

Nordic Solidarity and COVID-19

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Abstract: When the world was faced with the enormous challenge of COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020 Nordic solidarity and cooperation does not seem to have materialized. The Nordic countries have a strong regional cooperation framework and a long tradition of collaboration and tend to be perceived as a unified region in the international arena. Therefore, when confronted with a global crisis of this magnitude one would expect them to act in solidarity. However, joint political messages at the beginning of the crisis only stressed regional solidarity in already existing areas of cooperation. This lack of cooperation goes against small state theories that predict that small states seek international and regional cooperation to compensate for their structural weaknesses. In this paper we will examine how the Nordic countries reacted at the beginning of the crisis and explore whether the responses to the crisis reveal limits to Nordic cooperation and solidarity specifically.

Keywords: COVID-19, crisis response, Nordic cooperation, small states, solidarity

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Introduction

The Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – are known for their consensus-oriented and unified political processes and have long been hailed for their strong welfare systems. There is a long tradition for cooperation between the countries and the Nordic Council, founded in 1952, is in fact the oldest regional partnership in the world. Nordic cooperation has through the years grown into a unique multilevel regional cooperation, happening both on the ministerial and parliamentary level and touching on a wide range of topics like politics, economics, culture and security. This deep-rooted cooperation has created a sense of a Nordic identity that the states have used to develop a Nordic brand internationally. These small states also have a long tradition of working together on international affairs and within international organizations such as the United Nations where they present a united front that is to a large extent based on their shared values regarding human rights and equality. It is in the interest of small states like the Nordic countries to pool resources and work together to protect the international order in an international system where international law is

compromised, as they have fewer economic and military tools compared to larger powers (Lupel & Mälksoo, 2019).

The shared values of the Nordic states and their similar social structure are seen as the building blocks of Nordic cooperation by the Nordic public (Andreasson & Stende, 2017). The countries tend to see solidarity as a vital part of their cooperation. They seem to see themselves as belonging to the same group of like-minded welfare states. According to Wilde (2007), perceived sameness of this kind causes groups to feel solidarity amongst themselves that goes beyond mere cooperation, and is expressed in a shared feeling of reciprocal sympathy and responsibility between them that then promotes mutual support. In recent years this sense of solidarity between the Nordic states has also extended to cooperation between them when it comes to their security. In 2011, they agreed on a 'Nordic declaration of solidarity' that expressed their willingness to deepen cooperation and emphasize joint efforts to meet common challenges. In the declaration, they stress that based on their shared values and geographic proximity it is natural for the countries to cooperate when met with challenges arising in the area of foreign and security policy, in solidarity (Norwegian Royal Embassy, 2011).

When the world was faced with the enormous challenge of COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020, the Nordic region was also seriously impacted and had to act fast in responding to this unprecedented crisis. The reaction of the Nordic countries as small states to this global crisis will have been influenced by their size, for example it can be expected that the state administrative structures in the Nordic countries that are different than that of larger states, have had an impact on their ability to respond to the crisis (Sarapuu, 2010). Small states typically have to rely on cooperation with other states, often through international organizations. They also tend to make use of regional and international organizations to solve their soft security problems. For example, the small EU member states can make use of the pooled assets and regulatory framework of the EU to address issues such as border management, law and order, natural disaster response and pandemic control (Thorhallsson, 2018). This is also the case for the Nordic small states that traditionally work together within international organizations and have a strong regional cooperation framework that they tend to rely on in times of crisis.

However, it is interesting that when responding to the threat of COVID-19, a reliance on Nordic solidarity and cooperation does not seem to have materialized. Joint political messages only stressed regional solidarity in already existing areas of cooperation. This lack of cooperation goes against small state theories that predict that small states seek international and regional cooperation to compensate for their structural weaknesses, such as limited administrative capacity, a shortage of human resources and lack of economies of scale deriving from small populations (Sarapuu, 2010; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017; Jugl, 2019; Panke, 2010). In this paper, we examine how the Nordic countries reacted at the beginning of the crisis and explore whether the responses to the crisis reveal limits to Nordic cooperation and solidarity.

This paper seeks to advance the literature on small states by exploring the extent of Nordic cooperation, and solidarity specifically, when faced with crisis. It is of course difficult to assess solidarity: in this paper, we use Wilde's (2007) definition of solidarity, as something that goes beyond the concept of cooperation, indicating a deeper commitment of shared identity, affinity and reciprocity. How the Nordic countries reacted when faced with the common crisis of COVID-19 provides an excellent opportunity to study if increased incentives for closer cooperation in recent years and political declarations of solidarity have really delivered this deeper commitment of solidarity.

For the purpose of exploring the extent of cooperation and solidarity between the Nordic countries during the COVID-19 crisis, analysis of official documents, research papers and media coverage were used in conjunction with semi-structured interviews. Three in-depth interviews with key government officials and politicians were undertaken via Zoom, as well as an analysis of online debates and conferences.

Small states stick together: Nordic cooperation and the development of Nordic solidarity

The five Nordic states can all be classified as small, even though they differ in size. Population size is the most common single variable in defining the size of states. Most studies in political science and economics categorise small states as having resident populations below 10 or 15 million (Thorhallsson, 2018). It has however proven more useful to adopt a continuum of size approach when focusing on the internal aspects of small states. However, resource constraints and small state ecology become more exaggerated the smaller the population is (Ólafsson, 2020). The limited population numbers of the Nordic states, compared to the more powerful European neighbouring states, have an effect on their military, economic and administrative capabilities. The ramifications associated with their size have led the Nordic states to respond to challenges based on an understanding of their position as small states, using a traditional, cautious and flexible approach and a consensus seeking behaviour (Thorhallsson & Elínardóttir, 2020). Traditionally, small states rely on forging alliances and advancing their agendas through negotiations and participation in rule-based multilateral institutions. In a world where challenges are increasingly global and not solved with military power, power has gained a new meaning as power itself is more often diffused among stakeholders of specific issues on the global agenda. No one state can handle global challenges alone and therefore power also lies with those that are able to foster cooperation and address challenges together working towards shared interests. The tradition of small states working together regionally and internationally is therefore a powerful tool in today's world when states need to tackle global challenges (Tarp & Hansen, 2013).

The Nordic countries have a long tradition of pooling resources and working together both regionally and internationally to further and protect their interests as small states in the international arena. The cooperation is not only built on practicality when it comes to exerting power and furthering interest, Nordic cooperation has deep roots in politics, economics and culture. Nordic affinity is based on geographic proximity, cultural similarity and a long history of interaction and cooperation (Official Nordic co-operation, n.d.). The common features include the similarity of the Scandinavian languages, the close relationship between the state and the church and ultimately the social democratic welfare state that is built on generous and universal social benefits financed through a high tax rate and distributed in the form of services such as free health care, schools and higher education (Strang, 2016).

Ideas on a particular Nordic social model stem from the years before the Second World War when the region started to brand itself as a democratic haven at the same time as the continent was faced with the challenges of totalitarianism. However, the Nordic countries failed to establish a military alliance which led to different choices being made regarding defence and security. Norway, Denmark and Iceland opted for NATO membership and Sweden maintained neutrality. Finland living in close proximity to the Soviet Union had restrictions in its foreign policy that did not allow for side-stepping (Brommesson, 2018). Although the countries chose different paths to security, the idea of the Nordic region as especially peaceful is a big part of how all five Nordic countries present themselves internationally.

The institutional framework for Nordic cooperation, the Nordic Council, was established in 1952; it is the oldest and most wide-ranging regional partnership in the world. Subsequently, the Nordic Council of Ministers was founded in 1971. In general, the cooperation focuses on areas where a Nordic approach generates added value for the countries and the citizens of the region. Discussions on issues relating to foreign security and defence matters were practically absent from the agenda and up until the end of the Cold War, Nordic collaboration regarding security was mostly limited to the coordination of UN peacekeeping operations (Strang, 2016). Changes in the security environment and the weakening of multilateral institutions led to an increased interest and support for further cooperation in the field of Nordic foreign security and defence cooperation. The Nordic Foreign Ministers commissioned Thorvald Stoltenberg, former Minister for Foreign Affairs in Norway, to write a report with recommendations on how to strengthen Nordic cooperation in foreign and security policy in 2009. That same year the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF), a structure for Nordic cooperation in defence was established. The main purpose of NORDEF is to strengthen the participating nations national defence and facilitate efficient common solutions. In 2018, the Nordic Defence Ministers presented a political framework for defence cooperation in the Nordic region called 'Vision 2025'. The framework includes general guidelines and 16 specific goals with the aim to make NORDEF a platform for political dialogue, information sharing and if possible, close coordination of common Nordic positions on possible crisis situations, including terror, cyber and hybrid (NORDEF, 2018).

Nordicity and the emphasis on a Nordic identity has also become a significant tool in the statecraft of individual Nordic countries giving them a higher profile in the international arena. Similar cultures and languages support the development of this common Nordic identity with a unique trust in national, regional and local authorities (Nilsson & Jokinen, 2020). In 2011 the Foreign Ministers of the five Nordic countries signed the 'Nordic declaration of solidarity', which was incidentally one of the thirteen recommendations that Stoltenberg made in his 2009 report. The declaration emphasized the common interests and values of the countries in promoting democracy, international law, gender equality and sustainable development, and furthermore stressed that because of these shared values it would be natural for the countries to cooperate in solidarity, when met with challenges arising in the area of foreign and security policy (Norwegian Royal Embassy, 2011).

Defining solidarity

According to Brubaker and Cooper (2000), the idea of a collective identity is based on a fundamental and consequential sameness among members of a group. This can either be understood as a sameness in itself or perceived sameness. This sameness is expected to manifest itself in solidarity, in shared dispositions or consciousness, and collective action as has been the sentiment in Nordic cooperation through the years. Therborn (1995) also talks about this kind of collective identities, like in the case of Nordicness, it is based on the idea that a group of people see themselves as being similar that causes them to feel solidarity amongst themselves. However the concept of 'solidarity' in international relations seems to be more talked about in public debate whereas other aspects of political association have gotten more theoretical attention such as the concepts democracy, nationalism and community. As defined by Wilde (2007, p.171) solidarity is in essence "the feeling of reciprocal sympathy and responsibility among members of a group which promotes mutual support". The concept thus is connected with a certain emotional element, being associated with friendship, love or other essentially private matters. This may explain why it has not gotten much theoretical attention.

However, the concept is highly relevant for examining collective action in the international community, that has helped shape institutions and policies within and between states.

Waterman (2001) identifies six characteristics to achieve international solidarity: identity, substitution, complementarity, reciprocity, affinity and restitution. He stresses that international solidarity cannot be achieved purely out of a sense of moral duty but rather as the rational expression of shared interests. The use of the concept in relations to Nordic cooperation as depicted for example in the 'Nordic declaration of solidarity' in 2011 is interesting as it, like Wilde (2007) and Waterman (2001) define it, goes beyond the concept of cooperation indicating a deeper commitment of shared identity, affinity and reciprocity. The welfare state is often seen as the result of a struggle for solidarity and the institutional expression of solidarity, so it is not surprising that the Nordic states, that build their cooperation on their common values based on the democratic welfare system, should see solidarity as a vital part of their cooperation. However, it is interesting to look at how far such solidarity can be realised in a world where states tend to first look to their own interests and examine how this materialised in the first responses to the Covid-19 crisis in the Nordic Region.

Trust and Nordic solidarity

One of the defining features that has developed Nordic cooperation into something as strong as solidarity has been the trust that ties the five Nordic countries together. In the wake of COVID-19 the President of the Nordic Council, Silja Dögg Gunnarsdóttir, called for closer cooperation of the Nordic countries to fight the pandemic. She emphasized that,

the Nordic countries have exceptionally close relations with each other and a level of trust unique anywhere in the world. It is now that the friendship and trust we have built up must show its worth (Nordic Council letter to Prime Ministers, 2020).

The emphasis on friendship and trust was also a recurring theme in the interviews with government officials in Iceland. One government official described Nordic solidarity as being,

based on common values, a common culture and history, which enables us to work together on a solid foundation with a great deal of trust between both people and systems, in fact, and is based on a long experience of deep cooperation (Personal communication, October 7, 2020b).

Other governmental officials also talked about the importance of this extensive and deep cooperation on all levels of governance that generates both trust and solidarity. "It is in relations between people, it is this trust that makes us share with the Nordic countries, and them with us, more information and opinions, or attitudes, than with other countries" (Personal communication, October 7, 2020a). Interviewed government officials describe Nordic solidarity as something that has developed with time through close cooperation that has generated trust between the countries and made the cooperation both structured and organic. This trust has generated a certain solidarity between the states where they look to each other in times of trouble. Or as one politician put it, when comparing the relationship between the Nordic countries to that of a family,

What is the first thing you do when you don't know how high the oven temperature should be when making a lamb roast? You call your mother! You just trust that she will know, and it is maybe a little similar with us politicians in the Nordic countries. (Personal communication, October 6, 2020).

Nordic cooperation also enjoys widespread public support according to an extensive survey carried out by The Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council in 2017. The survey reveals that more than 90 percent of the population consider Nordic cooperation important or very important, with two-thirds of respondents supporting more Nordic cooperation. In all of the states a majority of the population want the cooperation to be increased. Recent global developments are seen by the public as a reason to further strengthen Nordic cooperation.

The most important basis for Nordic cooperation according to respondents is considered to be the shared values and the similar social structure of the Nordic countries. About a third of the respondents consider these two to be the most important. The main typical Nordic values mentioned are freedom of speech, equality, human rights and democracy (Andreasson & Stende, 2017). The Nordics therefore seem to see themselves as belonging to the same group of like-minded small welfare states and are proud of many of the characteristics of the region. The Nordic states are often at the top of international rankings concerning prosperity, transparency, gender equality and happiness, among other things (World Happiness Report, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2020; Transparency International, 2019; Legatum Institute, 2019). Even though the Nordic countries share a feeling of togetherness and promote Nordicism outside the region they still engage in friendly competition and comparison. It should also be noted that this emphasis on Nordicism abroad does not necessarily present itself in political discussions in the region and Nordic cooperation is never an issue in election debates (Strang, 2016). Nonetheless, the feeling remains that a basic Nordic identity exists based on shared values, a collective identity which has grown in recent years (Andreasson & Stende, 2017).

Based on this perception of sameness as expressed by the political elite, as well as the Nordic population, we would expect the Nordic countries to fall for cooperation and act in solidarity when faced with a global crisis of this magnitude.

Nordic cooperation in times of crisis

At the beginning of 2020, the world awoke to a new reality with the harsh arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, a transboundary crisis characterized by great complexity. The pandemic is an urgent threat to basic structures and fundamental values of nation states where major decisions have had to be taken under pressure, time constraints and deep uncertainty. The Nordic countries were no exception as skiers returned home infected from Austria, Italy and Germany, and decisions had to be taken in haste. Surprisingly in light of the shared values and close cooperation of the Nordics, the Nordic countries did not respond in unison when the crisis occurred. In the same manner as all nation states, the reactions were national.

The first case of COVID-19 was reported in Denmark on February 27. On March 13 the unprecedented announcement came from Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen to close the Danish borders (Frandsen & Mauricio, 2020). Five days later Denmark went into a lockdown when department stores and restaurants closed their doors and a ban on public events with more than 10 persons was imposed ("Denmark bans group," 2020). The first case was reported in Norway on February 26 and two weeks later, on March 12, the country went into a national lockdown followed by a travel ban and ultimately the shutting of borders a mere two weeks

later (Norwegian government, 2020). Finland had its first case at the end of January, with a Chinese traveller from the Wuhan district, but managed to contain the spread at the time by quarantine and contact tracing. A month later, on February 26, Finnish skiers returning from Italy and Austria brought the disease back to Finland. Finland declared a state of emergency on March 16, shut down schools and public facilities and closed down the national borders (Finnish government, 2020). At the same time, Finland made the news when medical gear was distributed to hospitals from a secret cold war stash (Anderson & Libell, 2020). Finland was better equipped than the other Nordic countries with respect to emergency stocks, something that may have to do with Finland's historical experiences from the Second World War. The country has a certain preparedness to act decisively and collectively in times of abrupt crises (Strang, 2020). The same kind of preparedness used to be true of the other Nordic states as well but the end of the Cold War saw all but Finland decide to rely on the fast delivery of the free market for medical supplies (Anderson & Libell, 2020).

Sweden, like Finland, had its first case with a traveller from Wuhan in January that was subsequently fully isolated upon detection. However, the first case of a Swede returning home contaminated was on February 26 and in the following days a number of new contaminations were reported (Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2020). In spite of a similar timeline and a rapid rise in numbers of both infected and deaths, the Swedish authorities had far less restrictive measures than the other Nordic countries. Schools, shops, cafés and restaurants have remained open, albeit with restrictions. The Swedish constitution does not allow the government to interfere with administrative authorities, leaving the decision-making in the hands of the public health agency. And although criticism rose on the narrow measures taken in Sweden compared to its neighbours in Norway and Denmark, the state epidemiologist stood firm. In a fairly similar manner, although imposing stronger restrictions on the number of persons allowed to gather, the Icelandic government has based all decisions on measures to be taken to fight COVID-19 on scientific advice. The first COVID-19 infected person in Iceland was diagnosed on February 28, a traveller coming back home from North-Italy (“Fyrsta tilfelli,” 2020). The Icelandic government then announced a ban of gatherings and public events with more than a 100 people on March 16, with high schools and universities closing and elementary schools staying open with certain restrictions (Government of Iceland, 2020a). Within a week the ban on gatherings was changed to 20 people and recreational facilities and other services that could not ensure a two meter distance between individuals were closed (Government of Iceland, 2020b).

The first responses of the countries to the crisis were thus very different and without any concrete collaboration between the countries. For instance, there are obvious interesting differences between the Norwegian and Danish suppressing strategies and the Swedish mitigation strategy. While Norway and Denmark quickly adopted strict lock-down measures Sweden issued recommendations and called on citizens to ‘each take responsibility’ and follow guidelines (Strang, 2020). Iceland, like Sweden, did not close its border but took stricter measures regarding extensive testing, quarantining, and social distancing (Directorate of Health, 2020).

With the Nordic countries being as similar as they are it is interesting to examine why they reacted so differently and why they did not choose to collaborate as one might have expected since the threat was external. One of the reasons for the different reactions to the COVID-19 crisis can be their differing administrative traditions. Finland, Sweden and to some extent Iceland, have comparatively small ministries and autonomous administrative authorities whereas in Denmark and Norway the politicians are more directly in charge of the administration. Strang points out that this made it easier for Denmark and Norway to react quickly and even to overrule authorities and their expertise when it was considered politically necessary. For example, even though the Danish epidemiologists said it was unnecessary to

close borders the Danish government nevertheless imposed restrictions and closed its borders (Strang, 2020).

Unilateral decisions in times of crisis is not a new phenomenon in the Nordic region. In response to the 2015 refugee influx in Europe all the Nordic countries experienced a jump in the numbers of arrivals of asylum seekers. The countries used controversial measures to deter the flow of asylum seekers and the most noteworthy when it comes to Nordic cooperation, was the reintroduction of border controls between the Nordic countries. These measures were introduced unilaterally, without consultation and generated frustration between the countries as it restricted the flow of citizens and commuters that typically cross the borders daily, such as in the Danish-Swedish Öresund area. Imposing border controls called into question the guiding principles of Nordic cooperation and solidarity, where the countries acted nationally even though these actions were of high political and economic cost for the region (Etzold, 2017). Now that the Nordic countries are facing another international crisis it is interesting to analyse if the level of cooperation and solidarity was different this time around. Did Nordic solidarity materialize in the initial responses to COVID-19? Did the countries stand together in solidarity or was the cooperation only in the form of consultation?

Consultation, cooperation or solidarity?

It is clear that, as the crisis hit the Nordic region, all the Nordic states responded on a national level. Even with drastic political decisions, such as closing borders, the countries were apparently not consulting with each other. According to a senior government official in the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs,

...there was full-scale panic, as in other countries, so rash actions were taken without informing anyone in advance, and it certainly caused frustration and discomfort when the border was closed without notice, between countries that are as intertwined as the Nordic countries and live, study, work and have family on the other side of the border (Personal communication, October 7, 2020a).

Another government official described the cooperation as limited and that general consultation between different Ministers occurred but may not have led to concrete cooperation and in some instances no cooperation at all. Referring to a statement by the President of Finland, one of the interviewees said,

Responses to the pandemic when it first hit were not international, but the sum of all the national responses. There was nothing international and that is, among other things, because health issues and people's wellbeing is a very national issue. The responses were very national everywhere (Personal communication, October 7, 2020b).

Commenting on why the Nordics did not collaborate more after the initial panic, one interviewee said that the different reactions taken by the countries in the beginning made it more difficult subsequently to find a common approach. Nonetheless, existing cooperation continued to work well, such as consular services that worked together in assisting Nordic citizens in returning home from all over the world (Personal communication, October 7, 2020b)

When looking specifically at the issue of closing borders, the lack of cooperation or even just consulting with each other is alarming. Especially considering that the countries have a long history of working together and supporting one another and have also all signed a Declaration on Solidarity. One of the interviewees said,

The integration element of Nordic cooperation was side-stepped and they just closed the borders in these border regions between Finland and Sweden, and Denmark and Sweden. I think that many would agree that this should have been better prepared and a dialogue opened to prevent unnecessary problems and frustration. Much of that was, however, fixed very early on, but it could have been prevented by better bilateral consulting (Personal communication, October 7, 2020b).

Concern rose as the seriousness of the situation materialized and each country continued to respond without consulting each other when implementing restrictions. In a conference call with Nordic colleagues on March 17 2020, Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, Iceland's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation, stated,

We have seen state borders being closed, one after the other. Under these circumstances, it is important to reaffirm the value of our unique Nordic region and that Nordic cooperation will stay strong (Government of Iceland, 2020c).

However, the Ministers mostly discussed existing cooperation and stressed the continuation of that cooperation, namely assisting each other in bringing citizens home without going further in coordinating their efforts in tackling the pandemic.

The Nordic Council also voiced their concern regarding the lack of collaboration and coordination. In April, the Presidium wrote a letter to the Prime Ministers, urging the Nordic countries to work together in times of crisis. It stressed the need for Nordic risk analyses and contingency planning and proposed setting up an independent Nordic contingency commission (Nordic Council, 2020a). A strategy for societal security had already been approved at the Nordic Council's session in 2019 containing a series of recommendations for closer cooperation. The Nordic Council was surprised by the lack of interest, and according to Silja Dögg Gunnarsdóttir, the President of the Nordic Council, this was a disappointment. "In the situation in which we now find ourselves, it is more necessary than ever that the recommendations in the strategy are fully implemented" (Nordic Council, 2020b).

There were more critical voices regarding the lack of cooperation and solidarity. The Border Barriers Council, a politically appointed body commissioned by the Nordic governments to promote free movement, criticized in a letter to the Prime Ministers, that the pandemic has subjected border commuters to severe trials. It has undermined the work on removing border barriers, something that goes against the Prime Ministers' vision of making the Nordic region the world's most integrated and sustainable region (Nordic Council, 2020c). According to Sven-Erik Bucht, former Minister of Rural Affairs in Sweden and member of the Border Barriers Council,

the corona pandemic has been a major blow to free movement in the Nordic region. Strict national restrictions have almost stopped cross-border exchanges, at least temporarily (Nordic Council, 2020d).

Bertel Haarder, the newly elected President of the Nordic Council for 2021, stressed that future cooperation on crisis situations would be a top priority of the Danish Presidency. He emphasized that the different restrictions that the countries chose to use in the fight against the pandemic led to problems for those who work, study and travel in the Nordic countries and that it is important that the Nordic countries learn from the negative aspects of closing borders. “I don’t think we should repeat border closings. In my opinion, they don’t work. And if borders are closed again then it must be done in close cooperation between the countries” (Nordic Council, 2020e).

The effects of COVID-19 on Nordic cooperation was one of the topics covered in the Nordic Council session in Reykjavik hosted online in October 2020. All of the Nordic countries' Prime Ministers took part in the discussion with some pointing out that Nordic cooperation had been lacking and others not fully agreeing to that view, saying that cooperation had been ample. Questions were also raised about the closing of borders having an effect on the public's confidence in Nordic cooperation and specifically the friendship between Denmark and Sweden. Mette Fredriksen, Denmark's Prime Minister did not see the closing of borders as a problem for Nordic cooperation, stating that the temporary closing of borders had to be looked at as a pragmatic action to contain the pandemic and should not have any effect on the close cooperation of the countries (Nordic Council, 2020f). The Nordic Council's President was still adamant in pointing out that the collaboration between the Nordic countries needed improvement (Guðnason, 2020). The situation created by the pandemic was a surprise to the Nordic governments that did not manage to respond together when the crisis hit. If the cooperation in this area had been more clearly defined responding in unison would have been possible. This would have led to a better situation for all and made the closing of borders unnecessary, according to the Vice President of the Nordic Council (Harðardóttir, 2020).

Although Nordic cooperation failed to some extent during the first reactions to the pandemic there has been willingness to work together on common solutions on the effects of the pandemic. For example, the Nordic Council of Ministers had meetings to work together on dealing with health and economic consequences, initiating a joint survey of the pandemic's effect on the Nordic labour market and mapping which groups have been hit the hardest (Preisler, 2020). The Nordic Ministers of Trade also met to discuss a common Nordic approach to boost trade, tourism and other industries, services and innovation-oriented companies in the Nordic countries in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Icelandic Minister of Tourism, Industry and Innovation called the meeting, stressing the importance of cooperation in this field based on the shared interests of the Nordic countries. “Research shows that the markets that we are most focused on tend to see the Nordic countries as one zone” (“Ræddu þvernorræna,” 2020).

In an independent report on how to further develop Nordic cooperation on foreign and security policy, commissioned by the Nordic Ministers of Foreign Affairs, recommendations were made to further strengthen Nordic cooperation in dealing with global crises such as COVID-19. In the report it is suggested that the Nordic countries should establish a unified Nordic action plan to better cope with major crises (Bjarnason, 2020). The report was commissioned to mark the ten year anniversary of the Stoltenberg report that contained a range of recommendations to strengthen Nordic cooperation of which a large share have already been implemented (Haugevik & Sverdrup, 2019). This could be indicative of a willingness among the political leaders to explore deeper cooperation in this field.

In general, it can be said that there is a lot of cooperation going on between the Nordic countries on different levels reacting to the effects of the pandemic. However, it is clear that Nordic solidarity so often referred to by the political elite was lacking in the panic of the first wave of the pandemic where the countries acted unilaterally by for example closing borders. It seems that solidarity, understood as something that goes beyond the concept of cooperation,

does not hold when the region is faced with an unexpected global crisis. Just as the global community tends to go national in times of crisis so does the Nordic region. Many Nordic leaders have therefore called for deeper cooperation but as one interviewee pointed out the competitive spirit of the Nordic countries can get in the way, with everybody defending their responses to the pandemic, making it difficult to move forward and reach a unified position (Personal communication, October 7, 2020a).

Conclusion

In spite of the Nordic small states being perceived as a unified region speaking with one voice in the international arena and the Nordic countries vision for the region as the most sustainable and integrated region in the world, the countries do not always react to crises in solidarity. Even though the Nordic countries have a long standing history of cooperation and as small states tend to seek cooperation through regional and international organizations, Nordic cooperation has its limits. The public and political elites in the countries tend to perceive the partnership as going beyond traditional regional cooperation referencing friendship, trust and solidarity, and describing the cooperation as organic. However, when COVID-19 hit Europe the Nordic countries responded unilaterally, just as they did when faced with the influx of migrants in 2015: they did not rely on Nordic solidarity and cooperation, even when taking drastic decisions such as closing borders. In the first wave of the pandemic the Nordic countries were unprepared and had to take hard decisions in a hurry. Surprisingly, in light of their shared values, close cooperation and their small state status, the Nordic countries acted only on a selfish and national level, just like other countries in the world. As the pandemic continued to grow, general consultations between ministries and different agencies occurred; but these did not lead to a unified response to the pandemic. It can therefore be said that Nordic solidarity did not materialize but, after the initial panic receded, there has been a willingness to work together when it comes to tackling the effects of the pandemic.

In examining the initial responses of the Nordic countries to COVID-19, it is clear that there are limits to Nordic solidarity. Being able to fight global challenges together based on the existing cooperation between the Nordic small states is a powerful tool in the international arena. If the Nordic countries want to stand together and present a unified front when it comes to tackling future global crises, it is important that each country reaffirms its commitment to Nordic solidarity. Or: do the Nordic countries need to re-define what Nordic solidarity really stands for?

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