people in every Nordic country.



Media and press in the region have longstanding traditions of being independent and free. In a 2024 index of media freedom, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden ranked among the top 5, while Iceland scored 18 of 180 countries assessed, largely due to threats to its media independence from powerful fishing interests. The region features robust and effective legal protective frameworks and generally has high public trust in public and private media broadcasters.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Nordic society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in Sweden.

## PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

### 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

#### Overview

Situated in northern Europe and home to extensive Viking activity from the 8th-11th centuries, Sweden was a major player in Baltic Sea trade before becoming a great European power in the 17th century. In subsequent centuries, Sweden lost territory it had gained around the Baltic Sea, and its monarchy began to democratize. Adopting a policy of neutrality in the 19th century, Sweden was not a belligerent in either World War. Thereafter, it became an established social democracy with a robust welfare system and joined the European Union (EU). More recently,



Sweden has renounced neutrality and drawn closer to the West in response to Russian aggression.

#### Early History

Archeological evidence from Segebro, in southernmost Sweden, suggests that humans arrived in present-day Sweden around 11,000 years ago. These early settlers were typical hunter-gatherers equipped with flint, bone, clay, and wooden tools and sustained by fish, reindeer, berries, and roots. Between 4100-3800 BC, the inhabitants of southern Sweden rapidly adopted agricultural practices, which altered the fabric of regional life, especially as advanced cattle-rearing techniques flourished.

By 1500 BC, Sweden had joined trade networks encompassing much of Europe (see *Economics and Resources*). Maritime commercial routes across the Baltic and North Seas brought bronze to Scandinavia (present-day Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), where it was molded into weapons, tools, and ritual artifacts. Early pagan practices such as sun worship and fertility rites also emerged during this period (see *Religion and Spirituality*). By 500 BC, Celtic-supplied iron had become

widespread in the region, improving agricultural tools and weapons. Around the same time, traders brought Roman glassware and pottery to Scandinavia.

In the 5th-6th centuries AD, Sweden's commercial linkages extended southward, through territory controlled by Germanic tribes to the then-declining Roman Empire, and eastward, across the Baltic and along Russian river routes to Asia. Two groups predominated: the Swedes (or Sveas), who occupied Svealand in present-day Uppland and Västmanland, and the Geats (or Goths), who controlled Götaland in the South. Other groups, like the northern Sámi (see *Political and Social Relations*), existed at the periphery.



### **The Viking Age**

In the late 8th century, Scandinavian raiders – among them Danes, Geats, Norwegians, and Swedes – began to raid, pillage, and trade throughout Europe, ushering in a period now known as the Viking Age (8th-11th centuries). Taking control of Baltic trade, Scandinavians erected the first major town and trading center in the region at Birka around 750. Meanwhile, Swedish raiders, known as Varangians, descended from Scandinavia and took control of land between the Baltic Sea and Kyiv (present-day Ukraine's capital). Eventually becoming politically separate from the seafaring tribes based in Scandinavia, the Varangians played a key role in political development in Eastern Europe.

The end of the Viking Age is associated with the Christianization of Scandinavia, which did not take root until the 11th century. Around 1008, King Olof Eriksson Skötkonung, the first Swedish king to rule over both Swedes and Geats, was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

### **Consolidation, Dynastic Competition, and the Church**

Political power in Sweden remained largely decentralized until the 12th century, when Svealand and Götaland united under a single crown. Authority of the consolidated kingdom, however, was contested. For a century, descendants of two Swedish Kings, Sverker the Elder and Erik Jedvardsson, vied for control,



and the throne alternated between their families. Simultaneously, the Catholic Church's political influence grew. In 1164, it established an Archbishop at Uppsala, the site of a longstanding pagan temple. As the Church began to administer justice and levy taxes, pretenders sought to legitimize their bids for power with Church support, and Swedish campaigns into modern Finland were justified as Church-sanctioned crusades.

### The Birger Dynasty and Hanseatic Trade

When the last of Erik's line to rule Sweden died in 1250, Birger Jarl, a powerful *jarl* (earl) rose to prominence. Becoming the *de facto* authority behind the throne after his son was elected King, Birger enacted reforms that curtailed serfdom (an exploitative system of peasant tenant farming), improved the inheritance rights of women, and abolished certain judicial punishments.



Under Birger's direction, the emergent city of Stockholm, established as a fortress in the late 12th century, grew rapidly.

Successive Birger descendants occupied the Swedish throne between 1266-1318. During this period, concessions

granted to Swedish nobility shifted the core of power away from the King. Sweden also developed trade links with the Hanseatic League (or Hansa), a powerful trading confederation of northern European towns and cities. Acting as a conduit to Central Europe, Hansa merchants traded extensively with Sweden and ultimately gained privileged trading rights. This special relationship would endure for centuries and reach its zenith in the 16th century.

### Magnus IV and Union with Norway

Following the death of the last Birger king, Sweden's nobles selected Magnus IV, then the 3-year-old inheritor of the Crown of Norway, to become King in 1319. This act unified Sweden and Norway and further codified the influence of the nobility over the Crown, introducing statutes that prohibited the King from raising taxes without noble approval. In 1323, the Treaty of Nöteborg

ended 30 years of conflict with Novgorod (a powerful principality in northwestern Russia) and brought much of southern Finland into the Swedish realm.

Magnus's reign also bestowed a new code of laws providing for royal elections and reaffirming the privileges of Hansa merchants. Meanwhile, the bubonic plague ravaged Sweden, killing around a third of residents and reducing the labor supply. It also caused the Crown's income from taxes and agricultural output to decline.



### **The Kalmar Union**

In 1364, Magnus was forced to abdicate when nobles invited his nephew, German Duke Albert of Mecklenberg, to invade and seize the throne. Albert secured the throne, but the nobility then forced him to sign decrees diminishing much of his power. He sought to regain control by claiming land for the Crown. In response, the nobles called upon Margaret I, Regent of Denmark and widow of Magnus's son Haakon of Norway, to remove Albert from the throne. Though Margaret's forces captured Albert in 1389, a protracted war followed. Margaret eventually prevailed, seizing Stockholm. In 1397, the Nordic kingdoms (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) established the Kalmar Union, which united them under a single monarch, Erik of Pomerania (Margaret's great nephew).

The Kalmar period was dominated by unrest and intra-union disputes. The Union persisted despite major upheavals such as a revolt led by nobleman Engelbert Engelbrektsson in 1434 and periodic wars between Sweden and Denmark from 1448-1512. In 1521, Swedish noble Gustav Vasa rebelled against the then-Danish-held monarchy and founded the independent Kingdom of Sweden in 1523, ending the Kalmar Union. Sweden signed the Treaty of Malmö the next year, making peace with Denmark.

### **The Vasa Dynasty**

Having championed Swedish independence from the Kalmar Union, Gustav Vasa ascended the throne. His rule was the first in what would become a relatively stable dynasty. Successive

Vasa descendants controlled the Kingdom of Sweden until the mid-17th century. They oversaw its expansion and rise to the



status of a great European power, heralding the independent Swedish Kingdom with Gustav Vasa as its founding father, and eventually a Swedish **Stormaktstid** (Great Power Era).

**Religious Reform:** During the Vasa Dynasty, a series of major religious reforms—collectively known as the Swedish Reformation—altered the status of the Roman Catholic Church in Sweden. In 1527, Gustav Vasa, with support from powerful

Swedish estates (the nobility, clergy, burghers, and peasants), placed the Church under royal control. A protracted period of reform followed. The result was the establishment of the independent Church of Sweden in 1536 and emergence of Protestantism as the dominant Swedish religion (see *f Religion and Spirituality*). The Reformation was fueled in part by zealous clergymen, whose prolific writings coalesced into a robust literary tradition (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

**Consolidation of Power:** In subordinating the Church to the state and later reorganizing the administration to exclude the nobility, Gustav Vasa achieved absolute authority in Sweden. The major estates met only with his approval, and local officials were appointed by royal decree. With the aid of adept German administrators, Gustav built an elaborate bureaucracy (whose rank-and-file members he personally scrutinized), stabilized Swedish trade, raised a powerful standing army and navy, and claimed large swaths of land. By his death in 1560, the Crown directly owned some 60% of the land in Sweden. Gustav Vasa's sons, Erik (1560-68) and Johan III (1568-92), succeeded him. Johan sought to reintroduce Catholic customs during his reign, prompting Sweden's clergy to meet in 1593 in Uppsala, where they officially adopted the Lutheran Augsburg Confession, formally making the Protestant Church of Sweden Lutheran in denomination (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

## Sweden's *Stormaktstid*

**The Lion of the North:** In 1611, Gustav Vasa's grandson, Gustav II Adolf ("the Lion of the North") became King of Sweden. Gustav Adolf almost immediately faced a Danish-Norwegian invasion, as Sweden was spread thin due to campaigns in the East against Moscow (which had eclipsed Novgorod to become the dominant power in present-day western Russia). In 1613, the Danes forced Sweden to an unfavorable peace in which it surrendered territory in the North (modern Finnmark in Norway).

Subsequently, Gustav Adolf sought to modernize the Swedish army by equipping its conscripted infantry, professional cavalry, and navy with Europe's most advanced firearms. A mobile artillery corps proved



valuable in campaigns against Moscow and Poland, which gave Sweden control of Ingria and Kexholm (in present-day northwestern Russia) and Livonia (present-day southern Estonia and Latvia), respectively. As a result, Sweden became the dominant power in the Baltic region.

By 1630, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation had begun threatening Swedish gains. After forging an alliance with France, Gustav Adolf's armies invaded northern Germany, entering the ongoing Thirty Years War that by then had gripped northern Europe for more than a decade. Swedish forces moved swiftly through the German heartland, seizing Munich by late 1632. That same year, Gustav Adolf died at the Battle of Lützen, after which the Swedish campaign faltered.

The next 16 years saw continued Swedish campaigns on the continent with varying success. At the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which ended the war, Sweden won some concessions along the southern coast of the Baltic Sea but relinquished its Polish ports. Emerging from the war as a great power, Sweden established colonies in Africa, Asia, and North America, the site of the short-lived New Sweden (1638-55) located along the Delaware River.

## The Great Northern War

By the early 18th century, years of war had weakened Sweden. Recognizing its fragility, a coalition of Polish, Danish, and Russian forces invaded Sweden's southern Baltic provinces. Swedish King Charles XII repelled the invasion but eventually surrendered to the forces of Russian **Tsar** (King) Peter I (the Great) at the Battle of Poltava in 1709, resulting in Russian occupation of Sweden's Baltic holdings and Finland. After



Charles died in 1718 during an ill-fated expedition into Norway, the Treaty of Nystad (1721) ceded Sweden's Baltic provinces and parts of southeastern Finland to Russia.

## The Age of Freedom

Sweden's early parliamentary period from 1718-92, known as **Frihetstiden** (The Age of Freedom), owes to the flourishing scholarship, arts, and press that defined Swedish cultural life for much of the 18th century. A diverse cast of intellectuals, like naturalist Carolus Linnaeus, astronomer Anders Celsius, and philosopher Emmanuel Swedenborg, among others, were free to think and publish as they wished.

Dissatisfied with the costs of continued warfare, Sweden's major estates established the **Riksdag** (Parliament) in 1720. Constitutional laws passed from 1720-23 granted all authority to the estates, which convened regularly in a Diet (assembly). The King retained his crown but served only as a voting member of the new body. Most foreign policy and fiscal matters were deliberated by the **Hemliga Kommittén** (Secret Committee), comprising 100 members of the nobility, clergy, and burghers.

A two-party system emerged in the Diet, with political power distributed between the Nightcaps, who encouraged restraint abroad (specifically to avoid provocations with the burgeoning Russian Empire), and the Hats, who advocated for more direct continental involvement. Though the Nightcaps held the majority for nearly 2 decades, overseeing major commercial successes spearheaded by the Swedish East India Company, power shifted to the Hats in 1738. Under their direction, Sweden waged

war with Russia (1741-43) and Prussia (1757-62), which resulted in a loss of Finnish territory along the Russian border and strained the economy. After the Hats regime ended in 1765, economic decline, famine, and foreign intervention devastated Sweden.

### **The Gustavian Period**

In 1772, King Gustav III launched a bloodless coup against the *Riksdag*, reclaiming the political power lost by the Crown a half century earlier. Gustav leveraged royal propaganda to establish his public image as an enlightened monarch and patron of artistic and scientific inquiry.

However, a failed effort to wrest Finnish border towns from Russia and his dissolution of the Diet in 1789 undermined Gustav III's popularity. In 1792, he was assassinated by a noble.



### **The Napoleonic Wars**

As Napoleon's revolutionary armies swept through Europe at the outset of the 19th century, Gustav IV Adolf, Gustav III's son and successor, allied with anti-Napoleon forces. In 1808, former coalition partner Russia joined with Napoleon-aligned Denmark-Norway in declaring war on Sweden. In 1808, Napoleon-aligned Denmark-Norway and Russia declared war on Sweden. Russian forces advanced through eastern Sweden (now Finland) with little contest, and Gustav IV fell from favor, overthrown by high-ranking military officials. The Russians forced Sweden to negotiate an unwelcome peace that transferred Finland and Åland to Russia in 1809. Further, Swedish efforts to compensate for the loss by seizing territory in Norway failed.

With Sweden brought into the Napoleonic fold and its throne vacant, the Swedes unexpectedly installed French Marshal Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte as their Crown Prince in 1810. Assuming the name Charles John and the duties of a European King outside of the Napoleonic realm, he took the helm of Swedish politics, and in 1812, forged a coalition with Europe's anti-Napoleon powers (Russia, Prussia, and Britain). He led allied Prussian, Russian, and Swedish forces against Denmark-

Norway, which surrendered. Although the subsequent Treaty of Kiel transferred Norway to Sweden, the Norwegians initially rejected Swedish rule. In a brief war, Charles John overcame Norwegian resistance but accepted Norway's autonomy, allowing it to enter a union with Sweden in 1814. In 1818, he formally became King, establishing the Bernadotte Dynasty, which remains on the throne today.



### 19th-Century Reforms

Between 1815-40, Charles John pursued policies designed to maximize royal power and erode the influence of the *Riksdag*. These efforts fueled substantial liberal opposition, which the King systematically suppressed. As opposition continued to mount and liberals won a majority in the 1840 parliamentary elections, Charles John made concessions, restoring power to ministers and implementing widely demanded compulsory education (see *Learning and Knowledge*). These adjustments marked the beginning of a reform period, when Sweden established free enterprise, the rights of unmarried women, and religious liberties. In 1866, a watershed parliamentary reform replaced the four-estate *Riksdag* with a two-chamber legislature. One chamber would be elected by indirect limited vote (which ensured that major landowners and industrialists retained power) and another by public vote.

### Neutrality and Norwegian Independence

During the latter part of the 19th century, Sweden opted to avoid Europe's major conflicts, instead establishing a policy of official neutrality. Despite the official line, King Oscar II (the fourth Bernadotte King) forged a close relationship with the emergent German Empire. When Norway's demands for increased autonomy culminated in the 1905 declaration of Norwegian independence, Sweden accepted Norway's terms and dissolved the union, seeking foremost to preserve Swedish neutrality and avoid another regional war.

The question of neutrality came to the forefront in 1911, as the debate over expenditures divided Swedish politics. Liberal

elements in the *Riksdag* advocated for a reduced military budget. Conservatives rallied against this initiative, demanding that national defense be shored up as conditions in Europe became tense. King Gustav V, who succeeded Oscar II, expressed his support for greater spending, which caused the Liberal-majority government to resign. In its place, Gustav V appointed his own government, installing Hjalmar Hammarskjöld as Prime Minister (PM).

### World War I (WWI)

Upon the 1914 outbreak of WWI (1914-18), which pitted the Allies (Britain, France, Russia, and the US) against the Central Powers (Austria-Hungary, Germany, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire), Sweden was committed to neutrality. To that end, it continued to trade freely with Germany, undermining a British blockade. In response, the Allies reduced trade with Sweden, causing food shortages that eventually forced PM Hammarskjöld to resign. In 1918, Sweden managed to restore its trade with the Allies on the condition that it limit commercial exchange with defeated Germany.



### Party Politics and the Emergent Welfare State

Meanwhile, in 1917, Sweden's left-wing parties, ***Liberalerna*** (The Liberals) and ***Socialdemokraterna*** (Social Democrats or SAP) won a majority in the general election (see *Political and Social Relations*). Forming a coalition government, PM Nils Edén took control of the *Riksdag*, modified the constitution, and extended suffrage to women (see *Sex and Gender*). Between 1920-25, longtime SAP leader Hjalmar Branting served as PM on three occasions. Regarded as the father of Swedish social democracy, Branting was instrumental in introducing democratic and labor reforms throughout the early 20th century. As PM, he also advocated for Swedish involvement in international institutions.

In 1932, the SAP won firm control of the government, facing the ill effects of the Great Depression, which had created an unemployment crisis and related labor conflicts (see *Economics*



and Resources). Through cooperation with the **Jordbrukarnas Riksförbund** (National Farmers' Union, renamed the Centre Party in 1957), the SAP, led by PM Per Albin Hansson, launched a public works campaign and advanced agrarian interests. As a result, labor stress eased, and wages rebounded to pre-Depression levels.

In the late 1930s, PM Hansson initiated legislation that laid the groundwork for the Swedish welfare state (which merges free markets and a generous public welfare system), introducing social benefits programs collectively known as **folkhemmet** ("the people's home"). These welfare programs expanded significantly, as the SAP and other left-wing elements with pro-welfare agendas would remain prominent in Swedish politics through the 20th century.



### World War II (WWII)

Owing to its enduring commitment to neutrality, Sweden rejected Adolf Hitler's proposal for a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany in 1939, prior to the outbreak of WWII. Though it reemphasized its neutrality at the war's outset, Sweden nevertheless offered material and volunteer aid to Finland to support its efforts to repel an invasion by the Soviet Union (USSR). In 1940, after Germany occupied Denmark and Norway, it sought to force Sweden to allow the transit of German troops through Swedish territory. Threatening military action in 1941, the Nazis demanded that Sweden provide transit facilities to shuttle German troops from Norway to Finland. Sweden capitulated but revoked its permission in 1943. Throughout the conflict, Sweden served as a refuge for Norwegians and Danes fleeing Nazi occupation.

### The Erlander, Palme, and Carlsson Years

Following the death of Per Albin Hansson in 1946, SAP parliamentarian Tage Erlander became PM and would come to control Parliament for more than 2 decades. He quickly moved to expand *folkhemmet*. Erlander championed the National Pensions Act of 1946, which implemented a new basic pension plan and established laws related to child allowances, health

insurance, rent subsidies, and educational reforms. SAP efforts to nationalize Swedish industry stalled. In 1951, an economic recession forced the SAP to reckon with labor issues and economic instability. Consequently, its members' focus shifted to preserving progress rather than pushing for more reforms. In the late 1950s, pension reform became a contentious political issue, with parliamentary gridlock undermining proposed reforms throughout 1958. A breakthrough in 1959 resulted in the introduction of supplementary income-adjusted pensions.

Meanwhile, Sweden's commitment to neutrality had resulted in little involvement in Cold War politics. Nevertheless, Sweden sought to be a part of the European economic integration (see *Economics and Resources*), and in 1960, became a founding member of the European Free Trade Association, whose other members were primarily Central and Western Europeans. In the meantime, the Soviet infiltration of the Swedish Security Service and invasion of Czechoslovakia (present-day Czechia and Slovakia) in 1968 dampened the popularity of more extreme leftist elements in Swedish politics. When Erlander retired from politics in 1969, he was succeeded by his protégé, Olof Palme, who took control of the SAP and thus became PM.



### **The New Instrument of**

**Government:** Palme oversaw the implementation of a new Instrument of Government (a document that establishes the basic principles and form of government and is one of four fundamental laws that comprise the constitution –see *Political and Social Relations*). In 1971, on the recommendations of a constitutional review committee convened in 1955, Sweden introduced the new Instrument, which replaced the two-chamber *Riksdag* with a single-chamber body elected by proportional representation. In 1974, additional adjustments expanded voting rights and revoked the King's remaining authority. Consequently, the Crown (under Carl XVI Gustaf, who remains King today) became entirely ceremonial.

Palme lost his mandate to non-socialist coalitions in 1976, which retained power until 1982, when worsening economic conditions helped restore him and the SAP to power. Those elections also yielded a redistribution of political power within the non-socialist coalition, as the center-right ***Moderaterna*** (Moderates, or M) gained a significant number of seats, while the L lost almost half its seats. Palme's term lasted until 1986, when he was assassinated in the first incidence of political violence in



Sweden's modern history. Though the identity and motive of the assassin remain in dispute, Swedish prosecutors closed investigations in 2020, naming Stig Engstrom, a citizen who committed suicide in 2000, the likely murderer.

After Palme's death, Ingvar Carlsson took charge of the SAP, becoming PM in 1986. SAP control continued until

1991, when amidst a recession (see *Economics and Resources*), a non-socialist coalition formed a government under the leadership of Moderate Carl Bildt. As the recession continued, the Swedish public, dissatisfied with stagnant economic conditions, voted to restore Carlsson as PM in 1994. Carlsson's platform was to reduce the then-enormous budget deficit and address unemployment.

**The European Union (EU):** Along with his efforts to reign in the enduring recession, Carlsson had begun to pursue EU membership in 1993. Swedish accession to the EU promised access to a vast export market, greater foreign direct investment inflows, and a means for addressing pan-European issues. Despite opposition from within the SAP, the government held a referendum in November 1994, which yielded 52% approval for EU membership (see *Economics and Resources*). Sweden officially became a member on January 1, 1995, though it elected to retain its currency, the krona, when the EU introduced the euro in 1999. As Sweden entered the 21st century, it was strategically positioned between a declining Russia and an increasingly confident bloc of Western nations.

## 21st-Century Sweden

Though the SAP retained control of the government through the first years of the 21st century, its members became increasingly divided over issues like the 2003 referendum to replace the krona with the euro, which did not pass. Concerns about the competitiveness of an economy burdened by extensive social welfare programs contributed to growing support for the M, which narrowly formed a government in the 2006 parliamentary elections. Under the M, Sweden made important reversals to longstanding SAP policies, particularly the introduction of plans to develop Swedish nuclear power, which the SAP staunchly had opposed. Though the Swedish economy was hard-hit by the global financial crisis of 2007-09 (see *Economics and Resources*), government stimulus spending helped enable a swift recovery.

In 2015, Sweden's decision to accept about 163,000 migrants, largely Syrians fleeing the Syrian Civil War, thrust it into the center of Europe's immigration crisis. These arrivals strained the social services infrastructure and raised political tensions, as fear of Islamism gripped Europe in the wake of terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015. Thereafter, the **Sverigedemokraterna** (Sweden Democrats), a right-wing, populist anti-immigrant political party that also advocates for leaving the EU, gained popular support. Further, the initial decision to accept so many Syrian refugees had become scorned by a wide range of political actors.



Meanwhile, in recent years, Sweden has continued to draw closer to its Nordic neighbors (see *Political and Social Relations*) and Western democracies. A years-long process of Swedish cooperation with the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO, a political and military alliance among more than 30 nations that promotes its members' security through collective defense) culminated in May 2022. This effort began in 1994 when Sweden joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program, which enables Euro-Atlantic nations to engage in bilateral cooperation with NATO. Sweden applied for official membership

in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The country's pivot from neutrality was confirmed in March 2024, when it became NATO's 32nd member.

## Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Ancient Nordic folklore has a well-developed system of religious beliefs that evolved over centuries (see *Religion and Spirituality*).



Most closely associated with Viking beliefs, Nordic cosmology integrates elements from a range of northern European belief systems, with particularly evident ties to Germanic mythology.

**Viking Myths:** The complex mythology of early medieval Swedes remains culturally relevant today. Its pantheon of deities appears throughout contemporary literature and film. Among them are **Thor**, a God associated with lightning, thunder, storms, trees, strength, and fertility, who was invoked by early Swedes for a successful harvest; **Odin**, associated with wisdom, war, healing, and death, protector of the armed aristocracy; and the **Valkyries**, maidens who determined the fate of warriors in battle. The myths in which these gods feature are wide-ranging.

One tale outlines the origin of the cosmos. It relates that the world was preceded by an abyss, **Ginnungagap**, flanked on its sides by **Muspelheim**, the elemental fire, and **Niflheim**, elemental ice. Slowly, **Muspelheim** and **Niflheim** converged, yielding **Ymir** (the screamer), a destructive prehistoric giant. From the thawing **Niflheim** emerged **Audhumla**, a cow, which, feeding on **Niflheim**, uncovered **Buri** (the progenitor). **Buri's** son **Bor** married the daughter of **Bolthorn**, a giant sprung forth from **Ymir**. Their half-god, half-giant sons, **Odin**, **Vili**, and **Ve**, slayed **Ymir** and fashioned the earth and sky from his corpse and the oceans from his blood, becoming the world's first **Asa** (deities).

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Kingdom of Sweden

**Konungariket Sverige** (Swedish)

### Political Borders

Finland: 339 mi

Norway: 1,035 mi

Coastline: 2,000 mi

### Capital

Stockholm

### Demographics

Sweden's population of about 10.6 million is growing at an annual rate of around 0.51%. Some 89% of the population lives in urban areas, with about 1.7 million residing in Sweden's capital and most populous urban area, Stockholm. Generally, the population concentrates in the South and coastal areas.

### Flag

Adopted in 1906, shortly after the dissolution of Sweden's union with Norway (see *History and Myth*), the Swedish flag is blue with a golden yellow cross that extends to the edges of the flag. The vertical part of the cross is off center toward the hoist side, resembling the style of the Nordic Cross and symbolizing Sweden's membership in the community of Nordic nations. The golden yellow and blue represent the gold crowns and blue background of the Swedish coat of arms.



Spain and Germany). Sweden borders Finland to the north and northeast, the Gulf of Bothnia to the east, the Baltic Sea to the southeast, the Kattegat and Skagerrak straits to the southwest,



### Geography

Sweden is the world's 58th and Europe's 5th largest country (ranking between

and Norway to the west and north. Slightly larger than California, Sweden's total land area is 158,431 sq mi.

Sweden is mostly flat, mainly consisting of gently rolling hills and lowlands. Lakes and forests comprise much of the landscape. In the North, vast forests (which cover around 69% of the country) and mountains comprise the Norrland region. Mount Kebnekaise (6,890 ft), in the far Northwest near its border with Norway, is Sweden's highest point. The Torne River (324 mi), Sweden's longest, is also in the far North and forms part of the border with Finland.



Glaciation (the process or result of glacier coverage) left Sweden dotted with craters and divots that filled with water, forming lakes. Today, Sweden has some 96,000 lakes, the largest mostly located in the central region known as Svealand. Glaciation also caused erosion and land uplift, creating nearly 260,000 islands. Consequently, Sweden has more islands than any other country, though fewer than 1,000 are inhabited. Along the eastern coastline, Swedish islands spread from the far North to the South, and others lie off the West Coast or in lakes. Highlands and fertile plains comprise much of the area in the South, a region known as Götaland. In the Southwest lies Vänern, Sweden's largest freshwater lake (2,155 sq mi).

### Climate

Sweden has a cold temperate climate that varies by latitude, with winter the longest of its four seasons. About 15% of Sweden lies north of the Arctic Circle, where winter typically lasts from November-April, though it can be longer. Sweden's Arctic North experiences polar nights and the midnight sun, 24-hour periods of darkness or sunlight, respectively. In the northernmost city, Kiruna, polar nights last about 28 days and the midnight sun 50. In the North, the average winter temperature is 11° F but can drop as low as -40° F. In the summer, temperatures can reach 68° F. While shorter in the North, Sweden's brief spring and fall last from April-May and September-November, respectively. In the central and southern regions, warm air from the eastern

waters keeps temperatures warmer. Stockholm, located on the East Coast, has average lows and highs of 29° F in January and 65° F in July. Malmö, in Sweden's far south, has average lows and highs of 34° F in January and 65° F in July. Sweden gets an average of 20-24 in of precipitation per year, and summer is the wettest season in most of the country.

## Natural Hazards

Sweden is vulnerable to flooding and storms across the country and landslides on the West Coast. Though the annual frequency of avalanches is high, they mostly occur in remote areas with limited impact on society. Almost every year, flooding due to rising sea levels, snowmelt, and rainfall causes harm to people, property, agriculture, and infrastructure, as well as coastal erosion.



resulting in pollution, harmful emissions, and habitat deterioration. The Baltic Sea is a major area of concern for Sweden, as overfishing and rising water levels impact its marine environment. Although Sweden faces various environmental challenges, its conservation efforts are robust. In 2017, the government introduced a climate policy with the goal of having zero net greenhouse gas emissions by 2045. In a 2024 environmental performance index, Sweden ranked 6 of 180 countries, lower than Finland (4) but higher than the US (34).

## Government

Sweden is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy that divides into 21 *län* (counties), each governed by *landsting* (county councils). The counties subdivide into 290 *kommuner* (municipalities). Boards of the county councils and the local municipal councils are the highest decision-making bodies in the counties and municipalities, respectively. Residents vote for councilors at both levels in a general election every 4 years. Sweden's current constitution comprises four fundamental laws, the earliest of which was adopted in 1809. It covers citizen rights,

## Environmental Issues

Human practices and climate change have degraded Sweden's natural environment,



freedom of expression, and procedural regulations that govern the country's democratic institutions and monarchical succession.

### Executive Branch

The current King, Carl XVI Gustaf, ascended the throne in 1973 and is the longest reigning monarch in Sweden's history. Although the monarch is head-of-state, his duties are symbolic. A 1974 revision to the Instrument of Government, one of the



laws that comprise the constitution, stripped the monarch of all political power. The King is the most senior representative of the Swedish Armed Forces and responsible for ceremonial duties like opening parliamentary sessions, chairing councils with the government, advising on foreign affairs, and carrying out state visits. The Act of Succession was last amended in 1979 to allow female successors. Consequently, Princess Victoria is the first female heir apparent.

The current Prime Minister (PM), Ulf Kristersson, has been the head-of-government since 2022. The PM is the chief executive power in Sweden, governs with a cabinet, and is accountable to Parliament. After a parliamentary election, the Speaker of the Parliament proposes a PM for Parliament's consideration. Once approved, the PM forms the cabinet by appointing ministers to the **Regeringen** ("the Government"). PM Kristersson governs with 23 cabinet members. The government is responsible for presenting bills to Parliament, implementing parliamentary decisions, allocating funds to the budget, and representing Sweden in the European Union (EU). The cabinet generally defines Sweden's political direction by guiding politics and proposing legislation to Parliament.

### Legislative Branch

Located in Stockholm, the **Riksdag** (Parliament) is a 349-seat single-chamber legislature. All members are directly elected by open party-list proportional representation vote with 310 in multi-

seat constituencies and 39 in “at-large” seats. Members serve for 4 years with no term limit. The *Riksdag* controls legislative and decision-making powers and oversees the government.



### Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes the *Högsta domstolen* (Supreme Court), *Högsta förvaltningsdomstolen* (Supreme Administrative

Court), and special, district, appellate, administrative, and administrative appellate courts. As the highest court, the *Högsta domstolen* is the highest judicial power for criminal and civil cases. The *Högsta förvaltningsdomstolen* is the administrative court system’s highest court, guiding decisions for authorities, lower administrative courts, and courts of appeal. Each court has 16 justices organized into two chambers who serve for life with mandatory retirement at age 67. The government appoints justices following a proposal from a nine-member Judge Proposal Board. The Board consists of two *Riksdag*- and seven government-appointed members, who serve 4-year terms.

### Political Climate

Sweden’s political structure widely ranks as one of the world’s fairest. Sweden received the highest possible score from 2017-23 and 99 of 100 in 2024 in a global freedom index that rates people’s access to political and civil rights. Sweden’s score declined in 2024 due to rising gang violence, as the rates of gang-related shootings, arson, and bombings have increased in recent years (see “Security Issues” below). Nevertheless, Sweden tends to be a safe country where residents’ political and civil rights are protected. While the country has several dominant political parties, governments typically consist of multiparty coalitions, and rival parties can gain power through elections. Sweden has universal suffrage for citizens ages 18 and older.

As of 2022, Sweden’s Parliament is the most right-wing in recent history, led by a center-right coalition. Today, eight political parties, often known by abbreviations, are represented in the *Riksdag*. Sweden is governed by the *Moderaterna* (Moderates,

or M), who hold the office of PM; **Kristdemokraterna** (Christian Democrats, or KD); and the **Liberalerna** (Liberals, or L). The **Sverigedemokraterna** (Sweden Democrats, or SD) are a right-wing populist, nationalist party that is not a formal member of the coalition but works in cooperation with the government in exchange for backing in the *Riksdag*. The **Socialdemokraterna** (Social Democrats, or SAP) represent Sweden's oldest political party (see *History and Myth*). Along with the **Miljöpartiet** (Green Party, or MP), SAP led the government elected in 2018. Today, these parties form part of the opposition, alongside the other left-leaning parties, **Centerpartiet** (Centre Party, or C) and **Vänsterpartiet** (Left Party, or V).



PM Kristersson and his cabinet prioritize collaborative projects to address challenges like crime, migration and integration, and climate and energy. Sweden's often left-leaning political climate has shifted to the conservative right in favor of more restrictive immigration and criminal policies. Many observers suggest one of the reasons for this shift is growing voter support for tighter migration policy in response to the increasing foreign-born population (see "Ethnic Groups" below). Since 2015, Sweden has taken in more migrants as a percentage of its population than any other EU country, placing pressure on public services and beginning what is known as the "migration crisis." Nonetheless, Sweden's politics are free and fair. In a 2024 corruption perceptions index, Sweden ranked 8 of 180 countries, behind Denmark (1), Finland (2), and Norway (5).

Although Sweden has historically maintained neutral foreign and independent defense policies, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 altered its position on non-alignment. Its neutrality initially delayed Sweden's application to the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO, a political and military alliance among more than 30 nations that promotes its members' security through collective defense). Sweden applied to join NATO in 2022, alongside Finland and became a member on March 7, 2024 (see "Regional Relations" below).

## Defense

The **Försvarsmakten** (“the Defense Force,” or Swedish Armed Forces) are a unified military force consisting of ground, maritime, and air branches, with a joint strength of 14,850 active-duty troops and 11,450 reserves. Military operations mainly focus on territorial defense (with growing concern over Russia’s military activity in the Baltic Sea area), cooperation with neighbors and NATO, societal resilience, and the ability to deal with civil emergencies. Upon turning 16, all residents, regardless of gender, are conscription obligated, and if called up, must perform either military, civilian, or general compulsory service until age 70. At age 18, Swedes may enlist in the Armed Forces.

**Army:** As the largest branch, the Army consists of some 6,850 active-duty troops organized into 5 command headquarters with 11 maneuver battalions (including reconnaissance, armored, mechanized, light, air maneuver, and other) and 1 armored maneuver brigade. The Army also consists of the following battalions: 4 combat support and 2 air defense combat service support, and the following convoys: 3 combat support and 1 combat service support.



**Navy:** The Navy comprises about 2,350 active-duty personnel with 2 amphibious maneuver battalions and a coastal defense battery.

**Air Force:** Composed of around 2,700 active-duty personnel, the Air Force comprises the following squadrons: 6 fighter/ground attack intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); 1 transport/ISR/airborne early warning and control, and 3 transport helicopter squadrons. It also has 1 training unit and an air defense battalion.

**Special Forces and Other:** The Special Forces consists of 1 special forces group and 1 combat support group. Around 2,950 staff, logistics, and intelligence personnel are organized into 1 combat support battalion and unit and the following combat service support roles: 3 battalions and 5 convoys.

# SWEDEN

## Air Force Rank Insignia



General



Lieutenant  
General



Major  
General



Brigadier  
General



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain



Lieutenant



Second  
Lieutenant



Senior  
Master  
Sergeant



Master  
Sergeant



Officer  
Cadet



Officer  
Cadet



Staff  
Sergeant



Senior  
Airman



Airman  
First Class

## Security Issues

**Foreign Threats:** Sweden considers actions like unlawful intelligence activities, influence operations, and cyberattacks by foreign powers as posing a high threat to its national security. The **Säkerhetspolisen** (Swedish Security Service, or *Säpo*) considers Russia the greatest foreign threat, as it has been the main culprit of these activities. *Säpo* also lists other authoritarian states like China and Iran as threats for engaging in similar, albeit less frequent, offensive activities.

After nearly 2 centuries of military nonalignment and neutrality in global affairs (see *History and Myth*), Sweden's new status has increased its vulnerability as a Russian target. Russia considers Sweden's NATO membership a threat to its security. When Sweden applied to join NATO, Russia's Foreign Ministry stated that it would have to respond with military-technical and other measures. Russia has used cyber espionage to threaten Sweden's national security in response to Sweden condemning its actions in Ukraine.

In early 2024, a Russian ransomware attack against Finnish information technology company Tietoevry affected over 120 Swedish officials, the *Riksdag*, and prominent businesses. *Säpo* states that the war in Ukraine has increased Russia's need for advanced technology (Russia has allocated extensive resources toward stealing capability from Sweden), further threatening Sweden's security.



**Violent Extremism and Terrorism:** In 2023, *Säpo* raised Sweden's terrorist threat level from 3 (elevated) to 4 (high) on a 5-point scale. Sweden was still assessed at 4 in 2024. While Sweden is generally peaceful, security risks have increased as a result of potential threats from terrorism and violent extremism, hostile actions by state-level actors, and organized crime. Experts suggest that lone operators in Sweden and groups controlled by actors abroad have the capacity to carry out violent attacks.

In 2015, a far-right extremist killed three in a stabbing at a school in Trollhättan, near Gothenburg. In 2017, a Uzbek immigrant with ties to Islamic State (also known as Daesh and IS) ran over pedestrians on a street in Stockholm, killing five. After anti-Islam Swedish activists burned copies of the Qur'an (the Islamic holy book) in late 2023, a self-identified IS member in Brussels, Belgium shot and killed two Swedish nationals and wounded a third, with their nationality the likely motive. The perception that Sweden is growing hostile to Islam and Muslim migrants has contributed to the increased terrorist threat from violent Islamists. Sweden considers the widespread extent of extremism, conspiracy theories, and anti-government rhetoric as



a threat to democracy, trust in the government, and overall security and safety in the country.

**Gang Violence:** In recent years, gang-related violent crimes have increased. In 2023, Sweden's death rate

from gun crime was Europe's highest after Albania. While much of the violence, including hundreds of bombings and shootings, occurs between warring drug and arms trafficking organizations, innocent bystanders are sometimes killed. In response, Sweden has increased funding for the police and updated its criminal laws. It also has been considering employing the military against organized crime.

## Foreign Relations

Sweden is a member of international organizations like the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization, Arctic Council, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and World Bank. Sweden organized the first UN conference on the environment in 1972, and over 100,000 Swedes have served in some capacity in the UN since Sweden joined in 1946.

Despite Sweden's previous official policies of non-alignment and neutrality, it historically has played a significant role in global affairs. In major conflicts such as World Wars I and II (see *History and Myth*), Sweden played a fundamental part as an arbiter. Today, it contributes global developmental assistance

through organizations like the UN and EU. For example, Sweden participates in UN initiatives like the Climate Club and co-leads the Leadership Group for Industry Transition together with India.

**Regional Relations:** Sweden is a member of notable political and economic regional organizations such as the EU, European Economic Area, and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Sweden also keeps close relations with its Nordic neighbors – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Åland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland – and is part of the Nordic Council (an official body for inter-parliamentary cooperation among the Nordic countries).

Sweden and its Nordic neighbors share a common history dating back millennia (see *History and Myth*). Relations between the Nordic countries are defined by close cooperation and resolution of internal conflict by peaceful means. The Nordics work together in policy areas such as EU legislation, justice, healthy and sustainable food systems, the environment and climate change, and sustainable development. Their “Our Vision 2030” is a cooperative goal to become the world’s most sustainable and integrated region by 2030. As the 2024 holder of the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, Sweden is responsible for coordinating the informal foreign and security cooperation of the Nordics and the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). The primary focus is on strengthening security cooperation in the region and providing continued support to Ukraine.



### **Relations with the US:**

Sweden is a close ally of the US. In 1783, it was one of the first countries to officially recognize US independence. The countries have maintained an amicable bilateral friendship since then, formally establishing diplomatic relations in 1818, with only a few periods of increased diplomatic tension.

The US regards Sweden’s NATO membership as positive and expects it to strengthen NATO’s collective defense and enhance its ability to respond to security challenges in the Euro-Atlantic



area. The two nations signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement in December 2023 to expand their close security partnership, enhance cooperation in multilateral security operations, and strengthen transatlantic security. Other areas of bilateral collaboration include science, technology, and innovation; sustainability and climate change; trade and economic development; and the defense of human rights and peace; among various other topics.



As an EU member, Sweden benefits from the economic relationship between the US and EU, which is the world's largest and most complex.

The US and EU work jointly to pursue initiatives to create new opportunities for transatlantic commerce (see *Economics and Resources*). In 2023, the US was the 3rd largest market for Swedish exports and the 11th largest source of imports.

**Relations with Russia:** Relations between states in present-day Sweden and Russia date to the 10th century and include a complex history of wars and reconciliation (see *History and Myth*). Though the countries have not been at war against each other since 1809, several diplomatic skirmishes and incidents since then have led to increasingly strained relations.

Today, the countries share economic and cultural ties, though Sweden's recent accession to NATO has caused both countries to suspend or withdraw from some of these exchanges. In April 2023, Sweden expelled five Russian diplomats over espionage concerns. A month later, Russia expelled five Swedish diplomats and shut down Sweden's Consulate General in St. Peterburg, as well as its own mission in Gothenburg.

In January 2024, the Supreme Commander (commander-in-chief, typically Sweden's highest-ranking military officer apart from the monarch) issued a warning concerning the nature of the Russian threat, advising Swedes to mentally prepare for the possibility of war. Although Sweden's opposition criticized the delivery of the message, national representatives collectively agree that the country must prepare to face a hostile Russia after

joining NATO and supporting Ukraine in its efforts to defend against Russia's invasion.

## Ethnic Groups

Based on country of birth, the population in Sweden is about 80% Swedish, 2% Syrian, 1% Iraqi, 1% Finnish, and 16% other groups such as Danes, Russians, Poles, and Iranians. Sweden recognizes Jews, Roma, Sámi, Swedish Finns, and Tornedalers (also known as Tornedalians, descendants of Finns who settled in the Torne Valley in northern Sweden) as official national minorities, and the law protects their languages (see *Language and Communication*) and cultures.

Generally, Sweden is an ethnically homogenous country, though recently it has become more diverse. Since Sweden does not gather population statistics on ethnicity, the population count of official minorities is an estimate. Ethnic **Svenskar** (Swedes) descend from North Germanic peoples and are most closely related to populations in Norway, Denmark, Germany, and a few other groups in Northern and Central Europe.



Swedish Finns, a group of Finnish-speaking Swedes, comprise the largest official national minority in Sweden, largely due to Sweden's and Finland's complex history and shared border. With an estimated population of 400-700,000, Swedish Finns primarily live in the Northeast along the border with Finland and in central Sweden.

The Sámi indigenous group traditionally concentrated in the northernmost and northwestern part of Sweden, in Swedish Lapland (see *History and Myth*). In recent years, many Sámi have migrated towards central Sweden. Today, Sweden estimates its Sámi population to be around 20-35,000.

The ethnic composition of immigrants in Sweden has shifted over time. For most of its history, Sweden's immigrants were primarily from other Nordic or European countries. Immigration from outside the region was relatively uncommon until recently.

During the first half of the 2010s, Sweden received the second highest number of refugees of all European countries, after Germany. In 2016, the number of new immigrants entering Sweden reached an all-time high of 163,000 people, most of whom were refugees escaping the Syrian Civil War.

As of 2023, nearly 200,000 people born in Syria live in Sweden, comprising the country's largest group of foreign-born people. Iraqis comprise the second largest (146,000), followed by Finns (129,000). Today, immigrants to Sweden mainly move for job opportunities in the country's startup and technology sectors (see *Economics and Resources*), to reunite with close relatives, and seek asylum as refugees.



## Social Relations

While Sweden historically had a hierarchal class-based system (see *History and Myth*), traditional class distinctions have faded over the past 50 years. Today, egalitarian values (beliefs that all people are equally important and should have the same rights) define Swedish society, and the country's distribution of resources is among the world's most equal, though the country still divides along rich-poor, rural-urban, and ethnic group lines.

In recent years, socioeconomic and political relations in Sweden generally have been stable, except for during the economic crisis in the early 1990s (see *Economics and Resources*). However, income inequality in Sweden has increased recently. Of the Nordic countries, Sweden has consistently had the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate over the past decade, and in 2022, it was the region's most unequal country.

In 2023, about 15% of residents lived at risk of poverty. This trend of becoming less equal is largely attributed to political decisions and tax policies that favor high-income earners. Despite these socioeconomic differences, Sweden prioritizes gender equality and has made significant progress on this issue in recent decades, even though men still retain certain advantages (see *Sex and Gender*).

Most of Sweden's population lives in large urban areas (see *Family and Kinship*). As a result, rural communities have shrunk, and many lack access to the same services as city dwellers. Sweden's urban-rural divide has steadily increased since 1985, with 33 of 290 counties losing at least a fifth of their population to urbanization. Experts attribute the draw to cities, especially of young people, for access to education, work opportunities, and better housing, among other reasons. Although Sweden does not have slums in a conventional sense, the country lacks sufficient housing for low-income households. Consequently, homelessness has risen in Sweden, where the estimated number of homeless people was 27,380 in 2023.

While Sweden generally has accepted refugees and ethnic and religious minorities, some have faced discrimination. Historically, colonization of the Sámi peoples led to centuries of social injustices like the loss of



reindeer herding culture and traditions, decline of indigenous languages, racism, and other wrongdoings that left lasting consequences reflected in the conditions of the Sámi today. Recently, Sweden has institutionalized protections for the Sámi, working toward reconciliation and reparations to address discrimination that many Sámi still face.

In addition, acts and demonstrations of Islamophobia have grown more frequent in recent years (see *Religion and Spirituality*). These acts often deliberately target the country's estimated 50-100,000 Kurds (a mainly Sunni Muslim group often considered one of the world's largest groups of stateless peoples, who primarily live in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran) and other Muslim groups. The government has introduced immigration restrictions due to shifting public opinion in recent years. For example, in 2023, extremists burned copies of the Qur'an in front of mosques and the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm. Although Sweden's freedom of expression laws permit such acts, PM Kristersson and Islamic organizations have condemned extremists for spreading hate.

### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

#### Overview

Sweden's population is predominantly Christian. As of 2023, an estimated 53% of residents belong to the Protestant Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) of Sweden and 1.5% are Eastern Orthodox Christians. Of the remaining residents, some 30% are non-religious (including those who identify as atheist and agnostic), 7% Muslim, and less than 8% belong to other Protestant congregations, practice Catholicism, or follow other religious traditions such as Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Sweden's constitution (see *Political and Social Relations*) protects religious freedom and prohibits discrimination based on religious belief and hate speech based on religious opinion. While religious groups are not required by law to register with the government, only registered religious organizations are eligible for government funding and tax exemptions.

#### Early Spiritual Landscape

The territory comprising present-day Sweden was first settled by nomadic tribes and clans (see *History and Myth*), who shared many similar spiritual beliefs. Although not much is known about these beliefs, archaeological sites and artifacts such as rock carvings and burial sites convey a rich mythology of spirits and **Asa** (deities), who early Swedes believed governed the natural world and various aspects of life.

Early medieval Swedes (see *History and Myth*) practiced Norse paganism and believed the universe was divided into nine realms within **Yggdrasil** (Norse tree of life). All humans, gods, giants, and other beings inhabited **Yggdrasil** in realms such as **Asgard** (the realm of the gods), **Midgard** (humans), and **Niflhel** (the dead). **Bifröst** (a rainbow bridge) connected the realms and allowed the gods to travel between them to protect and interact



with the human world. Some examples of such gods are **Odin** (the god of war), who protects heroes and rules over **Valhalla** (the hall of fallen warriors), and **Thor** (the god of thunder), who rules the sky and controls lightning, storms, rain, and fertility (see *History and Myth*).



Early Swedes built and decorated temples with idols representing their gods and spirits. According to legend, the Uppsala Temple was the most important religious center, where residents worshipped **Odin**, **Thor**, and **Freyr** (the god of peace and fertility). At the temple, pagans held ritual sacrifices of humans and animals, which they believed the gods required in exchange for protection and blessings. They held

**blót** (the communal ritual of slaughtering and offering animals to the gods, followed by eating the animal), during which they collected the animal's blood and splattered it on participants, walls, and altars. During **blót**, pagans believed they were dining with the gods and that covering themselves in the animal's blood preserved this magic and protection.

### Arrival of Christianity

Swedish pagans were exposed to Christianity through pillages, raids, and trade with Germanic and Anglo-Saxon Christians (see *History and Myth*). In the 9th century, Ansgar (Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen and Sweden's first Christian missionary), built a church and preached Christian gospel from the Swedish town at Birka. Nevertheless, many pagans viewed the Christian God as just another in the pantheon of Norse gods, and paganism remained the dominant religion until the 11th century.

In the late 10th century, Olof Skötkonung, who historians believe was the first Swedish king to embrace Christianity, ascended the throne. In 1014, he founded the Diocese of Skara, formally establishing the Roman Catholic Church in Sweden. Although Christian crucifixes and related iconography began to replace pagan symbols, statues, and temples, most of the Swedish population remained pagan. According to some accounts, in the

1080s, Swedes forced the Christian King of Sweden, Inge the Elder, to abdicate the throne for disrespecting pagan traditions and refusing to assemble the *blót* at the Uppsala Temple. In retaliation, he destroyed the Temple, an act that many consider Sweden's transition to Christianity.

### The Protestant Reformation

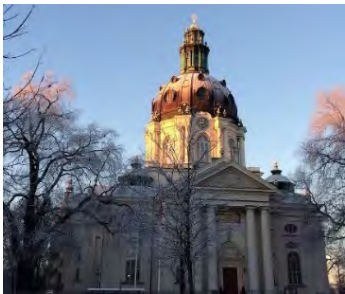
In 1517, Martin Luther, a German priest and theologian, criticized the authority of the Catholic Church for its interposition between God and the people. Lutheranism instructed *sola gratia* (salvation by grace alone) and encouraged followers to develop a personal relationship with God without the spiritual guidance of the Catholic Church, its priests, and pope (the leader of the Roman Catholic Church). In 1523, Gustav Vasa became King of Sweden and quickly began implementing radical changes (see *History and Myth*). He embraced Lutheranism and strengthened the power of the monarchy by confiscating all Church property. He also supported Lutheran reformers such as Olaus and Laurentius Petri, who completed the translation, printing, and instruction of the New Testament in the Swedish language in 1526 (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).



Several developments formalized the Reformation in Sweden. In 1527, the Diet (assembly) of Västerås officially allowed Vasa to seize all Church property, and in 1536, he abolished Roman Catholic canon law and established the independent Church of Sweden. The "Succession" Diet of Västerås in 1544 introduced further theological reforms. Following Vasa's death in 1560, attempts by Roman Catholic monarchs to reclaim the Church's power were unsuccessful (see *History and Myth*). Even as the Church of Sweden formally established its Protestant doctrine with the 1571 Church Ordinance, then-King Johan III sought to incorporate Catholic practices in the new framework. As counter-reformation efforts mounted, however, Swedish archbishops, priests, and statesmen met in Uppsala in 1593. There, they adopted the Lutheran Augsburg Confession, making the Church of Sweden formally Lutheran.

## Lutheran Orthodoxy and Pietism

In the 17th century, Sweden emerged as a major power in Europe (see *History and Myth*). As a monolithic religious state, Sweden enforced strict anti-Catholic laws during a period known as Lutheran orthodoxy. Church membership and attendance in Sweden was mandatory, and any citizen practicing Catholicism faced deportation or heavy fines. In 1686, the Swedish Church Law required a representative from every parish to conduct a **husförhör** (household interview) to assure that every parishioner could read the Bible and pass an annual survey on religious knowledge. Many Lutherans considered the Church's strict interpretation and teaching of the Bible spiritually lacking and sought alternatives through shared experiences.



**konventikelplakatet** (the Conventicle Act), which prohibited all religious meetings outside the ELC of Sweden.

The Crown sought to restrict religious freedoms to retain religious unity and control the public through the Church. Foreign ambassadors, the only people allowed to practice another faith, were required to worship in private. These strict regulations were unpopular and caused many Swedes to emigrate to the US.

## Religion in the 19th Century

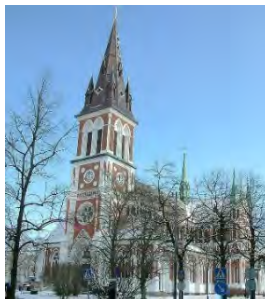
During the 19th century, Sweden experienced a rise in revivalist movements. Revivalism appealed to Swedes because it allowed personal faith and interpretations of the Bible, which the Church had restricted. To avoid official condemnation under the **konventikelplakatet**, revivalist groups met under the disguise of Lutheran prayer, Bible study, and preaching.



Meanwhile, Schartauanism, founded by Henric Schartau, a Pietistic priest who emphasized salvation through the “order of grace,” gained traction in southwestern Sweden. Although it emphasized a Christian life and personal relationship with God outside the ELC, sermons were often strict and followed the word of the established doctrine. In northern Sweden, Lars Levi Laestadius, a Swedish preacher of Sámi decent, founded the Laestadian Movement, which granted absolution (release from guilt for one’s sins) through confession. During the mid-late-19th century, revivalist movements gave way to **frikyrkor** (free churches – Christian denominations independent of the Church of Sweden) that expanded tolerance of Protestant denominations outside of Lutheranism. In 1860, Lutheran Swedish citizens legally gained the right to convert to other state-recognized Christian churches, though full religious freedoms would not materialize until the end of the 20th century.

### Religion in the 20th Century

In the 20th century, scientific and technological advancement increased trade, allowing the working-class population more economic opportunities. With urbanization (see *Family and Kinship*), many Swedes also demanded more rights and protections, resulting in the consolidation of democracy and party politics (see *History and Myth*). Because priests previously had performed the role of state representatives and parishes acted as local governments, many Swedes began to question the state of politics and religion.



Both urbanization and the rise of nonconformist denominations such as free churches threatened the Church, which responded with the **ungkyrkorörelsen** (Young Church Movement). Comprised of clergy and educated lay people, the movement sought to reestablish a central position for the Church in society and aligned the Church with the political right and conservative nationalism (see *Political and Social Relations*). Alongside these reforms, in the 1930s, the ELC became a **folkkyrka** (people’s

church) and implemented a secular system of elections for parish councils.

During the latter half of the 20th century, liberal reforms enabled the Church to remain relevant despite rapid secularization across Sweden. Various events aided the Church's transition from an inflexible organization to one more tolerant and democratic. In 1951, the Religious Liberty Act passed, allowing anyone to convert to a new faith or leave the Church without reason, which began a dismantling of religious unity and traditional doctrine. In 1958, the ELC opened the priesthood to women, and in 1960, the first woman was ordained. Despite the Church's reforms, Swedes continued to become more secular.

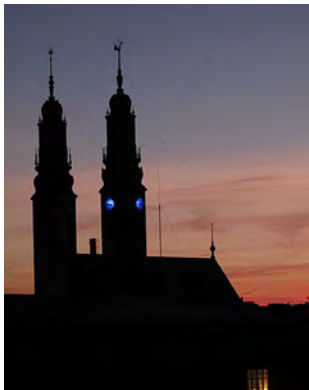
During the 1990s, Sweden's Parliament approved reforms to promote religious freedoms and separate Church and state. In 1991, the introduction of a civil national registration transferred the responsibility of population registration from Church officials to state administrators. In 2000, Sweden ceased to recognize Lutheranism as the country's official state religion. This legal separation of Church and state made Sweden the second Nordic

country, after Finland, to remove the ELC's status as official state church.

### Religion Today

Although over 53% of Swedes identify as members of the ELC of Sweden, many do not regularly attend church services or actively practice the faith. In recent years, ELC membership has declined. Nevertheless, the ELC of Sweden still plays a significant role in Sweden's culture. For example, many traditional rituals and

ceremonies such as christenings, marriages, and funerals occur in the Church (see *Family and Kinship*). While Sweden is a secular state, ELC members still pay their dues as state taxes through the Church assembly.



Despite the country's shift toward secularization in recent years, immigration has increased religious diversity. Although many Swedes pride themselves on their tolerance and acceptance of different religions, the country has witnessed an increase in religion-based discrimination (see *Political and Social Relations*). In 2023, the **Korankrisen** (Qur'an crisis) occurred, when anti-Islam activists set copies of the Qur'an (the Islamic holy book) on fire. The incidents sparked international outrage, and many observers condemned them as examples of religious hatred and prejudice against foreign nationals. However, Swedish courts ruled the acts freedoms of expression, creating a national discourse about what constitutes a hate crime.

**ELC:** With nearly 5.6 million members, the ELC in Sweden is the country's largest Christian denomination and the world's third-largest Lutheran denomination. The ELC is composed of 13



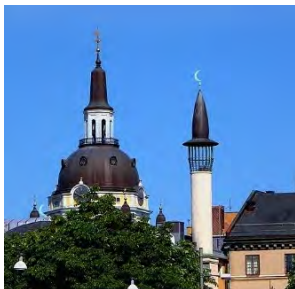
dioceses that divide into parishes. The Church Assembly is the decision-making body and comprises 251 elected members. Since 2022, the Archbishop of Uppsala is Martin Modéus, who also presides as the Primate of the ELC in Sweden and as the Metropolitan. While the Church remains liturgically traditional, it allows women into priesthood, performs same-sex marriages, and promotes universal access to sexual and reproductive health services.

**Other Christian Groups:** Eastern Orthodox Christianity is the second most common Christian denomination in Sweden, with around 160,000 members. During the 17th century, Sweden and Russia agreed to the Treaty of Stolbovo, which granted Sweden regions with Eastern Orthodox populations (see *History and Myth*). The treaty also granted Russia a merchant house and church in Stockholm, resulting in greater Swedish exposure to Orthodox Christianity. Today, the Serbian Orthodox Church is

the largest Eastern Orthodox Church in Sweden, established in the 1970s by immigrants and refugees.

In 2021, Church officials estimated that about 126,000 registered Catholics live in Sweden, though estimates do not account for unregistered Catholics or various immigrants and refugees, some of whom are Catholic (see p. 14 of *Political and Social Relations*). Founded in 1953, the Diocese of Stockholm covers the entire country. In 1998, the first Swedish Catholic Bishop since the Protestant Reformation, Anders Arborelius, was elected.

Sweden is home to some Protestant free churches, which comprise Evangelical, Pentecostal, Methodist, and Baptist denominations that each account for less than 1% of the population. Many of these churches emerged in the 19th century, and their congregations practiced in secret due to



religious intolerance. Among Sweden's earliest free churches were the Baptist (established in 1848) and Methodist (1868).

#### **Other Religious Groups:**

During the mid-20th century, immigrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Europe began to establish a diverse Muslim population in Sweden (see *Political and Social Relations*). Between 2014-23, the number of Muslims increased from about 600,000 to over 642,500, accounting for about 7% of the Swedish population. Today, several hundred local congregations include different branches, like Shi'a, Sunni, and Ahmadiyya. Most Muslim communities live in large cities, such as Malmö, Stockholm, and Gothenburg.

Many other religious minorities also live in Sweden. Experts estimate Sweden is home to about 15,000-20,000 Jews, many of whom also live in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö. Less than 1% of the population practices Hinduism, Buddhism, and various other faiths such as Sikhism and Humanism (which emphasizes human agency and virtue over that of the divine).

## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

The family is central in Swedish society, with members relying on each other for emotional, economic, and social support. Families are typically small and close-knit. Values like equality and individualism are central to Swedish family and social life.

### Residence

Sweden began to urbanize in the 19th century. As of 2023, some 89% of Swedes live in urban areas and about 16% in the capital city, Stockholm. All Swedes have access to electricity, and most homes have safe sanitation services. Due to the country's cold climate (see *Political and Social Relations*), roofs and walls often



have thick layers of insulation made from natural or synthetic wools. Windows are typically fundamental to the ambiance of Swedish homes and often have large frames with triple-glazed glass that allow in natural light without losing heat. Neutral colors and minimal furnishings are more common than lavishly decorated interiors. Many houses and apartments have private, public, or communal gardens nearby, where residents grow flowers and vegetables.

**Urban:** Families in cities tend to reside in detached houses or apartments. Some apartment buildings, especially those built in the 1940s-50s are painted bright colors, often red and brown. In the urban outskirts and suburbs, homes are typically made of insulated wooden walls with brick façades made of clay.

**Rural:** Country residents typically live in single-family wooden houses, which tend to be brightly painted in **falun rödfärg** ("falun red," a protective paint made from heating the residual product of mines that originated in the town of Falun). Raw wood is a prominent feature in many rural homes and used to form low wooden ceilings, hardwood floors, and wooden furniture. Many Swedes also have access to a **sommarstuga** (summer

cottage), which typically does not have running water nor electricity, but serves as an escape from the fast-paced lifestyle of urban areas rather than as a permanent residence.

### Family Structure

Many Swedish families value gender equality. Parents usually share domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and financial responsibilities (see *Sex and Gender*). While the nuclear (immediate) family remains the ideal, non-traditional structures such as divorced, never-married, and single parents are common. Many Swedes teach their children to value and respect one another and discourage competition among peers. While



Swedes value family, many only see extended family on special occasions like birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays.

### Children

Historically, Swedish families had two or three children but tend to have

fewer today (see *Sex and Gender*). Both parents often work full time, which the Swedish government encourages through subsidized childcare. Children may attend subsidized daycare starting at 1- year-old, though parents are expected to pay a relatively small monthly fee (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Parents also may use government financial aid to hire a nanny, which many families rely on for night and weekend care. After school, many teens play games, spend time with friends, or complete homework at *fritids* (youth centers) until their parents return home from work. The government gives parents financial support for children under 16 and directly to young Swedes enrolled in school until age 20.

**Birth:** Many expectant Swedish mothers register with a *mödravårdscentral* (maternity care center), which assigns a midwife and provides information about pregnancy, childbirth, and aftercare. Midwives create a care plan with mothers, which includes the doctor and hospital where they intend to give birth and are responsible for administering a pregnancy certificate.

The certificate provides proof of pregnancy, which parents submit with an application to the **Försäkringskassan** (Swedish Social Insurance Agency) to receive parental benefits (see *Sex and Gender*). While many expectant mothers continue to work during their entire pregnancy, the *Försäkringskassan* provides financial aid, which usually amounts to about 80% of her salary and begins 60 days from the expected birth date, for those who cannot work. Parents are granted 480 days of paid parental leave that may be distributed as they choose, though each parent is entitled to 240 days.

### Rites of Passage

Swedish children typically are given a Christian baptism, followed by a reception, regardless of whether the parents regularly attend church (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Swedish members of the Lutheran Church typically participate in the Christian rite of confirmation around age 15, which establishes their adult commitment to the faith.



**Dating and Courtship:** Swedes often start dating early in life, though seriously in their late teens or early 20s. Mutual connections usually introduce couples, and in recent years, many have met on social media or through online dating sites. Some couples refer to themselves as **sambo** (“partner”), a legal term that means they cohabit but are not married (similar to common-law marriage in the US).

**Weddings:** Marriages often occur in the afternoon and continue through the late night. Couples typically walk down the aisle together holding hands without parents. Traditionally, the bride places a gold coin from her mother in her right shoe and a silver coin in her left shoe from her father to symbolize financial stability. Bridal parties tend to comprise just one or two **brudtärnor** (bridesmaids) and **marskalk** (groomsmen), along with flower children, who are usually relatives of the couple.

After the ceremony, the reception generally begins with a **brudskål** (bridal toast), when the father of the bride announces the couple, followed by friends and relatives giving speeches. A

toastmaster guides guests through the reception that features a large meal, more speeches, and a first dance. Traditionally, if the bride or groom leaves the room, guests may kiss the newlywed who remains. Customarily, the groom gives his bride a **morgongåva** (morning gift) the morning after the wedding. Today, newlyweds may exchange a gift, usually a piece of jewelry or planned trip.

## Divorce

Sweden has a high divorce rate. As of 2022, it was 2.1 per 1,000 inhabitants, lower than the US (2.4) but higher than neighboring Finland (2) and Norway (1.8). One or both spouses may apply for divorce through **Äktenskapsbalken** (“the Marriage Code”), a governing legislative body that either issues the divorce



immediately or after a 6-month consideration period. No justification is required for divorce, which usually carries no social stigma in Sweden.

## Death

Swedes typically hold a funeral within a few weeks of the death. Christian funerals are common, even if the deceased did not regularly attend church

during their lifetime. Most ceremonies begin with a priest talking about the deceased and reading passages from the Bible. Family and friends often bring floral arrangements and wreaths to place on the casket. Towards the end of the funeral, relatives of the deceased usually sing songs and poems to express grief, remembrance, and love. Traditionally, the closest men to the deceased wear a white tie.

Secular funerals are usually conducted in a similar pattern, though without scripture. While traditional funerals and burials are still common, in recent years, many Swedes have opted to avoid a ceremony and instead are directly buried or cremated with their ashes spread in memorial groves or other significant locations. After the funeral, a reception with coffee and cake is common, and some families hold a dinner or go to a restaurant to celebrate the deceased's life.



## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Traditionally, the Swedish social system was patriarchal, meaning men held most power and authority. Today, the system is generally equal, meaning men and women alike take active roles in decision making and the workforce. Women typically have similar opportunities as men to hold positions of authority in the private and public sectors. Sweden ranked 5 of 146 countries in a 2024 gender equality index, behind Finland (2) and Norway (3), but above Denmark (15) and the US (43).

### Gender Roles and Work

**Domestic Work:** Traditionally, women in Swedish society take on more household responsibilities, both chores and childcare, though men increasingly contribute. Today, many parents equally share childcare responsibilities, and in most Swedish families, both parents work (see *Family and Kinship*).



**Labor Force:** In 2023, about 63% of Swedish women worked outside the home, similar to Norway (62%), but higher than Finland (58%) and the US (57%). Sweden has the second highest rate of female representation at the executive level in Europe. In 2022, women occupied some 42% of senior and middle management positions, similar to the US (43%), but higher than Finland (37%) and Norway (32%). Nevertheless, men occupy most industrial positions like business and finance that pay higher average salaries. Women fill most positions in human health and social work, education, public administration, and personal and cultural services.

### Gender and the Law

The first Gender Equality Act went into force in 1980, formally requiring men and women to be equals in society and prohibiting discrimination based on gender in the workplace. In 2009, the Discrimination Act updated the existing gender equality laws, not

only to prevent discrimination and harassment, but also requiring employers to actively promote gender equality in the workplace. Despite this law, discrimination and a gender pay gap still exist. Although the law requires equal pay, women's average earnings are around 90% of men's. Differences in profession, sector, and the tendency for women to work part-time more often than men to care for children help explain this gap.

Swedish law guarantees parental leave and other benefits. Two parents of children born or adopted after January 1, 2016 are entitled to 240 days of paid leave each. Ninety of these days are reserved exclusively for each parent and can't be transferred, though the couple may share the remaining days as they desire. Pregnant Swedes may start receiving parental benefits 60 days prior to the expected birth date. The other parent can take temporary leave for up to 10 days prior to the birth or adoption.

Child marriage is illegal in Sweden, restricting anyone under 18 from marrying, with no exceptions. Since 2019, child marriages conducted abroad are not recognized in Sweden.



### **Gender and Politics**

In 1919, Sweden passed a law providing universal and equal voting rights for women and men. In the 1921 election, the first in which women could vote and run, five women were elected to Parliament. Today, Sweden considers gender equality a fundamental constitutional standard and an explicit policy objective. In 2014, it adopted the world's first feminist foreign policy to address barriers to gender equality and include a gender perspective in its programs, but revoked it in 2022.

In 2018, the government established the Swedish Gender Equality Agency to ensure effective implementation of gender equality policy. The agency coordinates support among all levels of government and businesses to achieve cooperative policy goals. As of January 2025, women hold about 45% of seats in Parliament, similar to Finland (46%) and Norway (44%), but higher than the US (28% - both houses combined).

## Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

GBV is an issue in Sweden. As of 2024, about 21% of women aged 15 and older had experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) in their lifetime, higher than Norway (20%), but on lower than the US (26%). Some evidence shows that IPV increased in Sweden during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (see *Sustenance and Health*), primarily due to restricted movement and more time perpetrators and survivors spent together. To combat GBV, Sweden implemented a 10-year national strategy in 2016 to prevent and respond to men's violence against women. The strategy emphasizes preventive measures and support for victims, such as increasing state subsidies to women's and girls' shelters. On a positive note, the country has a low femicide (murder of a woman based on her gender) rate by global standards, at 0.4 per 100,000 females in 2022, lower than Norway (0.5), Finland (0.9), and the US (2.8).

## Sex and Procreation

Between 1960-2024, Sweden's birthrate declined from 2.2 births per woman to 1.7, similar to the US rate (1.8). Likely due to mandatory sex education (see *Learning and Knowledge*) and laws preventing child marriage, Sweden's adolescent fertility rate was 2 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 in 2022, far lower than the US rate (14). Sweden passed its first Abortion Act in 1938, which only allowed abortion for medical, humanitarian, or hereditary reasons. Today, abortion is legal and available with no restrictions up to and including the 18th week of pregnancy, and Swedes can obtain a special permit for later abortions.

## Homosexuality in Sweden

Sweden legalized same-sex adoption in 2003 and marriage in 2009. Swedes generally support gay rights. The country is one of the world's safest and most accepting of homosexual people, though prejudice still exists among some residents. Sweden hosts more Pride festivals per capita than any other country. The annual Stockholm Pride Parade is the Nordic region's largest pride festival. At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Sweden. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.



## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Language Overview

Swedish is Sweden's national and official language of government. The law also protects five official national minority languages: Finnish, Meänkieli, Romani, Sámi, and Yiddish. Some residents use English, German, or Swedish Sign Language, as well as several other primarily foreign languages.



### Swedish

**Svenska** (Swedish) belongs to the North Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. It is most similar to Danish and Norwegian but also close to Icelandic and Faroese. Swedish evolved from Old Norse, one of the Vikings' languages (see *History and Myth*). In the 10th century, Swedish emerged as a distinct language and used the runic alphabet (a set of letters that represent sounds and concepts) in its early history. Swedish adopted the Latin alphabet as Sweden Christianized in the early 13th century (see *History and Myth*). Regional trade routes (see *Economics and Resources*) also had a major influence on the language, leading Swedish to adopt many German words.

The 16th-century publication of the first Swedish Bible (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*) standardized modern Swedish, simplifying its grammar and verb system. Soon after, Swedish became the prominent language in government, education, and society. In 2009, Swedish became the country's official language by law with the passing of the Language Act. Today, over 90% of residents speak Swedish.

Swedish features a similar grammatical system and alphabet to English, which makes it relatively easy for English speakers to learn and understand. Compared to English, Swedish uses three additional vowels: "å" (pronounced like the "o" in own), "ä" (like "ai" in hair), and "ö" (like "i" in circus). Because the letter "y" is always a vowel, the language has a total of 9 vowels and 20

consonants. Further, Sweden is home to six major regional Swedish dialects that have recognizable differences in accent but are mutually intelligible.

## English

The foreign language most spoken in Sweden is English. As of 2022, about 86% of Swedes understand and can use English to some extent, even though less than 0.5% are native English speakers. People in the South typically have the highest English proficiency. Swedes start learning English as a second language early in school (see *Learning and Knowledge*) and tend to have constant exposure to English-language media.

## Other Languages

The most common foreign languages after English are German, French, Spanish, Russian, and Turkish. As of 2022, about 2.7 million Swedes use German to some extent, and about .04% are native speakers. Other languages exist in Sweden as a result of migration (see *Political and Social Relations*). Over 82,270 Arabic and 56,200 Polish speakers reside in the country. The Language Act of 2009 also protects the use of Swedish Sign Language, which counts around 8,000 users as of 2021.

**Official National Minority Languages:** In an effort to promote ethnic preservation and protect speakers' right to use their minority languages, in 2000, Sweden recognized five minority cultures and languages. To qualify as an official national minority language, it must be a language, not a dialect, and people must have spoken it in Sweden without interruption for a prolonged period (about 100 years). The most common minority language is Finnish, with around 40,200 speakers as of 2022. About



40,000 residents use Romani and 30,000 Meänkieli, a Finnish language spoken by the Tornedalers (close relatives of the Finns – see *Political and Social Relations*).

Today, fewer than 6,000 Swedish residents speak one or more of five Sámi languages (the Sámi are Sweden's only

indigenous group – see *Political and Social Relations*). Most Sámi users speak North Sámi and a few Lule Sámi, while the other languages are nearly extinct. Estimates suggest that between 1,500-3,000 native Yiddish speakers reside in Sweden.

### **Communication Overview**

Communicating competently in Sweden requires some knowledge of Swedish and the ability to interact effectively using language. This notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). These forms of communication ensure statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.



### **Communication Style**

Swedes tend to be direct communicators. Although small talk is uncommon, conversation is generally participative, as Swedes encourage others to share their perspectives. Swedes often consider interrupting conversation rude and wait for the speaker to finish before responding. While Swedes often have agreeable conversations, avoiding conflict or confrontation, they may look away or stop talking to show anger. If conflict does arise, Swedes tend to address it directly yet diplomatically.

Because Swedes typically are direct and reserved, some foreign nationals perceive them as impolite. Swedes intend to present themselves as respectful, not offensive. They consider long pauses and remaining silent appropriate and do not attempt to fill periods of silence in conversation. Nevertheless, they may view prolonged silence as a sign that their conversation partner has little interest in speaking with them or continuing the conversation.

Swedes tend to have reserved body language. They do consider eye contact important, as it conveys respect and attentiveness. Swedes may perceive avoiding eye contact as a sign that the other person is not interested in the conversation. Traditionally, touching during conversation, such as a hand on the arm or

elbow, is uncommon. However, physical contact is becoming more common in casual settings among friends and family. Swedes also tend to stand at least an arm's length from each other during conversation (see *Time and Space*).

## Greetings

Swedes value greetings as a sign of respect and politeness. Standard greetings vary by region and context, though the most common in any setting is a brief, firm handshake with direct eye contact. In more casual settings or with younger people, a head nod or brief raise of the hand, like a wave, is sufficient if people are too far away from each other to shake hands. Family and close friends may **kramas** (hug) when greeting one another. A short bow is also common. Like in the US, close male friends may half-hug and lightly pat each other on the back if they have not seen each other in a long time. In rural areas, shaking hands is not as common in casual settings, where Swedes may reserve a handshake for sealing an agreement or resolving a disagreement. In formal situations, rural Swedes typically shake hands. Further, many Swedes shake hands with each person present when entering or leaving a social setting.

Swedish greetings are accompanied by the phrase **hej** ("hello"), **god morgon** ("good morning"), **god dag** ("good day"), or **god natt** ("good night"). To casually ask "how's it going?" with friends,



one says, "**hur är läget?**" Swedes typically say goodbye with the phrase **hej då** ("goodbye").

## Names

Swedish names generally consist of two given names followed by a surname (last name). Many Swedes go by their middle rather than their first name. Historically, Swedes formed surnames by adding "son" to the end of their father's given name so that the child's last name would indicate that they were their father's child. Consequently, some of the most common Swedish last names today are Andersson and Eriksson. Traditionally, surnames are patronymic (indicating the father), though today, the parents may choose to give either of

their surnames to their child. Many parents name their children after a relative or give them a traditional family name.

### Forms of Address

Swedes commonly address everybody by their first name, even elders and those with professional degrees, and reserve titles for highly formal occasions. In formal settings, Swedes may use titles like **Herr**. (“Mr.”) and **Fru**. (“Mrs.”). In 2015, the *Swedish Academy Dictionary*, the official dictionary of the Swedish language, added the gender-neutral pronoun **Hen** (similar to “they”) to refer to a person without indicating a gender.

### Conversational Topics

Since Swedes are typically direct, they tend to converse about topics they consider functional. Common conversational topics are the weather, sports, and travel. Modesty is important to many Swedes, and they generally avoid boasting or talking much about themselves during conversation. To avoid offense, foreign nationals should not discuss illness, politics, and religion. They should not compare Swedish cities or regions to others, as many Swedes are proud of their own. In addition, they should not show off or boast, talk to strangers, or convey too much outward emotion.



### Gestures

Because they are reserved, Swedes typically limit hand gestures while speaking. Although Swedes generally are not animated, they use some gestures in conversation to emphasize discussion points. Like in the US, the thumbs-up gesture signals approval, but instead of crossing one’s fingers to wish someone good luck, Swedes **håller tummarna** (“hold your thumbs”), wrapping their fingers around the thumb to form a fist.

### Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.



## Useful Words and Phrases

English	Swedish
Hello	Hej
Nice to meet you	Trevligt att träffas
Yes	Ja
No	Nej
Thank you	Tack
Please	Snälla / tack
You're welcome	Varsågod
I'm sorry	Jag ar ledsen
Excuse me	Ursäkta mig
I don't understand	Jag förstår inte
What is your name?	Vad heter du?
My name is...___	Jag heter...___
Where are you from?	Var kommer du ifrån?
How's it going?	Hur är läget?
I am from...	Jag är från...
Goodbye	Hej då
Good morning	God morgon
Good day	God dag
Good night	God natt
How do you say this?	Hur säger du det här?
What is this / that?	Vad är detta / det där?
May I please have...?	Skulle jag kunna fa...?
Do you speak English?	Pratar du engelska?
What do you want?	Vad vill du?
What time is it?	Vad ar klockan?
Yesterday	Igår
Today	Idag
Tomorrow	Imorgon
Where is the...?	Var finns...?
Who?	Vem?
When?	När?
Where?	Var?
Which?	Som?
Why?	Varför?
Car	Bil
Plane	Flygplan
Bus	Buss
Train	Taget

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 99%

### Early Education

Before the arrival of formal education that accompanied the introduction of Christianity in Sweden (see *History and Myth*), regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, and historical knowledge to younger generations. The indigenous



Sámi peoples (see *Political and Social Relations*) taught their children by demonstrating everyday tasks essential to survival. Sámi fathers typically taught boys hunting, fishing, and woodcarving, while mothers taught girls household skills, weaving, and farming.

In the 9th century, as Roman Catholicism gained a foothold in Sweden, monasteries began to establish educational institutions and banned many indigenous practices (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Throughout the 13th century, Swedes established cathedral schools to prepare boys as servants of the Catholic Church. In 1477, Pope Sixtus IV (the leader of the Roman Catholic Church) authorized the opening of Uppsala University, the first university in Sweden, to prepare boys of noble families for priesthood. The Catholic Church remained the primary provider of formal education until the 16th century, when Sweden embraced Protestantism (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Reforms in the 17th century created trivial schools as the second level of education, providing education to middle- and upper-class boys. This level lasted 8 years and covered subjects such as Latin and Greek grammar, rhetoric, and dialect. After trivial school, some students began gymnasium school, which lasted 4 years and helped prepare them for university. Throughout the 18th century, educational reforms emphasized a centralized

system for formal education and instruction in the Swedish language.

### Education in the 19th Century

During the 19th century, Sweden began implementing a legal framework for compulsory early education to raise literacy among Swedes. In 1842, the Swedish Parliament passed the **Folkskolestadgan** (Public School Code), which mandated that each municipal government establish a **folkskola** (people's school) with at least one teacher, usually a priest, who was responsible for building a curriculum that typically covered 3-4 years of education. Many Swedes resisted sending their children to *folkskola*. Members of the country's large peasant population were often too poor to pay for school and lived in remote areas far from any, while many middle- and upper-class citizens preferred private tutors. To address low enrollment, the government issued the first standard curriculum in 1878, which set general guidelines for school schedules and sought to enhance teacher training.

Along with the development of a public school system for boys, a system of private schools for girls emerged. In the 18th century, education for upper-class girls had begun in the form of boarding schools, which primarily taught French and sewing. Throughout the early 19th century, education for girls expanded



to include more subjects, though only at private institutions. In 1874, Parliament subsidized private girls' schools to account for economic disparities among students, as many poor girls could not attend due to high fees. These subsidies resulted in many girls' schools opening, often outside of large cities. These rural schools gave more girls access to formal education, many for the first time.

### Education in the 20th Century

Sweden's economic growth in the early 20th century (see *Economics and Resources*) expanded the middle class and caused many Swedes to demand a better and more equal

educational system (see *Political and Social Relations*). In 1905, grammar school statutes established **realskola** (lower secondary school), which required 3 years of *folkskola* to enter, followed by 3 years of optional **gymnasieskola** (upper-secondary school). After 5 years of *realskola*, students could receive a **realexamen** (lower certificate) to apply to trade school, or after 6 years, continue to higher education. In the 1930s, state-run schools accepted the admission of girls, which increased enrollment in secondary education for both genders.

After World War II (see *History and Myth*), the educational system underwent various reforms.

As many Swedes became interested in training, vocational education and apprenticeship instruction were added to the national school curriculum. Throughout the 1950s-60s, workshop schools emerged to provide education and training in skilled work. In 1962, **grundskola** (primary school) replaced *folkskola*, and the government expanded compulsory education to 9 years. Likewise, *gymnasieskola* reorganized to comprise a 3-year university preparatory program and two 2-year vocational programs. Throughout the 1980s, university enrollment increased, resulting in demand for the construction of more college campuses.

While educational equality continued to improve throughout the late 20th century, in the 1990s, the government implemented radical reforms that aimed to decentralize education to grant students and parents more control. In 1992, the country began a voucher program that provided public funding to municipal and **friskolor** (privately run schools), granting parents a choice between tuition-free private or public schools. Aiming to increase competition among schools, the national curriculum could be adapted however schools decided, as long as they covered the core subjects and received approval from the **Skolinspektionen** (School Inspectorate). By the early 21st century, this lack of regulation had resulted in varying degrees of teacher training,



resources, and educational opportunities, which created an overall lack of consistency in the Swedish educational system.

### Modern Education System

Since the 2000s, free school choice has increased school segregation by socioeconomic status and national background. In 2011, Sweden implemented reforms to teacher training and increased mandatory national subject tests to help address some of these disparities. While these tests aimed to assess school performance, they often resulted in inflated scores that appeared to indicate improved outcomes on the national exams, even though international assessment scores were declining. Many critics have argued the system requires more regulation to ensure adequate education at every school. In 2013, further increases in teacher's professional development required them to receive a teaching certificate to work under contract. Nevertheless, recent trends have highlighted the country's shortcomings in educational equity and teachers' abilities to work in multicultural settings.



Today, education in Sweden is free and compulsory for all citizens. Children are required to attend a preschool class at age 6, followed by a mandated minimum of 9 years of *grundskola* starting at age 7. Generally, government-run public schools dominate the educational system. Some international and foreign-language schools teach in their native language and according to the curricula of global educational programs or their home countries. As of 2022, about 12% of primary-age students attended private schools, higher than neighboring Finland (2%) and Norway (4%), but lower than Denmark (18%).

While the Ministry of Education and Research oversees all school accreditation and assures that educators meet national benchmarks, the Swedish National Agency for Education develops, administers, and monitors educational programs. Municipal and private schools are state-financed and free of

charge. In 2022, Sweden spent about 7.1% of its GDP on education, higher than Norway (3.9%), Denmark (5.3%), Finland (5.5%), and the US (5.4%). In a 2022 assessment of student performance in reading, math, and science, Sweden had similar scores to the US and United Kingdom.

### **Pre-Primary Education:**

Public **förskola** (nursery school) for children ages

1-5 charge a fee based on the family's size, income, and duration of care, though some attend fee-based private daycare centers. The early childhood education curriculum encourages the development of social-cognitive skills through play-based learning and emphasizes gender equality. In 2022, about 88% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in early education programs.



**Förskoleklass** (preschool) education is compulsory for 6-year-olds. This level of education prepares children for *grundskola* by improving their learning abilities. Children often participate in activities such as playing, singing, and drawing. Many local authorities also offer open preschools, which allow parents to attend class with their child. As of 2022, some 96% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in pre-primary school.

**Primary school:** *Grundskola* begins at age 7 and divides into three cycles: **lågstadiet** (elementary school, grades 1-3), **mellanstadiet** (middle school, grades 4-6), and **högstadiet** (high school, grades 7-9). Most schools follow the national curriculum, which covers history, geography, arts, math, natural sciences, and physical education. While English is a compulsory second language, instruction is primarily in Swedish, and the government permits education in Sámi or other official national minority languages used by local communities (see *Language and Communication*). Before graduating, students are required to complete **praktisk arbetslivsorientering** (practical working life orientation), which provides career guidance and preparation for entrance into the workforce. As of 2022, some 99% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary school.

**Secondary Education:** *Gymnasieskola* is optional and free of charge. To determine admission, each institution administers its own entrance exam, and students must have received passing grades in Swedish, English, and mathematics during their final year of *grundskola* to enroll. Students who do not meet these entry requirements can enroll in an introductory program, which prepares them for higher education or joining the workforce and typically takes 2 years to complete. Upper-secondary school offers 18 national programs (12 are vocational and 6 prepare students for university) that take 3 years to complete. Students who complete the vocational program often enter the workforce after graduating, though they can opt to continue to higher education with the addition of courses that provide eligibility for university enrollment. As of 2022, about 97% of children of the were enrolled in upper-secondary school.

**Post-Secondary Education:** Sweden has a large network of public colleges and universities, which are state-funded and free of charge for citizens. Higher education is divided into three levels, *grundnivå* (basic level), *avancerad nivå* (advanced level), and *forskarnivå* (research level), which are similar to US bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. programs. The **Stockholms**



**universitet** (Stockholm University) is one of Sweden's oldest and largest universities. Other notable institutions are the Karolinska Institute in Sola, Lund University, Uppsala University, and the University of Gothenburg.

Post-secondary vocational education offers 1-2-year programs, which partner with employers to produce a highly qualified labor force. The Ministry of Education and Research issues the Higher Vocational Education Ordinance, which regulates admission requirements, objectives, content, scope, and providers of the vocational curricula.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Swedes tend to value punctuality, structured agendas, and direct communication in the workplace. They typically show little emotion in professional settings and often limit physical touch.

### Time and Work

Sweden's workweek generally runs from Monday-Friday, with most business occurring from 9am-6pm. While hours vary by store size and location, shops in large cities are open daily from 9am-6pm, though some close at 4pm or earlier on Sunday. Grocery stores and shopping malls typically remain open until 10pm. In smaller towns, businesses may close as early as 3pm and on weekends. Many banks are open Monday-Friday from 9am-3pm, with some open until 6pm on Thursdays. Post office hours vary widely by location and day, but service is typically available between 9am-7pm on weekdays. Government offices operate from Monday-Friday between 9am-5pm.



**Working Conditions:** Sweden's Working Hours Act mandates a 40-hour workweek. Swedish law provides workers a range of protections and benefits such as paid leave, overtime pay, and daily *fika* (an informal coffee break that can occur in many forms and allows workers an opportunity to pause during the day). Sweden offers maternity leave, paternity leave, and parental leave (see *Sex and Gender*). **Försäkringskassan** (The Swedish Social Insurance Agency) provides additional parental benefits and supports job seekers, the sick, and people with disabilities. While Sweden has no national minimum wage, industry-specific **kollektivavtal** (collective agreements) usually establish sector-wide minimum pay standards. Unions are prevalent, as some 70% of Swedes are members. Generally, Sweden's labor rights are extensive and well-enforced, creating good labor conditions and flexible working schedules.



**Time Zone:** Sweden adheres to Central European Time (CET), which is 1 hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 6 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Sweden observes Daylight Saving Time between late March and late October.

**Date Notation:** Like the US, Sweden uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Unlike the US, Swedes typically write the year first, followed by the month and the day.

### National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- January 6: Epiphany
- March/April: Good Friday
- March/April: Easter Sunday
- March/April: Easter Monday
- May 1: Labor Day
- May/June: Ascension Day
- May/June: Pentecost
- June 6: National Day
- Late June: **Midsommardag** (Midsummer's Day, see p. 2 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*)
- October/November: All Saints' Day
- December 25: Christmas
- December 26: St. Stephen's Day

### Time and Business

Swedish business culture prioritizes punctuality, structure, and directness. Arriving to meetings precisely on time, rather than early, is the norm. Swedes are generally quick to get to business and devote little time developing rapport at the outset of meetings. Swedes are typically detail-oriented, adhere to strict agendas, and bring accurate and relevant data to meetings. They tend to communicate directly, plainly, and honestly, avoiding exaggeration and displays of emotion (see *Language and Communication*). Because many Swedish organizations have relatively flat hierarchies, meetings often include input from everyone present and can be long. While lunch and dinner

meetings are common, Swedes are typically serious about slowing down and taking a break from work during *fika*. Though Swedes regard verbal agreements as binding, they are usually made into written legal contracts once reached.

### Public and Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in Sweden depends on the nature of the relationship. Swedes typically value their personal space, especially among strangers, and stand at a greater distance than Americans during conversation.

**Touch:** Swedes generally greet with a firm handshake (see *Language and Communication*). Traditionally, Swedes avoid embracing in public, though evolving attitudes toward physical touch have made light touching among friends more common.

**Eye Contact:** This form of non-verbal expression is an essential part of conversing in Sweden (see *Language and Communication*). Swedes tend to interpret failure to maintain eye contact as an indication of a lack of interest.

### Photographs

It is illegal to take photographs in private settings without explicit permission from the subjects. Some government buildings, churches, and military installations limit photography. Foreign nationals should ask permission when photographing Swedes (especially children).



### Driving

Sweden's roads are generally well-maintained and safe. Drivers often adhere to road regulations, and traffic is usually

minimal, especially in rural areas. Roads can be snowy and icy during the winter, and vehicles must be equipped with studded tires from December-March. Use of headlights is always mandatory, even during daylight hours. Elk and moose crossings are common in rural areas. Like Americans, Swedes drive on the right side of the road. In 2022, Sweden had 2.7 road fatalities per 100,000 people, slightly higher than the Nordic average (2.4), but much lower than the US (12.8).

## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Swedish clothing, arts, and recreation reflect the country's rich history and natural elements.

### Dress and Appearance

**Traditional:** Some Swedes wear the **Svenska Nationella Klädedräkten** (Swedish National Costume) for holidays and special events. The men's version typically consists of a white blouse, vest, trousers, knee-high socks, and **trätofflor** (wooden clogs). Swedish women's

**Sverigedräkten** ("the Sweden dress") consists of a long skirt, white blouse, blue embroidered bodice, yellow **förkläde** (apron), and a **huvudbonad** ("headdress," usually made of linen or silk). Women often carry a **kjolvaska** ("skirt wash," a bag that ties to the waist) made of leather or wool.



Some Sámi people (Sweden's only indigenous group – see *Political and Social Relations*) and rural Swedes wear the **kolt** (dress or tunic, often with a high collar) as a symbol of cultural pride during formal ceremonies and while working, specifically when reindeer herding. Although traditional *kolt* materials have been reindeer leather and fur, fabrics such as wool, cotton, and silk are more common today.

**Modern:** Many Swedes follow European fashion trends that tend to be more conservative than flashy. High-quality garments made from natural fabrics such as wool, linen, and cotton are common. Men typically wear dark jeans or pants, shirts, and well-kept shoes. Women often wear jeans or pants with a blouse or t-shirt. In business settings, Swedes typically prefer conservative styles such as dark suits or dresses/pantsuits.

### Recreation and Leisure

Swedes often spend their leisure time with family and friends. Typical summer activities are biking, canoeing, fishing, boating,

and dancing. Many Swedes participate in **fredagsmys** (cozy Friday), when family and friends spend time together relaxing at the end of the workweek, often watching TV or movies. During the winter, many Swedes participate in outdoor sports such as ice hockey, ice skating, and skiing. In February, children are granted **sportlov** (sports leave), when they get a week off from school to spend time outdoors with family and friends. Ski resorts are often fully booked during this time.

**Holidays and Festivals:** Swedes hold a variety of festivals and community celebrations, many reflecting the country's Lutheran beliefs (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*), pagan traditions, or historical events. Held in late June, **Midsommar** (Midsummer) is a celebration that originates from the pagan celebration of the summer season, harvest, and fertility. Today, many Swedes celebrate *Midsommar* by traveling to the countryside to experience the longest days of sunlight (see *Political and Social Relations*) amidst nature. Generally, the festivities include lighting bonfires, singing, eating, and dancing. The **Midsommarstång** (Maypole), a tall painted pole decorated with flowers, greenery, and ribbons, sits at the center of gatherings as a symbol of the circle of life.



Another notable celebration is Lucia Day, or the Feast of St. Lucia, held on the night of December 13. Similar to *Midsommar*, the tradition originates from pagan beliefs in a mythical figure, Lucia (a name meaning “light”), who brought light on the longest night of the year. To celebrate, Swedes hold **Luciatåg** (“Lucia train”) processions throughout the country, led by girls who play the role of Lucia and wear

crowns made of candles. Other girls and boys dressed in long white gowns follow behind her, singing and carrying candle sticks to represent bringing light to the cold, dark winter.

Some national holidays (see *Time and Space*) commemorate important dates in Swedish history. On June 6, Swedes celebrate **Sveriges Nationaldag** (National Day of Sweden).

Traditionally, children dress in the country's national colors and offer flowers to the Swedish King and Queen (see *Political and Social Relations*). Other celebrations include performances, flag making, and traditional folk dancing (see “Music and Dance” below).

### Sports and Games

Swedes participate in a wide variety of sports such as soccer, tennis, ice skating, skiing, horseback riding, ice hockey, **bandy** (similar to



field hockey, but on an ice rink), and motorsports. Sweden participates in numerous international competitions such as the Summer and Winter Olympics (where it has won hundreds of medals), FIFA World Cup, and Ice Hockey World Championships, which the country has won 11 times (most recently in 2018).

Swedish athletes consistently excel in international competitions, especially ice hockey, golf, tennis, floorball (a type of hockey), and boxing. Björn Borg dominated the international tennis scene in the 1970s-80s, winning 11 Grand Slam titles. Golfer Annika Sörenstam won the US Open title three times (1995, 1996, and 2006), and Peter Forsberg won two NHL Stanley Cup championships while playing for the Colorado Avalanche in 1996 and 2001.

**Soccer: Fotboll** (soccer) is Sweden's most popular sport. Youth learn through pick-up games at school and amateur leagues. **Allsvenskan** is the country's 16-team professional league. Three of the most popular clubs – Malmö Fotbollförening, Idrottsföreningen Kamraterna Göteborg, and Allmänna Idrottsklubben (Stockholm) – comprise **De tre största** (The Big Three) of Swedish soccer. Sweden's national team has qualified for 12 World Cups, placing second in 1958 and third in 1994. Stockholm's **Nationalarenan** (National Arena) is the Nordic region's largest soccer stadium.

Internationally renowned footballer Zlatan Ibrahimović is regarded widely as the greatest Swedish player of all time. A

formidable striker, Ibrahimović was awarded the prestigious **Guldbollen** (Golden Ball), as Swedish best player of the year 12 times before he retired in 2023.

**Games:** One of Sweden's many popular games, **kubb** (bowler), is a cross between bowling and horseshoes. Two teams must knock over their opponents' wooden blocks by tossing wooden sticks at them before knocking over the center "king" block to win the game.



### Music and Dance

Traditional folk music features a variety of instruments like the accordion, **säckpipa** (bagpipes), fiddle, and **nyckelharpa** (keyed fiddle). Swedes traditionally perform versions of the polka, polska,

**vals** (waltz), and **snavsvisor** (drinking songs). Kulning, one of the earliest forms of Swedish music, was used to call livestock from far distances and often has a sad, haunting melody due to its quarter- and half-tone vocals.

**Små grodorna** (The little frogs) is a popular song and dance often performed during *Midsommar* and Christmas celebrations. Participants gather in a circle around the *Midsommarstång* or Christmas tree, while mimicking a frog leaping and touching their non-existent "tails" and "ears." The **shottis** is a fast-paced dance that couples perform by taking two left sidesteps followed by a four-step turn during which dancers sometimes hop.

A revival of folk music in the 1950s and 60s produced numerous **spelmanslag** (folk groups), which played traditional instruments. Musicians such as pianist Jan Johansson popularized American and British styles of music like jazz, foxtrot, swing music, and early rock and roll in Sweden. In the 1970s, **dansband** ("dance band," a combination of jitterbug, swing, and country) emerged, with an upbeat tempo and lyrics of love, memories, and friendship to which many Swedes dance.

**Other Musical Genres:** Today, Swedes listen to an array of foreign and Swedish musical styles like pop, *dansband*, heavy metal, rap, electronic, and jazz. Pop music's superband, ABBA, gained significant international acclaim in the 1970s-80s and remains one of the best-selling music groups of all time. Swedish House Mafia, along with Swedish DJ and remixer, Avicii, helped make electronic dance music mainstream in the 2010s.

## Literature

Sweden has a rich literary history and is home to eight Nobel laureates in Literature. Local literature developed slowly until 1541, when Lutheran reformers Olaus and Laurentius Petri translated the Bible, which expanded reading and writing in the Swedish language (see *Religion and Spirituality*). During the 18th century, Swedish replaced Latin as the primary language of literature, initiating a "Golden Age," as poets and writers began incorporating Swedish culture and history in their works, increasing their popular appeal.



In the 19th century, Romanticism, which emphasized emotions, individualism, nature, and an idyllic retelling of the past, played a part in nationalist movements during political upheavals (see *History and Myth*). In *Lycksalighetens ö* (The Isle of Bliss), Daniel Amadeus Atterbom tells the story of a king who risks his kingdom through temptation and symbolizes mankind's division from the divine. Erik Johan Stagnelius's *Liljor I Saron* (Lilies of Sharon) expresses the struggle of the human soul in a world of sin and darkness. Carl Jonas Love Almqvist's *Det går an* (It's Possible) unites Romanticism and social commentary by exploring female sexuality and gender roles through its main character, Sara Videbeck. August Strindberg's *Fröken Julie* (Miss Julie) and *Fadren* (The Father) use complex female characters to challenge social conventions. Many Swedes recognize Strindberg as one of the country's greatest authors.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries brought renewed interest in works reflecting Swedish national identity and idealism. Selma

Lagerlöf's **Gösta Berling's Saga** (The Story of Gösta Berling, 1891) and **Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige** (The Wonderful Adventures of Nils, 1906) transitioned from realism to imaginative storytelling through vivid characterization and descriptions. In 1909, Lagerlöf won the Nobel Prize in Literature for her ability to recreate Sweden's atmosphere through her fantastical stories. Verner von Heidenstam's collection of poems, **Vallfart och vandringsår** (Pilgrimage: The Wander Years, 1888), emphasizes themes of beauty, fantasy, and nationalism. His **Karolinerna** (The Charles Men, 1897) and **Folkungaträdet** (The Tree of the Folkungs, 1905) won him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1916.

In 1945, Astrid Lindgren won a publishing company's contest for her chapter book **Pippi Långstrump** (Pippi Longstocking). The book has since been translated into 78 languages, adapted to film and TV, and is regarded as one of the best-selling children's books of all time. In the 21st century, John Ajvide Lindqvist's **Låt den rätte komma in** (Let the Right One In, 2004) received global praise and was adapted into two films in 2008 and 2010. Most recently, Tomas Tranströmer won the Nobel Prize in 2011, "because he gives us fresh access to reality" through his condensed, translucent images.

### Folk Arts and Handicrafts

Sweden has a rich history of arts and handicrafts. Ceramics, paintings, embroidery, woodcarvings, and pottery often depict natural design elements such as animals, flowers, birds, and plants.



Techniques like **dalmålning** (valley painting) and **kurbits** ("gourd," a floral motif that symbolizes good luck in many regions) are used to create intricate floral and geometric patterns on wooden surfaces. Some designs vary by region.

The **Dalahäst** (Dala horse) is a carved, painted statue, often bright red with **kurbits**, that has become a symbol of the central Dalarna County.



## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Swedes typically consider meals important social events and consume a blend of traditional Swedish and multicultural dishes that reflect the country's traditions, agriculture, regional influences, and global ties.

### Dining Customs

Generally, Swedes eat three daily meals and traditionally consider **frukost** (breakfast) the most important meal of the day. Swedes typically eat lunch between 11am-2pm and have a heavier **middag** (dinner) around 6-8pm. In addition to these main meals, many Swedes take a **fika** (coffee break – see *Time and Space*) in the late morning or afternoon for a snack and to socialize.



When invited to a Swedish home, guests typically bring the host a gift like chocolates or flowers and something for any children present (see *Family and Kinship*). Swedes expect guests to arrive on time and remove their shoes before entering the home. Prior to the meal, hosts usually offer guests coffee. Swedes tend to eat nearly all food with utensils, the knife remaining in the dominant hand and fork in the non-dominant without switching. Swedes place utensils on their plate to indicate they have finished eating, and guests should wait for the host to offer second servings. To either accept or decline more food is proper, as long as the person consumes it all, as Swedes typically consider it impolite to be wasteful. Guests typically stay after the meal for conversation and coffee, then thank the host for their hospitality once they are ready to leave.

### Diet

Historically, Swedes explored global culinary influences, which resulted in many fusion dishes like Swedish tacos inspired by Mexican cuisine and lasagna from Italy. Even the national dish, Swedish meatballs, became a dish only after the introduction of the meatball from Turkey. The **smörgåsbord** ("table of open

sandwiches”), like a buffet, is a Swedish tradition of feasting on an array of different foods for several hours. Swedes often prefer *smörgåsbord* when hosting guests.

While varying by region and season, meals tend to highlight seafood and root vegetables. Herring, cheese, pork, elk, potatoes, and seasonal produce are common in many dishes, as is reindeer, a popular northern Swedish ingredient that draws on the culinary traditions of the indigenous Sámi peoples (see *Political and Social Relations*). Due to the country’s cold climate (see *Political and Social Relations*), preservation methods like smoking, salting, pickling, and fermenting have shaped Swedish cuisine.



Porridge and bread are staples in the Swedish diet. Wheat, rye, barley, and oats feature prominently in Swedish cuisine and used in part for their versatility and low cost. Swedes serve bread or

**knäckebröd** (“crispbread,” a dry rye bread that stays fresh for over a year) with most meals. Many Swedes forage for mushrooms, nettles, dandelions, cleavers, ground elder, and lingonberries – common ingredients in many home kitchens. Swedes use lingonberry jam as a condiment to accompany a variety of dishes, ranging from meatballs to pancakes and porridge. Sweden’s historical trade routes (see *History and Myth*) influenced today’s common flavorings like cinnamon, cardamom, anise, saffron, dill, allspice, and ginger.

### Meals and Popular Dishes

Breakfast in Sweden is typically simple and nutritious. A popular morning meal is porridge, often with toppings of fresh fruit or jam. Muesli cereal with *filmjök* (“sour milk,” yogurt that ferments at room temperature and has a mild buttery flavor) is another common breakfast meal. Swedish breakfast sandwiches are a more filling option and typically either open-faced or on buns with toppings like butter, cheese, cured meat, and vegetables. Swedes also occasionally indulge in sweet breads and cakes such as the Swedish *sirapslimpa* (“syrup loaf,” a lightly sweetened and spiced bread) or cardamom cake for breakfast.

For lunch, meals tend to be simple and warm. Many traditional lunch restaurants serve soups, salads, and various proteins with boiled potatoes or another side dish. Swedes commonly eat **husmanskost** (“house owner’s fare,” a style of cooking locally sourced comforting meals originating from peasants) lunches consisting of dishes like **köttbullar** (meatballs) or **Janssons frestelse** (“Janson’s temptation,” a potato gratin with cream and sprats – small, oily fish). The **Flygande Jacob** (Flying Jacob) is a popular chicken casserole dish made with dried herbs, bananas, cream, chili sauce, and topped with bacon and peanuts.

Dinner features similar dishes to lunch but with larger portions. One Swedish tradition is to have **ärtsoppa och pannkakor** (pea soup and pancakes) on Thursdays. **Korv stroganoff** (sausage stroganoff) is another traditional dish of sausage cooked in a creamy, tomato-based sauce and served over rice. **Pyttipanna** (“small pieces in a pan,” or Swedish hash) typically is made from leftover pan-fried diced potatoes, onions, and meat, and some type of sausage. Many families eat spaghetti, other pasta dishes, chicken, or fish for dinner. For special occasions like Christmas and Midsummer (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), feasts often comprise **julskinka** (Christmas ham), **köttbullar**, **gravlax** (dry-cured salmon), **sill** (pickled herring), and an array of side dishes.

Popular desserts are Swedish apple pie (made without a crust and typically sweetened and spiced with cinnamon) and **semla** (a soft, cardamom-flavored bun with a marzipan and whipped cream filling). **Kladdkaka** (Swedish sticky chocolate cake, made without baking powder for a crunchy exterior and goey interior) and **Prinsesstårta** (“princess cake,” sponge cake with a pastry cream and fruit filling covered with green marzipan frosting) are traditional Swedish cakes.



## Beverages

**Kaffe** (coffee) is a popular drink in Sweden, typically consumed throughout the day. In addition to water, common beverages

served with meals are milk, juice, and soft drinks. Warm drinks like tea, and during the Christmas season, **glögg** (mulled red wine made with sugar and spices like cloves and cinnamon), are also popular options. Sweden's most popular alcoholic beverage is beer. While Swedes drink varieties such as lagers, ales, and stouts, low-alcohol and non-alcoholic beers are becoming more popular. Wine is another common alcoholic beverage that many Swedes drink with dinner. **Brännvin** (Swedish vodka or aquavit, commonly called **snaps**) is a spirit made from grains or potatoes. Swedes often drink chilled *brännvin* (which is similar to vodka but often flavored with herbs or spices like caraway) during parties, holidays, and on special occasions.

### Eating Out

Restaurants in cities like Stockholm and Malmö range from fine dining establishments specializing in international and Swedish cuisine to cheaper casual bistros. Market halls sell a variety of fresh local produce, meat, bread, pastries, and local delicacies. Some restaurants include a service charge in the bill. Tipping is welcome but not expected, and many Swedes commonly round up their bill to the nearest whole number for friendly service.

### Health Overview

While the overall health of Swedes has improved in recent years, circulatory diseases and cancer remain predominant. Between 2000-24, life expectancy at birth increased from about 80 to 83 years, the same as neighboring Norway, but just above Finland (82) and higher than the US (81). During the same period, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased from about 3 deaths per 1,000 live births to 2, a figure



slightly lower than the EU average (3) and less than half the US rate (5).

### Traditional Medicine

Traditional treatment methods consist of knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's

beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Sámi healing relies on practices like spiritual connection, prayer, and herbal

remedies. Sámi healers primarily live among indigenous communities in far northern Sweden (see p. 2 of *Political and Social Relations*), though their number has declined in recent years. Today, folk medicine and other non-conventional practices are becoming increasingly popular and used alongside conventional medical treatments. Common alternative methods are acupuncture, chiropractic massage, and herbal remedies used to treat various conditions. Sweden's public healthcare system covers some complementary and alternative medicinal services.

### Healthcare System

Sweden's public healthcare system reflects a long history of public funding and local self-governance (see *Political and Social Relations*). The Health and Medical Services Act of



1982 states that the main objective for Swedish healthcare is high-quality equitable healthcare for the entire population. The Act formally made county councils responsible for the planning and provision of public health services. Today, the **Socialstyrelsen** (National Board of Health and Welfare) under the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs is responsible for developing standards and ensuring good health, social welfare, and care for all residents.

The government primarily uses taxes to fund Sweden's universal public healthcare, which is accessible to all residents, regardless of nationality. Sweden's public healthcare system is highly decentralized. As the national government is only responsible for policy, regulation, and supervision, the healthcare system prioritizes local concerns. While Sweden's 21 counties are responsible for financing, purchasing, and providing health services, its 290 municipalities provide more specialized service like elder care, rehabilitation services, and healthcare in schools. Public healthcare covers or highly subsidizes most health services like wellness physicals, specialist appointments, and emergency care. While patients are responsible for small co-pays, the government provides exemptions for vulnerable persons. As of 2024, it limits the annual co-pay per patient to

kr1,100 (about \$108). As a result, only approximately 3% of residents' healthcare costs are out-of-pocket.

Since public healthcare is universally accessible, only about 10% of Swedes utilize private healthcare, often due to its shorter wait times, more comfortable facilities, higher standards of service, and other amenities. The private healthcare sector is relatively small and more expensive than the comprehensive public healthcare system. The cost of private healthcare varies based on provider and insurance plan, though the annual average cost per patient is around kr4,000 (about \$391).

While pharmaceuticals are not free, they are affordable. The government caps the annual out-of-pocket prescription payment per patient at kr2,200 (about \$215). As of 2019, public and private dentists cover dental care costs for people aged 23 and under, and the government subsidizes dental care from age 24. As of 2023, Sweden spent nearly 11% of GDP on healthcare, much lower than the US (17%), but higher than Finland (10%) and Norway (8%). As of 2023, only about 3% of low-income Swedes reported unmet medical care needs, on par with the EU average (3%). Despite Sweden's high-quality public healthcare system, some residents in remote regions have difficulty accessing care, and wait times for some procedures increased

after the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Healthcare Challenges

The leading causes of death in Sweden are circulatory diseases, such as stroke and ischemic heart disease, which accounted for about



28% of deaths in 2023. Cancer was the second leading cause of death (25%), followed by Alzheimer's and other dementias (7%). While many experts rank Swedes' overall health very high, behavioral risk factors like diet, smoking, and alcohol consumption contributed to 32% of all deaths in 2021. As of February 2025, the government confirmed some 2.8 million cases of COVID-19, resulting in nearly 28,600 deaths. As of December 2023, about 72% of Swedes have received the full recommended course of a COVID-19 vaccine.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

Sweden's early economy was primarily agrarian, comprising clustered subsistence-based settlements and highly parceled farms. Though it varied over time, early land ownership was divided almost evenly between freeholders and the aristocracy. Around 1500 BC, Sweden became important to European trade, as it integrated with continental European commercial networks. Trade later flourished at the outset of the Viking Age (8th-11th centuries AD, see *History and Myth*), as Swedish Vikings seized control of Baltic Sea commerce and built trading posts throughout the region. Trading furs, farm goods, and enslaved people; Swedish Vikings accumulated substantial wealth. In the 13th century, Sweden began to trade extensively with merchants from the Hanseatic League, a powerful trading confederation of northern European towns and cities (see *History and Myth*).



Although the economy expanded as Sweden became a major European power in the late 16th and early 17th centuries (see *History and Myth*), the country spent huge sums on war. Stagnating and then shrinking in the wake of the Great Northern War (1700-21, see *History and Myth*), the Swedish economy remained turbulent during much of the 18th century. It weathered an especially serious downturn and famine from 1771-72, largely caused by poor harvests and high food prices. Nevertheless, this period of Swedish history also yielded several economic developments, such as the adoption of Europe's first banknotes in 1661 and the introduction of a new currency system in 1776.

Sweden's agricultural sector underwent major transformations between the mid-18th and early 19th centuries. Among several efforts to improve agricultural production was the 1803-07 **Enskifte** ("single shift"), which combined small farm plots into larger farms to increase efficiency. Farmers also introduced new

crops and cultivation methods, and subsistence-based agricultural production transitioned to free-market exchange. Around the same time, infrastructural developments (particularly enhanced roads and canals) reduced transportation costs, which supported the burgeoning agricultural sector.

Industrialization began earnestly in the 1840s. As European industry expanded, demand for input and staple goods – notably iron, wood, and oats – increased. Swedish producers met this demand while modernizing in the process. Expanding canals, roads, and rail networks – funded in part by state-borrowed foreign capital – supported new development. At the turn of the 20th century, an innovative engineering sector emerged. Financed by the state, banks, and foreign direct investment (FDI); sectors across the economy improved, and engineering became Sweden's primary economic area of focus.



Sweden's industries became the growth engine behind decades of economic expansion. World War I (see *History and Myth*) created foreign demand for specialized Swedish goods, causing a trade surplus and

enabling investment in the Swedish welfare state starting in the 1930s (see *History and Myth*). Swedish firms like Volvo, Saab, IKEA, and H&M emerged during the interwar period and the years that followed. Supported by a rise in exports after World War II (see *History and Myth*), the welfare state grew into what became known as the Swedish or "Nordic Model," which merges free markets and a generous public welfare system and encourages participation in unions. Public education, healthcare, childcare services, and social security programs expanded, supported by taxes and industrial growth that facilitated public spending. This model worked through the 1960s as industry grew and Swedish multinational firms became major players in the global economy.

In the 1970s and 80s, increased global competition undermined Sweden's industrial and engineering sectors. Compounded by



the state's expensive welfare obligations, the situation resulted in surging inflation and other issues leading to a major recession in the early 1990s (see *History and Myth*). Successive Swedish governments sought to minimize the impact by implementing labor programs and fiscal reforms. The recession also served as the impetus for Sweden's entry into the European Union (EU) in 1995, which eased some of the pressure by integrating Sweden into the larger European economy. Sweden did not, however, adopt the euro when introduced in 1999, and instead elected to retain the krona, its currency.



The Swedish economy grew rapidly in the early 21st century. Swedish manufacturing, commodities, and financial services – each growing by more than 4% annually between 1993-2010 – fueled the expansion, with the country's GDP more than doubling between 2001-08. Structural factors such as the quality of Swedish education, deregulation enacted in the 1990s, the growth of Swedish multinationals, and post-recession fiscal reforms help to explain this growth.

Nonetheless, the 2007-09 global financial crisis rocked Sweden, resulting in a 5% fall in GDP in 2009. The economy recovered quickly due to adept crisis management consisting of stimulus measures and deficit control. In 2010, GDP grew by more than 6%. While the eurozone debt crisis gripped Europe in the 2010s, Sweden became a refuge for capital fleeing the eurozone in search of more stable investment conditions.

Sweden's more liberal approach to the COVID-19 pandemic (see *Sustenance and Health*) resulted in a moderated economic decline relative to its Nordic neighbors, with only a 2.2% decline in GDP in 2020 and an efficient recovery. Today, Sweden is among the world's richest countries by GDP per capita, and it has the highest GDP among the Nordic countries, totaling some \$593 billion in 2023. In the same year, Sweden's unemployment rate was about 7.7%, and its debt-to-GDP ratio is the Nordic states' second lowest at around 31%. As of early 2024, experts

predict Sweden's relatively high inflation will fall and growth quicken in the coming years.

## Services

Accounting for about 65% of GDP and employing nearly 81% of the labor force in 2023, the services sector is Sweden's largest. Major subsectors include financial services, digital services, tourism, and education.



**Tourism:** Sweden welcomed some 7.3 million tourists in 2023, accounting for about 7.1% of GDP that year. During the warmer months, coastal and lakeside recreation draw many tourists. The Arctic region attracts visitors each

winter, often to see the aurora borealis (also known as the “Northern Lights”), during which strong winds create colorful streaks of light that move during the night sky. Major cities like Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö are popular destinations throughout the year.

**Financial Services:** Banks and financial technology (fintech) firms are major actors in Sweden's financial services sector. Four banks – Swedbank, Handelsbanken, SEB, and Nordea (formerly a Swedish bank, now based in Finland) – command a 60% share of Sweden's deposit market. Sweden's nearly 450 fintech firms offer diverse digital financial services, ranging from payments to credit provision and wealth management.

**Digital Services:** Sometimes called the “Silicon Valley of Europe,” Sweden is a world-leader in digital technologies. From 2017-21, Sweden was Europe's third largest recipient of venture capital investment in technological firms, and the country's extensive digital services sector accounted for some 6% of GDP in 2023. Many of Sweden's digital services companies such as Spotify, Skype, and Klarna are globally recognized brands.

## Industry

The industrial sector contributes some 23% of GDP and employs 17% of the workforce. Most Swedish industrial production is in engineering and manufacturing. The sector, which is export-

oriented, comprises the automotive, forestry, chemical, steel, and industrial equipment subsectors, among others.

**Automotive Manufacturing:** In 2023, Sweden exported some \$29.4 billion of vehicles. From 2005-2023, Swedish automakers produced an average of about 292,000 vehicles yearly. Though major Swedish automaker Saab went bankrupt in 2011, the country remains home to Volvo and Polestar.

**Forestry:** With nearly 55.6 million acres of productive forest land, Sweden is one of the world's largest exporters of timber and forestry products. Some 92% of timber harvested in Sweden is used to produce sawn goods and pulp. Sweden's forestry sector is highly sustainable, with net annual forest stock growth of 120 million cu m (see *Political and Social Relations*).

### Agriculture

This sector accounts for just under 2% of Swedish GDP and employs less than 2% of the workforce. Over 6% of Sweden's land area (mostly in the South) is arable, and its agribusinesses primarily produce dairy, cereals, oilseeds, potatoes, cattle, and pigs. Swedish farms have high crop yields by global standards.

**Dairy:** Totaling about 2.8 billion kg of milk-per-year, Sweden's dairy production is around one tenth that of Germany's (the EU's largest milk producer). Still, Sweden's dairy farms are the continent's most efficient, yielding an average 9,500 kg of milk per cow each year. Dairy farming is concentrated in Sweden's southern "milk belt," a region accounting for about 70% of production.

### Currency

Adopted in 1873, Sweden uses the Swedish krona (SEK or kr, plural "kronor") rather



than the euro. The krona is issued in six banknotes (20, 50, 100, 200, 500, and 1,000) and four coins (1, 2, 5, and 10). A krona divides into 100 öre, which are no longer issued. Merchants typically round to the nearest krona when customers pay with cash. Between 2019-23, US\$1 ranged between kr8.20-11.37.

## Foreign Trade

Exports, which totaled around \$302 billion in 2023, consisted of cars, refined petroleum, packaged medicaments, and vehicle parts sold to Germany (10%), Norway (9%), the US (8%), and Denmark (7%). Imports totaled about \$306 billion and consisted of cars, crude petroleum, vehicle parts, refined petroleum, and broadcasting equipment from Germany (17%), the Netherlands (11%), Norway (10%), and Denmark (6%).



## The European Union

Sweden joined the EU in 1995 after a national referendum yielded 52% support for accession. Initial

opposition to membership was strongest in the rural North. Sweden's EU member status offers several benefits associated with European economic integration such as access to a common export market, secure business environment, and improved access to FDI. Although recent economic analysis suggests that Sweden has benefitted comparatively little relative to other EU members, support for EU membership is at an all-time high among the Swedish public, with about 68% of Swedes in favor of retaining the country's EU status. Since Sweden did not adopt the euro after its introduction in 1999 and voted to retain the krona in 2003, its monetary policy is not directly tied to that of the European Central Bank. Nevertheless, the Riksbank (Sweden's central bank) is a member of the European System of Central Banks. Today, public opinion polls suggest that only around 30% of Swedes favor adopting the euro.

## Foreign Aid

Sweden provides substantial official development assistance (ODA), much of which it channels through international organizations, such as the United Nations and EU. In 2023, Sweden's total ODA was \$5.6 billion, or around 0.91% of gross national income. Sweden has provided military aid to Ukraine since Russia's invasion in 2022 (see *History and Myth*). From 2022 through late 2023, Sweden delivered over \$2 billion of tanks, advanced weapons systems, ammunitions, and personal protective equipment to Ukraine.

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

Sweden's physical and telecommunications infrastructures are well-developed, and its media landscape diverse and free.

### Transportation

Travel by privately owned vehicle (POV) is Sweden's most common method of transportation, although with a POV ownership rate of 472 cars per 1,000 people in 2023, Sweden ranks below the European Union average



(542). Sweden's public transport infrastructure is well-developed; with bus, rail, ferry, and taxi services available across much of the country. Ferry services connect Sweden to other countries in the region and the Swedish mainland to the Stockholm and Gothenburg archipelagos. Ridesharing services like Uber and Bolt are widely available. Stockholm has an extensive rail system, including its **Tunnelbana** (or *T-bana*, subway), light rail, commuter rail, and tram systems. About 68 mi of *T-bana* track traverse 100 stations on 3 primary routes that divide into 7 lines. The commuter railway links Stockholm to Uppsala. Many Swedes also walk and ride bicycles.

**Roadways:** Sweden has about 123,805 mi of roadways. Around 80% of state-owned roads are paved, with the remaining 20% largely serving rural, forested areas. Sweden has an extensive national roadway system that traverses the country (with greater density in the South). In 2018, Sweden introduced the world's first electric road, which charges electric vehicles as they drive along a 1.2-mi stretch near Stockholm. The government also has plans to electrify the E20 motorway (from Malmö to Alingsås). In a 2019 global assessment, Sweden ranked 8 of 141 countries in road connectivity and 20 in quality of road infrastructure.

**Railways:** Sweden's 6,780-mi-long rail network is the Nordic region's longest. Passenger rail operators, like state-owned SJ (previously **Statens Järnvägar**, or Swedish State Railways) and

various private firms, completed nearly 244 million passenger trips in 2023. Railways link Sweden to Norway and Denmark, and a planned Sweden-Finland line is expected to open in 2025. Stockholm Central Railway Station is Sweden's largest, handling about 300,000 daily passengers.

**Ports and Waterways:** Sweden has 1,275 mi of navigable waterways. Two major routes from Stockholm and Gothenburg proceed inland through a series of interconnected lakes, canals, and rivers and are heavily transited from May-September. In 2022, around 90% of Sweden's international trade transited through its seaports, of which Gothenburg is the largest.



**Airways:** As of 2023, 149 of Sweden's 231 airports have paved runways. Stockholm Arlanda Airport (ARN) is Sweden's primary air transit hub and one of three bases for Scandinavia Airlines (SAS), the flag carrier of Denmark, Norway, and

Sweden. Although SAS has the largest market share of airlines in Sweden, it filed for bankruptcy in 2022. Nevertheless, with the support of a \$1.2 billion investment from Air France-KLM, it is expected to recover by mid-2024.

## Energy

Sweden is a global leader in decarbonization. In 2023, biofuels and waste accounted for about 29% of Sweden's total energy supply, followed by nuclear (27%), oil (19%), hydropower (12%), wind and solar (8%), coal (3%), and natural gas (1%). In 1991, Sweden became the first nation to introduce a carbon tax and today levies the world's highest carbon tax at \$126 per metric ton. Because Sweden produces no oil or natural gas, it relies on imports to sustain its oil-reliant transport sector. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Swedish government made efforts to reduce reliance on Russian oil and natural gas, which in 2021 represented 8% and 30% of imports, respectively.

## Media

In 1766, Sweden passed the world's first press freedom law, which banned censorship. Today, Sweden's media are free,

well-developed, and independent from political influence. Sweden ranked 4 of 180 countries in a 2023 world press freedom index. Nevertheless, lawsuits, threats, and online hate campaigns target Swedish journalists. In extreme cases, reporters have been physically assaulted. In addition, recent laws designed to protect national security information have raised concerns about the possibility of government sanctions on journalism.

**Print Media:** While they are declining in circulation, Sweden's print media remain prevalent. Swedish publishing group Bonnier publishes Stockholm's daily newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, along with



*Expressen* and *Sydsvenskan*. *Svenska Dagbladet* is also popular. Norwegian firm Schibsted owns the tabloid *Aftonbladet*, which is the country's most circulated paper. *The Local* is Sweden's primary English-language newspaper.

**TV and Radio:** Radio penetration in Sweden is high, reaching around 70% of the population. ***Sveriges Radio*** (Swedish Radio) is Sweden's public radio provider and captures about 75% of the market. It offers 3 national channels; which broadcast news, culture, classical music, and youth programming, as well as 25 regional channels. MTG Radio and Bauer Media own all local broadcasting licenses for commercial radio. Television is more widespread than radio, as some 80% of Swedes watch daily. Public ***Sveriges Television*** (Swedish Television) is the largest broadcaster, followed by TV4, the biggest commercial channel.

### **Telecommunications**

In 2023 and 2022, Sweden had about 9 landline and 125 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, respectively. In 2024, 90% of households had 5G coverage.

**Internet:** In 2023, about 96% of Swedes were regular Internet users. While many Swedes access the Internet through mobile devices, Sweden has about 41 fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants.



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