

# The Consequences of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Norwegian/Swedish National Border

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## *Abstract*

This study investigates how the Covid-19 pandemic affected the daily lives of individuals on both sides of the southern part of the Swedish-Norwegian border. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, passing the border without any major regulations from the authorities was the norm. The studied border area is unique, partly through extensive Norwegian border trade to Sweden and partly through significant tourism from Norway. Commuting, on the other hand, has primarily gone in the opposite direction from Sweden to Norway.

Norway closed the border for entry on 17 March 2020. The short time intervals of the Norwegian restrictions 2020–2022 created uncertainty and anxiety among the border people. When Norwegian border trade and tourism ceased, it had tangible negative consequences for the economy and jobs on the Swedish side. Social contacts across the border suffered. There was negative rumour-spreading between Norwegians and Swedes. All Norwegian restrictions were lifted on 12 February 2022.

The main source for this investigation are reports from local newspapers near the border. They have published reports with interviews and photos featuring opinions from individuals. This study can form the basis for further discussions on approaches and preparations to better cope with future crisis situations.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, closed border, infectivity, vaccination, commuters, tourism, cultural contacts

## Introduction

In February 2022 Sweden and Norway lifted the declaration of a two-year long Covid-19 pandemic until further notice. The pandemic had caused severe, far-reaching restrictions on people's daily social life since March 2020. This involved washing your hands, keeping a distance, avoiding crowds, using face masks and visors etc. Sweden lifted all restrictions on 9 February 2022 and Norway did the same on 12 February.

In April 2020, Strömstad Academy started working on an interdisciplinary anthology focussing on the current Covid-19 as well as on previous

large pandemics all the way back to ancient time and the time of the Old Testament. In Sweden there was the early eighteenth-century plague, the nineteenth-century cholera, and the Spanish Flu during and right after the First World War. The anthology on the pandemics was published one year later in April 2021 (Gustavsson & Olivestam, 2021).

In the present study, I aim at doing a follow-up to look at how an individual's daily social life was affected during the two year long Covid-19 pandemic. Focus will be on individuals living in the immediate Strömstad area and surroundings, as well as on Norwegians living on the other side of the country border. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, passing the border back and forth on a regular basis without any major regulations from the authorities was the norm. The mandatory presenting of a passport when crossing the border between Norway and Sweden was lifted in 1952.

In the academic field of ethnology where I belong, investigations on the Covid-19 pandemic were performed in the Scandinavian countries already during the ongoing pandemic. The issue was about how the pandemic affected people's everyday life. Because the restrictions differed between the Scandinavian countries, different praxis and approach between countries evolved both on an individual and a collective level. There was also criticism against the restrictions. In Norway this was studied by the cultural scientist Tove Fjell in the city of Bergen (Fjell, 2021). Investigations



1. Map showing the southern border between Norway and Sweden. Computer-aided drawing by Torill Sand, Oslo.

performed in the Nordic countries have been based on answers to lists of questions being mailed out, diaries, and material from the media. Results have been published in the Norwegian journal *Tidsskrift for kulturforskning*, 2021 no. 1 and in the Swedish online journal *Kulturella perspektiv*, volume 30, 2021.

My study differs from the investigations mentioned above in that my main focus is on how the Covid-19 pandemic affected the lives of individuals living on both sides of the Swedish-Norwegian border in the Strömstad area. That way I elaborate further on my previous investigations about the history of cultural contacts across this particular part of the border. This part of the border has also historically on several earlier occasions been closed down in a similar way as was done during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example this was the case during the time of the Norwegian alcohol prohibition 1916–1927. The border was also completely closed down to prevent Norwegians from leaving the country during the German Nazi occupation of Norway during the second world war 1940–1945 (Gustavsson, 2019).

The Strömstad municipality stands out in that there has been extensive Norwegian trading over the border from 1990 and on, with focus on large shopping malls and business centres located close to the border. An increasingly stronger Norwegian economy and pricing differences between Swedish and Norwegian goods and products have been the reason for this extensive trading, in particular regarding meat products, goodies/sweets and alcohol (Gustavsson, 1999 and 2019).

Furthermore, there has been an extensive tourism from Norway starting around Easter Holidays and running well into the autumn. The relatively short distance from the Strömstad area to the densely populated metropolitan Oslo area is a decisive factor here. The Norwegians have arrived by boat filling up the Strömstad harbour during the summer season. There has also been extensive Norwegian camping activities. In addition, the Norwegians started buying an increasing number of vacation homes in the northern parts of Bohuslän from 1990 and on. These homes have been used on a regular basis during summer, but also in the autumn and spring. That way the tourist season gets extended in Sweden (Gustavsson, 2013).

As trading across the border and tourism primarily applies to the Norwegians, the opposite is true for work commuting since the 1990s. There the activity has been from Sweden to Norway. Swedish men have primarily been working in construction businesses, where work opportunities have been abundant in the greater Oslo area. Young Swedish females have found jobs in retail business, and in the hotel and restaurant business, also in the Oslo area. Also, Swedish females commuting on a daily or weekly basis are those working in healthcare occupations. Healthcare workers have been in great demand in Norway. Swedish nurses have also enjoyed higher salaries, lower taxes and more staff colleagues at work in Norwegian hospitals



2. Kalnes hospital. Photo Ulf Blomgren.

(Gustavsson, 1999). The opening in 2015 of Kalnes hospital, a regional hospital for Østfold, had a great impact on work commuting. The hospital is located in the outskirts of Sarpsborg, a couple of Swedish miles from the Swedish border. A collaboration between Norway and Sweden has, up to the outbreak of Covid-19, been able to give pregnant women and acutely ill individuals

from the Strömstad area the opportunity to go to Kalnes instead of having to go to the regional hospital NÄL outside Trollhättan located nine Swedish miles away.

The main source for the present investigation are reports from *Strömstads Tidning* (abbrev ST), that was founded in 1866. This newspaper covers the municipalities of Strömstad and Tanum in the northern parts of Bohuslän. It is published three days a week: Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. During the two year pandemic there have been Covid-related articles and reports basically on a daily basis. Many reports with interviews and photos featuring opinions from individuals from both sides of the border have been published. Sometimes there have been posts on the ‘letter to the Editor’ page. When nothing else is stated in figure texts, photos presented in the present investigation are taken by journalists working at *Strömstads Tidning*.

The advantage for scientists in ethnology having access to local newspapers is that these newspapers aim at carefully reflect what is going on in the local area and document this day by day. Aided by this documentation, the scientist can study cultural processes going on over time. My investigation can be considered a cultural process study in real time based on material from local media. I have earlier used material from *Strömstads Tidning* for other process studies at the Norwegian/Swedish border. Among others documenting the smuggling of alcohol using boats in the Strömstad area during the time of alcohol prohibition 1916–1927 (Gustavsson, 2019).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, *Strömstads Tidning* not only covered events on the Swedish side of the border but also events on the Norwegian side. The main source has been *Halden Arbeiderblad*, which collaborated with *Strömstads Tidning* for information. I have been able to gather a substantial amount of material. *Strömstads Tidning* has, basically on a daily basis over two years, presented various aspects on Covid-19 with focus on the Strömstad and Tanum municipalities and the closed Norwegian border.

The present investigation focuses only on the impact of the corona pandemic on contacts across the border. Therefore, internal living conditions in Strömstad are not covered unless they are related to individuals on the other

side of the border. This includes distance education in schools, face masks, visors, keeping distance in stores and public places, voluntary aid work, change of procedures in the libraries, live broadcasting of church services, marriages and funerals, the situation at retirement homes, loneliness, close-down of cultural and athletic activities and post-Covid problems.

## The Various Phases of Infectivity in Sweden

As a basis for the many border restrictions and their various phases during the Covid-19 pandemic are the various phases of infectivity. Their ups and downs replacing each other. Changes were followed in detail by the governments and Public Health Agencies of Norway and Sweden. *Strömstads Tidning* also reported continuously with updates on the current infectivity situation both in Norway and Sweden. Infectivity in Strömstad was in particular related to the Västra Götaland region and the close by located Viken region in Norway.

The Covid virus was first mentioned in *Strömstads Tidning* on 20 February 2020. At that time no one was yet reported infected in the Västra Götaland region (ST 20 Feb 2020). The first discovered case of infection in Sweden was a young woman in the city of Jönköping in late January. Thereafter, the Västra Götaland region started working on establishing new protocols for managing a potential upcoming wave of infections. On 6 February the first case was reported in the Västra Götaland region. After that, health care centres in Strömstad started preparing for a potential spread of infection (ST 29 Feb 2020). On 5 March two more corona cases in the region were reported. Those infected had been returning from travel in Iran and Italy (ST 5 Mar 2020). On 10 March the number of infected individuals was up to 32, on 12 March to 48, on 28 March to 297, and on 2 April to 399. The infection was mainly brought into the country via travel from other countries (ST 10 Mar, 12 Mar, 28 Mar and 2 Apr 2020).

The first person infected in Strömstad was Sara (assumed name). She believed she contracted the virus at a hotel in Gothenburg. She was quarantined in her home. “We all need to take responsibility for limiting the contagion, that’s what saves lives”, she stated on the phone with *Strömstads Tidning* (ST 26 Mar 2020).

On 9 May there were 14 cases in the municipality of Tanum and less than 10 in the municipality of Strömstad (ST 9 May and 16 May). On 9 June the number of infected was up to 19 in Tanum, while in Strömstad the number remained under 10. “Strömstad currently has the least number of infected in the west”, *Strömstads Tidning* reported. Only five municipalities in the region remained having less than 10 cases (ST 9 Jun 2020).

On 15 June one child and one caregiver at the Mellegården School in Strömstad had become infected (ST 18 Jun 2020). On 30 June the number

of infected was 30 in Tanum and 17 in Strömstad. With 13 cases per 10,000 inhabitants, Strömstad was the only municipality in the region having this low spread of infection. On 18 July the number was up to 22 cases per 10,000 inhabitants and on 8 August the number was up to 27, compared with 48 cases in the municipality of Tanum. On 8 August the total number of infected was 36 in Strömstad (ST 18 Jul, 25 Jul, 1 Aug and 8 Aug). One could wonder about the significance of the closed border to Norway regarding the low number of infected. The number of travellers/tourists during the spring and summer had been extremely limited and from Norway next to no one. That Tanum had a larger number of infected could be explained by the fact that more Swedes are visiting during summer holidays there, while Strömstad mainly gets visitors/tourists from Norway.

Further into August there was an increased spread of infection in particular in the municipality of Tanum. This was true to a high degree in the coastal city of Grebbestad, with many tourists in crowded spaces. Thus, the infection control doctor Eva Lindhusen Lindhé from the Västra Götaland region stated: “We are seeing a large spread of infection in Grebbestad. We have not been observing the crowding protocols during the summer holidays, at least not in Grebbestad. We have three ‘hot spots’ in the coastal area and these are the cities of Lysekil, Smögen and Grebbestad. There has been a lot of crowding on the bridge decks.” (ST 15 Aug 2020).

From mid-August the spread of infection increased also in Strömstad while it started to go down in the municipality of Tanum (ST 29 Aug 2020). However, on 5 September *Strömstads Tidning* reported on a “50% decrease of infected in Strömstad”. Eight cases in week 34 was down to 4 cases in week 35. The total number of infected was at this point 63 while in Tanum 73 (ST 5 Sep 2020).

On 19 September four students at the Strömstiernaskolan were reported infected. The infection control doctor Eva Lindhusen Lindhé urged everyone in Strömstad to be careful in their contacts with other individuals. “Strömstad is currently standing out statistically”. Five cases in week 36 were up to ten in week 37. Regarding cases per capita, Strömstad was now on top in the region (ST 19 Sep 2020). In Tanum on the other hand, the infectivity was down to a minimum (ST 26 Sep 2020).

In mid-October the trend turned to only one new case a week in Strömstad. Tanum didn’t have any new cases in two consecutive weeks (ST 17 Oct 2020). On the other hand, the infectivity was up in the region (ST 29 Oct 2020). In Strömstad and Tanum, however, the spread of the disease was low compared with the regional situation (ST 14 Nov 2020).

By the end of November, levels of infectivity sky-rocketed in the region. Strömstad, however, had a decrease in cases from 13 cases in week 46 to 7 in week 47 (ST 28 Nov 2020). On 5 and 12 December *Strömstads Tidning* reported that “Strömstad has the lowest spread of virus in the region”.

This was per capita (ST 5 Dec and 12 Dec 2020). There were more Covid patients in the hospitals in the region than ever earlier during the pandemic (ST 17 Dec 2020).

From mid-January 2021, infectivity in Strömstad increased. It was now the highest in the region per capita with 46 new cases per week and per 10,000 inhabitants. The infectivity was largest among people aged 20–59. The infection control doctor Thomas Wahlberg urged everybody in Strömstad to follow active restrictions, keep a distance not getting together and meeting with new individuals (ST 30 Jan and 4 Feb 2021). At this point in time vaccination had just started in the retirement homes.

High levels of infectivity remained in Strömstad throughout February 2021. The number of 80 cases per 10,000 inhabitants in the beginning of February was the absolute highest in the region. In Tanum the viral spread was lower with 39 cases per 10,000 inhabitants (ST 6 Feb 2021). The total number of deaths in Covid-19 was very low in February with 5 deceased in Strömstad and 8 in Tanum (ST 13 Feb 2021).

By the end of February, infectivity went down in Strömstad to 19 cases in week 7 compared with 47 cases in week 6. In Tanum the trend was the opposite during those same weeks. There the number of infected increased from 54 to 65. For Strömstad this meant 14 cases per 10,000 inhabitants, and in Tanum an increase to 51 cases (ST 27 Feb 2021).

In March the number of corona cases went down generally in the region (ST 11 Mar 2021). Then there was a strong increase in Strömstad by the end of April. In one week the number of infected was up from 17 to 37. Tanum had over the same time period a certain decrease from the high number of 65 per week (ST 24 Apr 2021).

Then the trend turned again. In mid-May there was talk about a decrease in cases in the northern parts of Bohuslän in particular in Strömstad where it first went from 34 to 25 per week and thereafter down to 15 cases per week (ST 15 May 2021). By the end of May, the number of new corona cases were at its lowest in 6 months (ST 29 May 2021). On 5 June infectivity was reported to have been steadily going down over the last weeks. The last weeks Strömstad only had two new cases and Tanum five. The local recommendations that had been in effect in the Västra Götaland region since 17 February was lifted on 12 June (ST 5 Jun 2021). On 17 June Strömstad and Tanum reported no new cases in the last week. Charlotte Ericsson at the Bohuslinden health centre in



3. Corona-shed for testing behind the Bohuslinden health centre in Strömstad, February 2021. Photo Jakob Simonsson.

Strömstad reported that “during the winter and early spring we had a lot of cases for a while, but then it tapered off and now we are down to zero” (ST 19 Jun 2021). Zero new cases were also reported during the second half of June (ST 29 Jun 2021). On 5 July Norway declared the Västra Götaland region a green zone and opened up the border. This caused more people to move around in Strömstad. However, on 17 July the number of cases was still zero in Strömstad and two cases in Tanum (ST 17 Jul 2021).

In August the trend turned and the infectivity increased again. In the first week of the month six new cases were reported in Strömstad and four in Tanum. Those infected were primarily 20–49 years old (ST 14 Aug 2021). On 21 August the infection control doctor Thomas Wahlberg stated that there had been an increase in infectivity of 41 per cent totally in the region over one week. Strömstad was still at six cases as in the previous week, though. At the same time, infectivity in Norway amounted to 25 per cent. Many also tested positive for corona at the border in Svinesund. In one week there were 67 cases primarily 0–18 years of age (ST 21 Aug 2021). By the end of August, Strömstad and the Öckerö municipality in the northern archipelago of Gothenburg had the highest number of infected per capita in the region. The municipal commissioner Kent Hansson thought the increase made sense “considering how many people that had visited the city lately. There have been a whole lot of people in the restaurants” (ST 28 Aug 2021).

Due to the increased infectivity, the Norwegian government decided to declare all of Sweden a red zone on 27 August, and to close down the border for all individuals not fully vaccinated or not been infected with Covid-19 during the last six months.

In the beginning of September infectivity went down again significantly. Eight cases in week 34 was followed by four cases in week 35 in Strömstad and only one case in week 36. In Tanum there was only one case per week during this time period (ST 5 Sep and 18 Sep 2021). In the region as a whole infectivity was up by 34 per cent over two weeks in early September, though (ST 18 Sep 2021). On 27 September Norway lifted some travel restrictions, but not for the Västra Götaland region that remained labelled a red zone (ST 25 Sep 2021).

In the beginning of October, infectivity in the region went down (ST 7 Oct 2021), and on 11 October Norway changed the region’s status to orange zone. This meant that travel registration no longer was needed when entering Norway, nor was testing at the border, or quarantine when entering, needed.

In early October infectivity in Strömstad and Tanum still remained low with four cases in Strömstad and two in Tanum in week 41 (ST 23 Oct 2021). On 30 October the situation was changed and *Strömstads Tidning* had the following headline “Strömstad has the highest infectivity in the



region”. This was per capita. Tanum remained at a lower number (ST 30 Oct 2021). On 20 November Strömstad still had the highest number of infected individuals in the region. Tanum, on the other hand, had only one case the week prior to this (ST 20 Nov 2021). By the end of November, Strömstad had the second highest status of corona infected individuals per capita in the region. Those infected were mostly primary and middle school children (ST 27 Nov 2021).

On 26 November Norway intensified travel restrictions for entering the country for all individuals over 16 years of age. The reason for this was the soaring infectivity in Norway. The infection control doctor Eva Lindhusen Lindhé pointed out that Strömstad being so close to the Norwegian border could have played a role for the high infectivity in Strömstad. “It is a very porous border being crossed daily in both directions by many individuals. And when infectivity is high on the Norwegian side, as it has been lately, the municipalities close to the border can easily bring the infection into Sweden. And Strömstad is the municipality in the country most likely to receive most individuals crossing the Norwegian border,” she stated (ST 27 Nov 2021).

High degree of infectivity continued to be the case in Strömstad in the beginning of December, although it had been going down somewhat so that now the municipality was ranking number six per capita from the bottom in the region. Tanum, on the other hand, had almost no spreading at all of the virus. On 3 December Norway established even tougher roles for entering the country introducing a demand for testing at the border (ST 4 Dec 2021). The infectivity remained high on the Norwegian side of the border throughout December.

The infectivity among primary and middle school children in Strömstad stayed high in December. Some hard hit classes started practising distance teaching (ST 11 Dec 2021). This could be explained by the fact that not many children aged 12–15 were vaccinated. Only 50 per cent were vaccinated in mid-December, being the lowest number in the region. In Tanum, being better off infectivity-wise, the number of vaccinated were 61 per cent among those aged 12–15 (ST 18 Dec 2021).

In mid-January 2022 it was reported that the number of infected in the Västra Götaland region was up by 40 per cent over the last weeks. 300 individuals were hospitalized (ST 18 Jan 2022). One week later there was an even higher infectivity. At that point in time 44,791 cases were reported in the region. This being the highest weekly number since the beginning of the pandemic (ST 27 Jan 2022).

In mid-January the infectivity in Strömstad was as alarming as in the whole region. 144 new cases in week 1 showed a per capita increase of 350 per cent. And with 106 new cases in Tanum, the increase was even greater. It amounted to 600 per cent compared with the status at the end of

December. These high numbers had never before been reported throughout the whole span of the pandemic (ST 15 Jan 2022). Those high weekly numbers increased even more throughout the rest of January. In week 3, 360 new cases were reported in Strömstad, almost twice as many as in week 2 that had 188 new cases (ST 29 Jan 2022). This happened almost just right before all Covid-19 restrictions were lifted in Sweden on 9 February 2022. It makes sense to ask oneself if this was not a somewhat daring step by the Swedish government considering the infectivity numbers still remaining that high.

From this point in time and on reports on infectivity has been low in *Strömstads Tidning*. Press conferences on a regular basis about the infectivity status ended in the beginning of March 2022 (ST 10 Mar 2022). As in Norway, there was a certain corona increase noted in the summer of 2022 in the Västra Götaland region. The last part of July had an increase of 10 per cent compared to the previous week. There were “somewhat more cases along the coastline of Bohuslän” according to the infection control doctor Leif Dotevall. Thus, tourists in the coastal areas may have played a role here. In the beginning of summer 2022, the very contagious BA.5 variant was very dominant, according to the infection control doctor (ST 30 Jul 2022).

## The Various Phases of Infectivity in Norway

Thanks to contacts with Norwegian newspapers, mostly *Halden Arbeiderblad*, *Strömstads Tidning* was able to follow the infectivity on the Norwegian side of the border on a continuous basis. On several occasions it showed a different profile from what was observed in the Strömstad area. Infectivity outbreaks close to the border have been followed carefully raising concerns in Strömstad as well as in Norway.

On 27 February 2020, three individuals in Halden were suspected to have contracted the virus during a trip abroad (ST 29 Feb 2020). Later test results showed that they were not infected, though (ST 5 Mar 2020). On 19 March 2020 eight Covid-19 patients were reported hospitalized in Sykehus Østfold (ST 19 Mar 2020). Because of this development in infectivity, the Halden municipality set up a crisis management group (ST 14 Mar 2020). At the same point in time, also the Strömstad municipality formed a crisis management group expected to start working should the contagion reach Strömstad (ST 14 Mar 2020).

At the end of July 2020, a large outbreak of infectivity in Norway was reported with 24 confirmed cases in the Moss municipality eight Swedish miles north of Strömstad. The source of the infection was said to be a wedding party with around hundred guests in the border city of Sarpsborg (ST 1 Aug 2020). In the city of Fredrikstad, 32 new cases were confirmed within a couple of days at the turn of the months August/September (ST 3 Sep 2020).

In the beginning of 2021, it was obvious that the mutated and more contagious omicron virus from Great Britain had reached the Norwegian border regions close to Strömstad (ST 26 Jan 2021). From 1 February 2021, an extensive close-down of social activities in the Halden area was reported. There had been a rapid spread of infection in the municipality. On 31 January there were 23 new cases reported, which was the highest number reported in one single day during the pandemic so far. The outbreak was primarily related to the Halden ice rink and the hockey team Comet (ST 2 Feb 2021). Already on 17 February, however, the Norwegian government lifted the tough restrictions in Halden and Sarpsborg, while they remained in place in Fredrikstad and on the islands in the Hvaler municipality right outside Strömstad (ST 18 Feb 2021).

A new outbreak of infectivity occurred in the city of Halden in August 2021. On 12 August twelve individuals were reported infected in one single day, which was the highest number since April 2021. Ten out of these twelve cases were caused by the infection being 'imported' via travellers coming to Norway via Svinesundsbron (ST 14 Aug 2021). In mid-December 2021, a record number of Covid patients were hospitalized in the Kalnes hospital (ST 16 Dec 2021). Never before during the pandemic had the number been this high. And half of these individuals were not vaccinated. In Halden, 144 individuals tested positive for the corona virus in one week in mid-December. 55 of those were children under the age of 12 (ST 23 Dec 2021). At the same time, Fredrikstad had its highest number of confirmed Covid-19 cases at over 700 individuals in one week (ST 16 Dec 2021). In mid-January 2022, infectivity was up in Halden with 337 new cases in one week (ST 15 Jan 2022). This was right before the Norwegian Covid-19 restrictions were terminated on 12 February 2022.

As in Sweden, infectivity did not end by this. Over the first weeks after 12 February, around 1000 individuals died and over 3300 needed hospital care. Prior to 12 February, 1667 individuals had died in Norway. The additional number of 1000 individuals over a short time period right after this date was disastrous. It was the contagious omicron variant that was getting around. The main part of the deceased were individuals in retirement homes as was also earlier the case in Sweden (ST 16 Apr 2022). A new wave of Covid in Norway was reported by the end of June 2022. There was a 130 per cent increase over four weeks. The reason for this was the very contagious BA.5-variant, stated the Norwegian Public Health Agency. In Sweden no similar increase was observed (ST 30 Jun 2022).

Overall infectivity had been going up and down several times very close to the city of Strömstad area. Those were waves that were difficult to anticipate. Considering this fact, the short time intervals the Norwegian government applied as to how long the border should be closed, when it could possibly open up and to what extent are understandable. This caused significant

insecurity but also irritation among for example Norwegian owners of summer houses in Bohuslän, but also in the Swedish border trading community (please see below).

## Norwegian Border Control Following Close-Down

On 17 March 2020 Norway closed the border for Norwegians to enter after being abroad. Freight traffic was exempt from the close-down. The exemption also included daily commuters working in areas important to society. The goal with these tough border restrictions was to prevent infectivity being brought into the country from abroad. Norwegians coming back from visiting places abroad had to be quarantined for fourteen days when coming back home. According to Helsenorge.no, someone being quarantined was not allowed to visit workplaces, schools or preschools, make domestic trips or receive visits at home. The individual was only allowed to go shopping or go to the pharmacy if no one else could do this for him/her (ST 21 Aug 2021). Anyone who was found breaking the quarantine regulations received a NOK 20,000 fine. If refusing to pay you could expect an indictment (ST 23 Jan 2021). On 8 May 2020, the quarantine time decreased from fourteen to ten days. From this same date, it was also decided that Norwegians could be exempt from quarantine for six months if they could prove that they had been infected with Covid-19 and had recovered (ST 12 May 2020).

Easing of the Norwegian border restrictions was done a couple of times over this particular two year time period. This was primarily so in the summer, when infectivity was lower compared with in the autumn, winter and spring, but restrictions were then upgraded again. The short time intervals for restrictions contributed to create insecurity and concerns. *Strömstads Tidning* speculated every time right before an upcoming expiry of restrictions. What next? More lax or tougher restrictions? Because of the short

time frames, it became almost impossible to make future plans for businesses as well as for groups and individuals,

Whenever there was a decision made about border close-down in Norway or Sweden, the countries needed to establish control measures. This has been particularly true with Norway where the border has been closed for entry much longer than in Sweden. One way of preventing the crossing of the border was using physical barriers. At



4. The Norwegian border control station at Svinesund on 17 March 2020, the same day that Norway closed the border for immigration into the country. Photo Marita Adamsson.

minor place passages Norway has stacked tires in high piles. This way absolute close-down was accomplished (2 Oct 2021). This could not be done at the main passage on the new Svinesundsbron. There, freight traffic as well as daily commuters working in areas important to society were allowed to cross. On this bridge, customs and police authorities, aided by military and national guards, could carry out controls regarding Covid-19 testing etc. All minor border passages did not have physical barriers though. Instead control of individuals was done by police, customs, soldiers and the national guard. There was a large sign stating: “Förbjuden inresa. Entry prohibited [www.polisen.se](http://www.polisen.se)” (ST 11 Feb 2021).



5. Minor border passages in Hävedalen and Vassbotten were totally closed in the beginning of October 2021. Photo Thomas Benne-lind.

The prohibition also applied to naval passages. The customs vessel Havørn in Fredrikstad started to patrol the border area between the Norwegian Hvaler islands and the Swedish Koster territory outside of Strömstad right after the Norwegian prohibition on 17 March 2020 (ST 31 Mar 2020). This prevented the Norwegian boat tourists from visiting the Strömstad harbour.

Already in late March 2020 many Norwegian cars were pulled over by Norwegian police when trying to go shopping across the border to Sweden by crossing minor border roads (ST 26 Mar 2020). Fourteen days of quarantine followed in Norway. In mid-April 2020, 2,300 Norwegians were quarantined after being over shopping on the Swedish side (ST 18 Apr 2020). The border control in Svinesund also detected some smuggling activity across the border to Norway. Confiscation of aquavit holding more than 60 per cent alcohol was in June 2020 up by 390 per cent compared with before the pandemic outbreak (ST 30 Jun 2020).

On 12 August 2020 a car with six individuals from Sarpsborg, that had been crossing the border for shopping in Sweden, was pulled over by the police. They were imposed a ten day quarantine (ST 13 Aug 2020). Further into August 2020 the Norwegian police controlling Norwegians coming back from Sweden ended. The quarantine time of ten days remained in place but with no official control (ST 20 Aug 2020).



6. A minor border passage has a large sign showing that entering Norway is prohibited in February 2021. Photo Thomas Örn.

On 9 November 2020 Norway again reinstated the police- and national guard control at minor border passages. The ten day quarantine remained in place. In the Sarpsborg Quality Hotel a ‘quarantine room’ was set up at a daily price of NOK 500 (ST 21 Nov 2020). This also normally applied to Norwegian citizens. For daily commuters to Norway, the rule of testing every seventh day remained in place (ST 12 Nov 2020).

On 2 January 2021 Norway closed the old Svinesundsbron physically as well as other minor border passages, to prevent the spread of the new mutated omicron virus. Piles of stacked car tires made crossing the bridge impossible. A road sign stated: “Riksgrensen stengt/Norwegian Border closed. Bruk grenseovergang/use E6 Svinesund” (ST 9 Jan and 8 Jul 2021). This in turn led to extremely long lines piling up at the toll gate in Svinesund (12 Jan 2021). Sixty Norwegian soldiers and national guards were called in to carry out the mandatory corona testing. On 18 January a requirement was imposed for all travellers into Norway to be tested at the border instead of after entering the country. On 19 January the border opened up for freight transport, travellers having occupations important to society, Saami people with private businesses, and individuals with special family needs (ST 21 Jan 2021).

Beginning on 11 June 2021, fully vaccinated Norwegians, or those that had been infected with Covid-19 in the last six months, were exempt from quarantine when coming back home after travelling to Sweden. At the border they had to show a corona certificate and an entry schedule. This made the lines at the border increase significantly which was a huge disadvantage for Swedish border commuters. The old Svinesundsbron was at this point in time only open for those with occupations important to society and those holding a Norwegian passport. On 17 June, however, the bridge opened up for all border commuters (ST 17 Jun and 19 Jun 2021).

On 5 July 2021 the Västra Götaland region was declared a green zone by the Norwegian government (ST 29 Jul 2021). This meant a great number of Norwegian visits in Strömstad during the summer 2021. On 6 July

*Strömstads Tidning* stated: “The Norwegians are back in Strömstad: a ‘day of happiness’ “ (ST 7 Jun 2021). After this, those travelling into Norway had to fill out a registration form and have a corona test taken (ST 8 Jul 2021). Norwegians and Swedes, that were fully vaccinated and could present a corona pass at the border, were exempt from filling out a registration form and have a corona test taken (ST 15 Jul 2021).



7. Physical close-down of the border passage to Norway on the old Svinesundsbron in January 2021. Photo Marita Adamsson.

On 9 August new restrictions with mandatory quarantine following a visit to the Västra Götaland region, were instated if you were not fully vaccinated (ST 10 Aug 2021). On 27 August the infectivity was up again and the Norwegian government decided to consider all of Sweden a red zone. This meant quarantine for all entries from Sweden by those not fully vaccinated or could show that they had been infected with Covid-19 some time during the last six months. At the time, the old Svinesundsbron was opened for those with a Covid pass and for those that could present a certificate showing that they had been infected with Covid-19 some time during the last six months (ST 28 Aug 2021). On 27 September Norway lifted some of the restrictions for entry but not for the Västra Götaland region that remained a red zone (ST 25 Sep 2021). On 11 October this status was changed to an orange zone. This meant that an entry registration to Norway, testing at the border, or quarantine following entry was no longer needed.

On 26 November Norway again intensified the entry restrictions for everyone over 16 years of age. Those not vaccinated again had to be quarantined for ten days. All travellers to Norway had to register with the entrynorway.no. The reason was the soaring infectivity in Norway. On 16 November, 2,552 new Covid-19 cases were registered and this was the highest per day number since the beginning of the pandemic (ST 20 Nov 2021). On 3 December Norway imposed even stronger rules for entering the country with mandatory testing at the border (4 Dec 2021).

On 1 February 2022, Norwegians no longer had to be tested when coming back home (ST 2 Mar 2022). Not long thereafter, on 12 February, all Norwegian restrictions were lifted.

## Swedish Border Control Following Close-Down

Unlike Norway, Sweden long opted not to close the border for entry. On 25 January 2021, also Sweden closed the main border passages on the new Svinesundsbron and in the Dalsland Nössemark, though. Minor passages were already closed by Norway. The reason for the border close-down for entry to Sweden was an increased spread of the contagious omicron variant. Exempt from entry ban were freight transport, and people living and working in Sweden having a residence permit in good standing. The border police, aided by the military, handled the supervision of the border to Norway (ST 26 Jan and 4 Feb 2021). The Swedish border police officer Mikael Holmgren stated that “this is the greatest challenge we have faced since the second world war” (ST 28 Jan 2021).

A new Swedish border close-down was instated on 28 December 2021 staying in effect until 21 January 2022. To enter Sweden, foreign citizens over 12 years of age needed to present a negative Covid-19 test performed



8. Swedish border control at Svinesund had to turn away 350 individuals coming from Norway on the first day of close-down, 28 December 2020. Photo Fredrik Hagen.



9. Karin Stahre and Rasmus Nilsson, group leaders for the ‘corona hosts’ in Strömstad in the summer of 2020. Photo Linda Smith.

in the last 48 hours. Exempt from this rule were border commuters and those nationally registered in Sweden. Only on the first day of close-down, the Swedish police had to turn away 350 individuals coming from Norway. It was mostly travellers on buses (ST 30 Dec 2021). On 9 February 2022, all Swedish restrictions were lifted.

To prevent crowds from being formed outside, Strömstad municipality hired eight ‘corona hosts’ with yellow waistcoats from the beginning of June to 31 August 2020. They were in particular positioned to guard the dockside for steam vessels to control the lines of people and prevent crowding at the ferries to the Koster islands. They have been acting as advisors but not taking physical action. When necessary, police and guards have been standing by to step in (ST 20 Aug 2020).

## The Role of Norwegian and Swedish Governments

How were people and local authorities on both sides of the border able to influence the situation with a closed border? One player here was the regional border Norwegian-Swedish collaborative committee, Svinesundskommittén, that was established in 1980, and is composed of municipality politicians and civil servants from Sarpsborg, Halden, Strömstad and the Dalsland city of Bengtsfors. Working with this committee are also representatives from the Västra Götaland region and Viken region in Norway (ST 3 Nov 2020). The committee is supposed to work for the strengthening of the development along the border and for exchange between the countries <https://svinesundskommitten.com/>. The Committee was for the first time writing to the governments both in Norway and Sweden in June 2020, with the objective to safeguard “safe and free mobility across the border” and to eliminate various forms of border obstacles (ST 23 Jul 2020). Meetings with the Border Committee have been possible to carry out on the middle of the old Svinesundsbron as was the case in September 2020 (please see below) (ST 8 Dec 2020). At this occasion,



a joint message was conveyed pointing out the need for collaboration instead of blaming each other, as was perceived by the working commuters. Before Christmas 2020 the Svinesund committee dropped a press release stating: “We respect each others situations and it is of utmost importance that the trust and faith between border populations remain intact and that we also continue to be able to work together in order to strengthen various areas of development in our common region” (ST 8 Dec 2020).

In February 2021, the Svinesund committee sent a second letter to ministers in charge in Sweden and Norway. They pointed out how a long-standing and well functioning cross-border labour market was about to be brought down because of the pandemic restrictions (ST 20 Feb 2021). The Committee had received several emails “from devastated work commuters living in Sweden”. A new letter was sent to the Norwegian government in August 2021 (ST 28 Aug 2021). Yet another letter was sent to the Norwegian and Swedish prime ministers in the beginning of December 2021. This was when Norway, effective on 3 December, intensified entry restrictions deciding that both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals again should be tested at the border. According to this letter, the economic effects were tough on work commuters, employees and businesses. In addition, there were negative social effects when families and friends were forced apart. “The Nordic cross-border freedom on which we have been building our societies disappeared” (ST 9 Dec 2021).

In the beginning of April 2020, the Västra Götaland region and governor Anders Danielsson wrote a letter to the Swedish government asking for a financial support package for those particularly vulnerable businesses in trade and tourism in Strömstad (ST 11 Apr 2020). At the end of May 2020, the municipality director in Halden sent a letter to the Norwegian Public Health Agency in Norway. He asked for the inhabitants in Norwegian border municipalities to be exempt from quarantine regulations after visiting Sweden. The request was, however, turned down by the Norwegian Health and Care Minister Bernt Høie (ST 28 May 2020).

In July 2020, representatives for the Strömstad municipality and the local business sector met with Foreign Trade Minister Anna Hallberg on video link (ST 11 Jul 2020). She was considering a special solution for the Norwegian-Swedish border, but the proposal was not accepted in Norway (ST 27 Aug 2020). Parliament politicians from various parties visited Strömstad during the summer and autumn of 2020 to get an idea of the dire situation in the municipality.

In November 2020, some municipality politicians and business leaders again met with Foreign Trade Minister Anna Hallberg in a digital meeting, explaining to the government the terribly dire situation the labour market was experiencing. The Minister was impressed by the collaboration in Strömstad to handle the severe crisis. She promised to work for the border

to be opened “but having said that I don’t want to raise false hopes” (ST 14 Nov 2020). On 8 December the situation in Strömstad was debated in the Parliament as a response to a question posed by the Moderate politician Johan Hultberg living in Fjällbacka, Tanum municipality (ST 12 Dec 2020).

On 29 January 2021 the Norwegian government prevented Swedish daily commuters from going to work in Norway and they did not get their salary or other reimbursement benefits. They were offered to use their vacation time in February 2021. This caused enormous protests from members of Parliament living in Bohuslän and from the Strömstad municipal commissioner Kent Hansson, but also from the Swedish Labour Market Minister Eva Nordmark and Foreign Trade Minister Anna Hallberg (ST 23 Feb and 25 Feb 2021). On 26 February the Norwegian government decided to make an exception for all Swedish and Finnish daily commuters effective on 1 March (ST 27 Feb 2021).

At the end of July 2021, the municipal commissioner and several business leaders in Strömstad met with the Chairman of the Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee Kenneth G. Forslund to reach a solution to open the old Svinesundsbron for all fully vaccinated. Forslund promised to initiate increased discussions with Norway on this issue (ST 31 Jul and 5 Aug 2021). On 2 August the Halden politician Linn Laupsa sent a letter to the Norwegian prime minister Erna Solberg on a similar note asking the government to find solutions for the situation with lines at the border crossing in Svinesund (ST 12 Aug 2021). The political pressures both from the Swedish and the Norwegian side eventually were successful as the old Svinesundsbron at the end of August was opened for everyone with a corona pass and not only for border commuters (ST 7 Sep 2021). Vaccination against the pandemic virus had over the summer of 2021 added to a positive situation compared with previous summer.

On 19 October 2021, Labour Market Minister Eva Nordmark visited Strömstad and was fascinated over how the dire labour market crisis had been handled. “I can see an adaptation where individuals in professional training really has increased. That residents in mid-working life can adapt and take the opportunity to get an education” (ST 21 Oct 2021).

Following the termination of the pandemic restrictions in February 2022, the Svinesund committee and five other Norwegian/Swedish border committees wrote a letter in the beginning of April 2022 to the Norwegian and Swedish prime ministers. In the letter they asked for the countries to start a collaboration to enable the reaching of common measures to block future contagions (ST 2 Apr 2022). In the summer of 2022, the eight Nordic Ministers for Collaboration met in Halden stating in a common declaration that the pandemic had made them realize the importance of a strengthened Nordic future collaboration. “When facing national decisions affecting the

free mobility across our borders, we need to talk to each other more efficiently” (ST 5 Jul 2022).

## Swedish Work Commuters

When the Norwegian border closed down on 17 March 2020, Swedish nursing staff continued to commute to their workplaces in Norway. From 26 March and on, they had to present passport and employer certificate. However, they were not required to quarantine themselves in their time off, as were the Norwegian work commuters to Sweden. This difference made Norwegians wonder (ST 28 Apr 2020). Norwegian nursing staff working in Norway were not allowed travelling abroad in order not to be infected and so not being able to work (ST 14 Mar 2020).

In mid-September 2020, Norway imposed a rule that Swedish border commuters had to do a corona test, meaning that they would be nasal swabbed by a nurse every seventh day. The informant, with the assumed name Anna, was commuting every day across the border. She complained about not being informed in advance about the new corona testing rule. On top of that, the woman testing her had a cold, which Anna pointed out to her. Anna concluded saying “I feel discriminated against and lawless. It feels very strange to be ordered to be exposed to this quite unpleasant test once a week” (ST 26 Sep 2020). The assistant nurse Zanna Kummel Ohlsson, on the other hand, was grateful to receive the test as often as once a week, since she was working close to corona patients (ST 3 Oct 2020).

In October 2020, Swedish nursing staff at the Kalnes hospital had to wear masks when waiting for their result after corona testing if they had been in Sweden more than 10 days when off duty. Swedish daily commuters, on the other hand, did not have to wear masks, nor did the Norwegian nursing staff (ST 3 Oct 2020). It should be pointed out that at the Kalnes hospital there are around 140 Swedes working, most of them living in Strömstad (ST 14 Aug 2021).

Another Swedish woman, with the assumed name Christina, has been working at a smaller care giving business in Norway, where she was the only Swede working. In September 2020, she had to report herself sick due to stress and concerns because of changed working conditions. Being Swedish, she has felt herself singled out as someone possibly spreading infection in Norway (ST 1 Oct 2020). The



10. Corona testing by nasal swabbing.  
Photo Stefan Bennhage.

assistant nurse at Kalnes, with the assumed name Maria, experienced what she perceived as a “witch hunt against us Swedes”, referring to the, to her unpleasant, nasal swabbing once a week (ST 8 Oct 2020).

As opposed to previously presented informants, Karin Stacke has not asked the newspaper for her to be anonymous. She was a biomedical analyst at Kalnes, and in the beginning of October 2020 she filed a notification to the union regarding the working conditions with special treatment of Swedish citizens. She objected to the requirement of testing every week: “this all feels very political”. At the same time, she felt like the hospital management at Kalnes were in support for the Swedish employees (ST 8 Oct 2020). At some point into October the Norwegian Public Health Agency changed their position and allowed testing samples to be taken from the throat instead of the nasal way (ST 24 Oct 2020).

The weekly testing procedure hit a road bump, though, when the testing station in Svinesund was closed down on 15 November 2020. Employees then had to get tested in the Norwegian municipality where they were working (ST 24 Oct 2020).

On 2 January 2021 Norway closed down the border passages at the old Svinesundsbron and at other minor passages for entry. This led to increased commuting time for many border commuters. Katarina Johansson living in Bullaren could no longer cross the border at a close by minor passage in Vassbotten. Instead she had to leave home four hours, as opposed to previously two hours, before her work shift started at a business in Fredrikstad making plasterboards. The extended travelling time was mainly caused by long lines at the new Svinesundsbron (ST 14 Jan 2021). Further into January 2021, the old Svinesundsbron was again opened for traffic (ST 28 Jan 2021).

On 29 January 2021 the Norwegian government blocked Swedish daily commuters that did not have socially important professions from going to work in Norway and they did not receive their salary or other reimbursement. They were asked to use their vacation time in February 2021. Socially important professions included nursing staff and freight transports. A border commuter, who wants to remain anonymous, immediately crossed the border on 28 January with a caravan, when finding out about the decision. She had not been working very long in Norway and therefore had no vacation time to use (ST 30 Jan 2021). Following the Norwegian decision on 29 January, Christian Perman, living in Strömstad and commuting on a daily basis to Norway as an assembler, felt that “it was tough to be forced to stay at home. Not knowing how long it was going to stay that way was taxing. I started looking for a new job. It was not that I did not like the job, but you can’t go indefinitely without a salary. You start to feel almost desperate for money, it is hard when your safety net goes away.” (ST 11 Mar 2021).

The closed border for Swedish work commuters had negative consequences for Norwegian businesses in Halden that had many Swedish employees.

The factory Nexans in Halden making electric power cables, was considering a close-down of production in the beginning of February, if the border would not be opened for border commuters momentarily (ST 2 Feb 2021). Both the LO district and the Trade Union in West Sweden were complaining and demanded to the Norwegian and Swedish governments that the border should be opened for border commuters (ST 18 Feb 2021). The Norwegian Parliament Stortinget voted 'no' on 18 February to a proposal that Swedish work commuters should be financially compensated from Norway (ST 20 Feb 2021). On 9 March, however, there was a response from the Norwegian government that border commuters should be retroactively compensated for income lost after 29 January. They would be getting 70 per cent of their sickness benefits, which roughly corresponded to the reimbursement they would have received had they been laid off. The Norwegian prime minister Erna Solberg stated: "I am happy that we found a solution that will ease up the situation for those many Swedes working in Norway" (ST 11 Mar 2021).

On 26 February the Norwegian government decided to make an exception for all Swedish and Finnish daily commuters becoming effective on 1 March. They needed to present a negative corona test no more than seven days of date at the border. This was mandatory even if they had been infected with Covid-19 some time during the last 6 months (ST 11 Mar 2021). Weekly commuters not having socially important professions were not included in the new decision and could therefore not cross the border (ST 27 Feb 2021).

When fully vaccinated Norwegians, as of 11 June 2021, no longer needed to stay quarantined coming back from travel to Sweden, lines at the border increased significantly. This meant a great disadvantage for the Swedish daily commuters. Thus, the old Svinesundsbron was then open only to those holding socially important professions and those with a Norwegian passport (ST 17 Jun 2021). The Swedish border commuter Frida Cederbratt stated: "In one work week, I have spent a total of eleven hours in line. Pretty soon I will not have any free time left". She called for a separate line for border commuters (ST 5 Jun and 17 Jun 2021). On 17 June the old Svinesundsbron was opened up to all daily commuters to decrease the lines (ST 19 Jun 2021).

Biomedical analyst Karin Stacke at the Kalnes hospital felt in November 2021 that she had enough of the Norwegian border restrictions that had been going on for a long time. She had experienced stress and felt singled out being a Swede. She therefore quit her job at Kalnes, having worked there for nine years, and started working in Sweden. She emphasized that "I felt that I could no longer stay loyal to Norway and I stopped trusting the country". She was relieved getting a job in Sweden (ST 11 Nov 2021).

## Norwegian Work Commuters

Following the Norwegian border close-down on 17 March 2020, Norwegian

work commuters with jobs in Sweden had to be quarantined when at home off work (ST 4 Feb 2020). Belinda Klieline Abbot runs ‘Belinda’s Cafe’ ten Swedish meters in on the Swedish side of the border and lives close by on the Norwegian side. In June 2020 she felt that “there is like an invisible wall against Sweden in the middle of the border bridge. To me it feels like East- and West Germany”. She could not even go to pick up her mail on the Swedish side without having to stay quarantined in Norway afterwards. To avoid for the cafe to go bankrupt, she started working extra hours at a pharmacy in Norway (ST 4 Jun 2020).

An additional problem for Norwegian border commuters emerged when Sweden closed the border for entry on 25 January 2021 due to concerns about the new omicron variant that had been identified in Norway (ST 26 Jan 2021).

When Norway lifted the restrictions for fully vaccinated Norwegians on 11 June 2021, this caused increased lines not only for Swedish but also for Norwegian daily commuters in Sweden. Maral Dabirian lives in Sarpsborg but works as a dentist and is also heading the clinic at Folk tandvården in Strömstad. She belongs to the minority of individuals commuting for work in Sweden while most individuals are going the opposite way. As a daily commuter she has been stuck in lines and border controls and finds that “things have been taken to the extreme, border commuters have been caught in the middle”. In her car she needed to keep passport, working permit and a copy of her population registration at all times. Every day she also had to fill out an entry form posted on the Norwegian government website. She was allowed to cross the old Svinesundsbron since her profession was considered socially important (ST 19 Jun 2021).

When new Norwegian restrictions were imposed on 9 August 2021, unvaccinated Norwegian work commuters in Sweden again had to stay quarantined at home in Norway. A Norwegian work commuter stated: “Because you cannot socialize with other individuals and have to keep to yourself with your own imposed rules, it feels as if you have the plague and cholera. Doctor’s offices don’t really want you coming in when you are quarantined”. Another Norwegian border commuter stated: “I have never cried so much as I have done this last year” (ST 21 Aug 2021).

## Norwegian Border Trading

When Norway closed the border on 17 March 2020, it was devastating for border trade from Norway in the Strömstad area. 54 per cent of all Norwegian cross-border trade took place at Svinesund, the nearby Nordby shopping centre and Strömstad. At Nordby before the pandemic, 90 per cent of all customer visits were by Norwegians (ST 14 Mar 2020). Groceries accounted for the bulk of purchases. 90 per cent of alcohol purchases in Strömstad were made by Norwegians (ST 5 Mar 2020; cf. Guttormsson &

Trollidal, 2020). On 19 March 2020, *Strömstads Tidning* announced: “No Norwegians – drastic difference in customer flow”. The brothers Arne and Even Hole from Halden took the opportunity to shop at Nordby just before the border close-down went into force. They thought it was “good that Norway is taking proper measures to reduce the spread of the coronavirus” (ST 19 Mar 2020). On 24 March *Strömstads Tidning* reported that Swedish stores were not allowed to deliver goods across the border to Norwegian customers. It was prevented by the Norwegian customs and police authorities (ST 24 Mar 2020).

When Norwegian border trade in Sweden ceased, it soon had positive effects on grocery shopping in Norwegian border areas. Store manager Carina Andresen in Sarpsborg stated at the beginning of April 2020 that sales of groceries had increased by almost 60 per cent compared to the corresponding period in the prior year (ST 4 Apr 2020). At Nordby shopping centre, sales had decreased by 95 per cent in the first week of April compared with the previous year (ST 4 Apr 2020). As a result, by mid-April, many stores there had closed down and others had introduced shorter opening hours (ST 16 Apr 2020). At the end of March, the tapas restaurant Toro in Strömstad reported a 95 per cent loss of customers (ST 28 Mar 2020). Since the advance warnings of Norwegian border closings were constantly very close to the imposition and was renewed at short intervals, it created both uncertainty and anxiety among Swedish border stores. It was impossible to plan ahead, something that they pointed out in several interviews conducted by *Strömstads Tidning*.

For the Norwegian brothers Orvelin, who own about thirty stores on the Swedish side of the border, sales by the end of June 2020 had decreased by 95 per cent (ST 27 Jun 2020). In October, grocery sales in the Strömstad area had decreased by a total of 82 per cent (ST 24 Oct 2020).

Grocery stores in Norway were not alone in making large profits after the border closure. Vinmonopolet, which corresponds to the Swedish Systembolaget, also made gains. In October 2020, alcohol sales in Sarpsborg had increased by 189 per cent and in Fredrikstad by 140 per cent (ST 3 Dec 2020). In Halden, the increase was over 200 per cent (ST 8 Dec 2020). One year after the border closure, Vinmonopolet stated that it had increased its turnover by NOK 3.24 billion (ST 18 Mar 2021).

From 11 June 2021, fully vaccinated Norwegians or those who had had Covid-19 during the last



11. The parking lot at Nordby shopping centre almost completely empty of cars in October 2020. Photo Marita Adamsson.



12. Faiza Ali from Norwegian Moss loaded the shopping cart full of groceries in mid-June 2021. “I feel somewhat nervous to be back because it’s been a year and a half since I was last here.” Photo Arvid Brandström.

six months escaped quarantine after travelling to Sweden. After a further easing of Norwegian border restrictions on 5 July 2021, a lot of Norwegian customers returned to Sweden. On 8 July *Strömstad Tidning* wrote: “The Norwegian customers are back in Strömstad – fantastic”. The newspaper had met several satisfied Norwegian customers who had not shopped cross-border since March 2020. Erik Karlstad-Solberg from Sarpsborg had bought meat, pork, bacon and

moist snuff at Nordby (ST 8 Jul 2021). Merete Welke from Fredrikstad loaded lots of soft drinks into her car: “Today, I paid SEK 59 for a 24-pack, in Norway I would have had to pay more than double. Then you will understand why I hoard” (ST 6 Jul 2021). In addition to lower prices, Norwegian customers have also mentioned that in Sweden there is a wider range of groceries compared to Norway (ST 22 Jun 2021).

Stricter Norwegian border restrictions with quarantine requirements for entry into Norway were introduced for the Västra Götaland region on Monday 9 August excepting only those who were fully vaccinated. The weekend before 9 August, *Strömstad Tidning* stated that “Norwegians bunkered cheap goods at the Swedish border – with kilometre-long lines as a result”. The purchases were mostly alcohol, tobacco, meat and sweets. “What we have in common is that there were large volumes” (ST 10 Aug 2021).

In October 2021, the border was reopened when the Västra Götaland region became an orange zone instead of a red. Several store owners in Strömstad immediately expressed relief and joy about this (ST 12 Oct and 14 Oct 2021). However, the joy did not last long when Norway reintroduced stricter entry rules on 26 November and even more so on 3 December 2021 (ST 7 Dec 2021). It became even worse when Sweden also decided on a border closure from 28 December 2021 to 21 January 2022 (ST 25 Jan 2022).

## Norwegian Holiday Home Owners in Sweden

From the 1990s and onwards, more and more Norwegians from the Oslo region bought holiday homes in northern Bohuslän, particularly in the Strömstad area (Gustavsson, 2013). When the border was closed on 17 March 2020, however, it was not possible to go to these houses by car, since when the homeowners returned to Norway, they faced a ten days quarantine. Norwegians were only allowed to visit and check on their holiday



homes during the day but not to stay overnight or shop in Sweden if they wanted to avoid quarantine.

In May 2020, a digital petition was initiated among these holiday home owners demanding that the Norwegian government allow overnight stays in Sweden (ST 5 May 2020, cf. Fjell, 2021). “The group named, ‘for us who own holiday homes in Sweden’ “ on Facebook had about 8,000 members in 2020 (ST 8 Oct 2020). More than 1,000 of them filed a lawsuit against the Norwegian state with the District Court in Oslo. On 5 February 2021, this court followed the complainants’ line. It was established that the requirement for quarantine after an overnight stay in a holiday home in Sweden was an interference with people’s freedom of movement and their right of consideration for home and family life. The Norwegian state decided to appeal the decision, however (ST 9 Feb and 16 Feb 2021). In June 2021, the state won the dispute in Borgarting lagmansrätt (equivalent to court of appeal in Sweden). The Norwegian holiday home owners appealed to the Supreme Court (ST 24 Aug 2021) where the state won again in 2022. The court ruled that while the rights of the cottage owners had been restricted, they were not violated. Instead, the quarantine regulations were justified (*Aftenposten* 7 Apr 2022).

Estate agents in Strömstad have stated that during the early phase of the pandemic, holiday home prices were kept high because some Norwegians bought houses without having personally been on site to look them over. They were content to see the houses digitally (ST 16 Jul 2020). However, in the autumn of 2020, the Norwegians’ interest in buying holiday homes in Sweden disappeared (ST 13 Oct 2020). After the lifting of the Swedish and Norwegian corona restrictions on 9 and 12 February 2022, demand and prices for holiday homes in Strömstad started to rise again (ST 31 Mar 2022).

## Tourism Facilities without Norwegians

The Norwegian tourist season begins in the week before Easter. Unlike in Sweden, Maundy Thursday is a public holiday in Norway. During the 2000s, many Norwegian tourists have taken holidays on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Easter week. Since the 1900s, Norwegian youngsters have come to Strömstad with caravans of vintage cars during Maundy Thursday. A popular term for this is ‘gutter day’. It has been a pleasure ride with a considerable consumption of alcohol and extensive policing. Some young people have been apprehended by the police due to too much drinking (Gustavsson, 2019). This tradition came to an abrupt end in 2020 and 2021. As a compensation for the missing Norwegian youth, a vintage car association and some entrepreneurs in Strömstad conducted a car caravan through the city streets during Maundy Thursday 2020. There was no need

for enhanced policing. *Strömstads Tidning* stated: “The initiative means that Swedish 70-plus people will take over the tradition from Norwegian youth this Easter” and “there will be no beer drinking” (ST 9 Apr 2020).

The consequences of the lack of Norwegian tourists were felt in several areas in the Strömstad area. The guest harbour staff in Strömstad experienced this clearly during the summer of 2020. There were about 70 per cent fewer overnight harbour guests compared to the summer of 2019. As a result, port revenues decreased to the same extent. During the pre-season from Easter to midsummer, operations were down in the port, as about 95 per cent of visitors during that time had previously consisted of Norwegian boats (ST 3 Sep 2020). Another consequence of the absence of Norwegian tourist boats was that the maritime accidents in which the Sea Rescue Society had to intervene decreased significantly during the summer. This was not because Norwegians were inferior boaters but because of their reduced number (ST 11 Jul 2020).

Later in the summer of 2020, new Swedish tourist boats arrived at the port of Strömstad but this did not compensate for the loss of Norwegian boats. Guest harbour manager David Nikkinen Gravander stated that he “heard several visitors say that they took the opportunity to spend the holiday in northern Bohuslän this year, as there are not as many Norwegians and thus not as large crowds“ (ST 18 Jul 2020). In the summer of 2021, a lot of Norwegian boaters returned as a result of the Norwegian government easing border restrictions on 5 July (ST 13 Jul 2021). Between 5 July and 12 July the number of guest nights rose from around 1,000 to 2,000. The Norwegians Anne and Ivan Jensen were happy that they could again dock in the guest harbour in Strömstad after two lost years. “The Swedish archipelago is fantastic, so we have missed it” (ST 29 Jul 2021) Another boater who had returned was Sveinung Skjelstad who had previously visited Strömstad for twenty years. He said that “the entire Swedish coast is so nice because it is not as privatized as the Norwegian coast. Here you can go ashore almost everywhere” (ST 13 Jul 2021). On the other hand, port manager David Nikkinen Gravander was disappointed that Swedish tourist boats were largely absent compared to the summer of 2020. “I had hoped for a nice mix in the guest harbour with Norwegians and the Swedes from last year who realized that it is quite nice in Strömstad” (ST 13 Jul 2021).

Like the guest harbours, the campsites had a lower occupancy due to the lack of Norwegians. Grebbestadfjordens camping noticed this already during Easter 2020. Revenues amounted to only about one sixth compared to previous years (ST 11 Jun 2020). Lökholmens camping in Strömstad and Daftö Resort camping had similar problems in the summer of 2020 in that they were about 90 per cent dependent on Norwegian visitors (ST 25 Jul 2020). Like Norwegian boaters, some Norwegian camping guests returned in the summer of 2021, but not to the same extent as before the pandemic (ST 13 Jul 2021).

The hotels also experienced cancelled overnight stays and conferences early on (ST 14 Mar 2020). Newly arrived Swedish tourists did not come close to replace the missed Norwegian guests (ST 22 Oct 2020). Tanum municipality has found it easier to attract Swedish tourists than Strömstad municipality. One idea among Swedes had been that Strömstad is overcrowded with Norwegians. Swedish tourists have been reluctant to go there in the summer. Dan Järbyn, who is the director of Fjällbacka camping in Tanum municipality, has experienced such a perception (ST 25 Jul 2020). At the campsite on the island of Nordkoster, west of Strömstad, however, the owners managed, even without marketing, to partially replace the missing Norwegians with new Swedish visitors (ST 1 Aug 2020).



13. Guest harbour manager David Nikinen Gravander points to the increased number of Norwegian boaters in the port of Strömstad at the beginning of July 2021. Photo Victoria Petersson.

## Cultural Activities without Norwegians

Cultural activities were imposed many restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Several events were cancelled and some were broadcast digitally. This applied to the Strömstad Film Festival between 29 January and 8 February 2021 (ST 30 Jan 2021). The storefront walk on a Sunday in Advent 2020 with a fifty year history went digital (ST 28 Nov 2020). There have been concerts outside nursing homes to counteract the loneliness of the residents (ST 12 May 2020). Singer Thomas Flodin, who lives in Strömstad, has long belonged to the Oslo Opera, whose choir had to close down its activities in March 2020. For him, that meant a part-time furlough, first at 70 per cent and then at 50 per cent. He had to train by himself at home in Strömstad, among other things, with appearances in the church (ST 14 Mar and 14 May 2020). Digital opera in Norway has been followed from Strömstad. When Opera Østfold had its first performance in the autumn of 2020 in Halden with about forty physical participants, Strömstad residents could enjoy this via the opera's Facebook page. Strömstad Tidning wrote: "Halden sends opera across the closed border". Sparebank 1 Østfold Akershus had allocated funds for digitization so that the opera could reach a larger audience (ST 22 Oct 2020). Digital broadcasts also went the other way from Sweden to Norway. Two of the three musicians in the trio Doggerland who were to perform at the traditional Christmas concert North Sea Christmas in Fredrikstad in 2020, were Swedes who could not cross the



14. Swedish and Norwegian dancers met in Lurs bygdegård in Tanum in October 2021 after a year and a half break. Photo Thomas Bennelind.

border. They made a recording of two songs instead and broadcast them across the border via screen. *Strömstads Tidning* wrote: “North Sea Christmas overcomes the border barriers with film greetings” (ST 12 Dec 2020).

Border restrictions were partially eased in June 2021. Cultural activities could then start again to some extent after being closed since March 2020. In Lokstallet in Strömstad, the dance spectacle *Mykorrhiza* could be performed for

the first time in just over a year in front of an audience. Choreographer Ina Dokmo said that “it feels great, almost a little surreal” (ST 15 Jun 2021). The fortieth anniversary for the association Tanums Gammeldansare was able to resume its activities in Lurs bygdegård in the autumn of 2021 after a year and a half. Friends and members of the association came from Halden. Liv Thomassen Moen told that “I have been dancing here for many years. It feels great to see everyone again. Now I’m really eager to dance. I prefer old-time dancing and bug” (ST 2 Oct 2021).

## Sports without Norwegians

Summer sports competitions between Norwegians and Swedes have been a tradition for many years. This applies to the Shrimp Tennis in July. In the summer of 2020, it had to be carried out without Norwegians. “We usually have a lot of Norwegian players,” the competition director said. Over a hundred players were registered in 2020 and they came from many parts of Sweden. Some were on holiday and others came solely to participate in the competition (ST 23 Jul 2020). The Exercise Race Strömstadsmilen was arranged virtually in July 2020. The runners could participate no matter where they lived. The idea, the race management said, was that “we want people out on the move”. This would be done without participants being exposed to the risk of infection. What was missed was the festival in connection with the race (ST 30 May 2020). The field shooting competition *Nolhotten*, where almost half of the participants used to come from Norway, had to be cancelled at Easter 2020 for the first time in fifty years. The loss in the club coffers was big (ST 9 Apr 2020). Strömstads Badanstalt stopped all indoor training in March 2020. “Above all, we don’t have our Norwegian friends, it’s sad,” said CEO Marcus Palm (ST 19 Mar 2020). In Strömstad Golf Club, about two thirds of the approximately 900 members

came from Norway. In Dynekilen's Golf Club with 400 members, about half came from Norway. In the spring, about 90 per cent of the players used to be Norwegians. Track owner Kenneth Isaksson pointed out that "this time of the year, the parking lot outside the clubhouse is usually almost full of Norwegian cars" (ST 25 Apr 2020). By and large, many of these golf clubs had to close down from the spring of 2020. The financial loss was extensive, and this meant that staff had to be laid off. Living in Strömstad, the coach of the Norwegian national rowing team since 2013, Johan Flodin, had to switch to digital meetings with the national team players in 2020. "We work primarily to plan and to make assessments of what has happened" (ST 23 May 2020).

## Layoffs

A report in April 2020 showed that Strömstad municipality topped the list of the most crisis-affected municipalities in Sweden. Tanum municipality was in fifth place (ST 16 Apr 2020). In June 2020, it was reported that in Strömstad, unemployment had increased more than in any other municipality in the Västra Götaland region. In Strömstad, the unemployment rate in June was 8.5 per cent, compared with 5.7 per cent in February 2020, and in Tanum 6.5 per cent (ST 13 Jun 2020). In October 2020, the figure for Strömstad had risen to 9.5 per cent (ST 12 Nov 2020) and to 10.6 per cent in December 2020 (ST 19 Jan 2021) and in April 2021 to 11.4 per cent (ST 20 Apr 2021). After that, the trend turned and by October 2021, the unemployment figure had fallen to 7.4 per cent (ST 27 Jan 2021).

The Norwegian border closing from 17 March 2020 soon led to short-term layoffs on the Swedish side with an emphasis on cross-border trade and later in the spring of 2020 also in the tourism sector. In March 2020, Sweden introduced the possibility of six months short-term layoffs, with the possibility of a three-month extension. The longest lay-off period would thus expire on 30 November 2020. It was later extended to apply also in the first half of 2021 (ST 12 Nov 2020). As early as 24 March 2020, CEO Mathias Dalnoki at hotel Laholmen stated that "we have virtually no turnover". Short-term layoffs of all sixty employees were introduced (ST 24 Mar 2020). The worst situation was for temporary employees who were not covered by the lay-off rules (ST 26 Mar 2020). By August 2020, around 1,500 employees in Strömstad stores had been laid off. At the same time, 250 people had been laid off in Norwegian-owned Grensemat stores and 96 were given notice of dismissal as of 1 October (ST 13 Aug 2020 and ST 24 Sep 2020). At the end of October, an additional 200 employees were given notice of dismissal. Then there would only be 50 employees left in Grensemat (ST 26 Sep 2020). However, shortly before Christmas 2020, these termination notices were withdrawn as operations manager Göran

Lundgren expected an opening of the border between April and June 2021 (ST 24 Dec 2020). He pointed to the impending vaccination as a light in the pitch-dark tunnel of 2020 (ST 31 Dec 2020). Restaurants had also tried to keep fighting and believe in the future instead of closing down the business. Restaurant owner Daniel Olofsson, who has been active in the trade since the early 1990s, stated at Christmas time 2020 that “we can’t lie down and die. I go to work every day with the attitude that we’re going to make it” (ST 29 Dec 2020). Despite the difficult work situation, few bankruptcies and company closures were mentioned in Strömstad. One of them concerned the store Skopiraten. It filed for bankruptcy in August 2020 as a result of the reduced customer influx after eleven years of operation (ST 22 Aug 2020).

Something that could counteract layoffs was investment in e-commerce. Under Reinert Sörensson’s leadership, the store chain Sportshopen, with its head office in Grebbestad in Tanum municipality, had to lay off 80 per cent of its staff after the Norwegian border closure. Sörensson then started trying to attract Norwegian customers with his e-commerce, which he started in 2017. During the autumn of 2020, things had gone surprisingly well. In Grebbestad’s online shopping, there were more Norwegian customers than Swedish ones in October 2020 (ST 15 Oct 2020). On 4 November 2020, 25 employees were considered supernumerary, but eleven of them were able to be reassigned to online shopping positions (ST 5 Nov 2020). In 2021, eight new e-commerce stores were opened in Strömstad. This contributed to the city rising from place 116 to place 9 on the list of Sweden’s best e-commerce municipalities this year. The investment in Norwegian customers had made this possible (ST 14 May 2022).

The closing of the sea border with Norway affected Norwegian boaters who usually frequent the Strömstad’s guest harbour. Through the pandemic, Norwegian boats disappeared, and this contributed to a significant loss of income for the port and consequent layoffs of staff.

Public boat traffic between Norway and Sweden was affected. The daily car ferry lines ColorLine and FjordLine, which are Norwegian-owned and operate on the Strömstad-Sandefjord route on the west side of the Oslofjord, had to suspend operations when the Norwegian border was closed. Strömstad municipality lost an estimated SEK 30 million in port revenue. Service resumed only on 5 July 2021, much to the delight of the shipping company and crew. The Norwegian travel restrictions were removed for the Västra Götaland region (ST 29 Jun 2021). The staff, meanwhile, had been laid off but had now returned. For infection control reasons, ferry lines initially made a 50 per cent cut in the number of passengers accepted. In October 2021, the number of ferry departures per day doubled. ColorLine then had four daily departures and FjordLine two (ST 30 Oct 2021).

When Norway introduced stricter entry requirements on 3 December 2021, ferry departures were again reduced by half as a result of a reduced

passenger base. One hundred employees were given notice (ST 14 Dec and 30 Dec 2021). Further restrictions had to take place when, on 28 December 2021, Sweden introduced new entry restrictions with requirements for corona passports or a negative corona test for foreign citizens. Traffic could be normalized in February 2022 when both the Swedish and Norwegian restrictions ended (ST 5 Feb 2022). All remaining furloughs then ceased.



15. The car ferry ColorLine in June 2021.  
Photo Thomas Bennelind.

## Crisis Support for Companies

At an extraordinary meeting at the end of March 2020, Tanum municipality decided to establish a support package for local companies (ST 24 Mar 2020). In March 2020, the Swedish government introduced a furlough subsidy for vulnerable companies (ST 10 Nov 2021). In March and April 2020, companies that had lost at least 30 per cent of their turnover could apply for state adjustment support. In May, the loss ceiling was raised to 40 per cent and in June and July to 50 per cent (ST 8 Sep 2020). On 1 February 2021, Strömstad municipality was able to start a transition office with the help of a state support of SEK 3.5 million to help both vulnerable companies and the unemployed. State adjustment support was granted until 30 September 2021. A new adjustment support was introduced on 1 December 2021 in light of Norway's reintroduction of stricter entry restrictions (ST 18 Dec 2021). The candy company Gottebiten AB received a total of SEK 28 million in support, that being the highest sum among the companies in Strömstad. Next up was Maximat at Nordby shopping centre with SEK 22 million in support. Laholmen hotel received a SEK four million support (ST 4 Nov 2021).

## Schooling

The closed border has had an impact on school education when students had studied on the other side of the border. It affected sixteen-year-old Gio Kraghe Storgårds in Strömstad, who in August 2020 started attending a high school course in Halden for music, dance and drama. She only had time to spend a week in her new school before the Norwegian infection control announced that no Swedish students or athletes were allowed to enter Norway. She found it sad to be hit by the border closure. For seven weeks, she had to stay at home in Strömstad, participating in digital teaching. "I had to record dancing

and send movies, but it's not that easy." "I can't handle some subjects from home ... When we have choir singing, it doesn't work from home at all." The same applies when it comes to staging plays. In October 2020, the Norwegian restrictions were changed so that Swedish school students were put on equal footing with commuters and could thus again participate in schooling on site (ST 24 Oct 2020). At the beginning of 2021, the Norwegian students were also suspended from in-person teaching for a short time (ST 4 Feb 2021). On 15 February 2021 the Norwegian government reopened the border for Swedish school students in Norway (ST 16 Feb 2021).

## Finding New Professions as a Result of the Pandemic

When the extensive cross-border trade with Norway largely ceased on 17 March 2020, many store employees, who were often young, were laid off and became unemployed. The prospects were uncertain, as it was not clear when the border could be reopened. This uncertainty was amplified by the fact that the timing of closures and openings was frequently changed without warning. In that situation, some former trade employees started to have second thoughts about their future work situation. One way was to train for a profession that did not depend on the Norwegian border. Such examples have been highlighted in several reports in *Strömstads Tidning*.

In the autumn of 2020, 25-year-old Emma Thyft was given notice of dismissal from her work in the retail sector. She expressed her experiences as follows: "It came as a shock when the border closed, but you had to accept the situation and I thought that this should not ruin my life". In January 2021 she began training as a dental nurse (ST 11 Feb 2021). In May 2022, she had almost completed her education and had already received a permanent job as of June at a dental clinic in Strömstad (ST 10 May 2022).

On 13 June 2022 Carl Fredrik Lensnäs, 28, and Ulrika Källsvik, 46, completed their education as assistant nurses at the adult education school in Strömstad (ST 16 Jun 2022). Jennie Bergström, 31, who had worked eleven years in a clothing store, found a new job in the customs service without extra training. This was the new Brexit department in Strömstad, which worked with customs declarations of goods going to or coming from the UK (ST 15 May 2021).



16. Emma Thyft was able to immediately start working at Granit Hoti's dental clinic in Strömstad when she finished her new education in June 2022. Photo Victoria Petersson.

Some laid-off persons set up their own enterprises. Turgay Akin, with a background in the restaurant



trade, started a company on 17 July 2020 that delivers food from restaurants to customers in the Strömstad area. He decided to start this new project on 10 July (ST 11 Aug 2020). Border trader and restaurant owner Jaana Eriksson decided to invest in her interest in horses. She switched to selling accessories for horses such as bridles, halters and saddle girdles. She successfully turned to a Swedish market in Bohuslän in trotting and equestrian sports (ST 6 Feb 2022).

## The Effects of Losing Contacts across the Border

The closed border has meant that relatives and close friends on both sides of the border have not been able to meet. It has been perceived as a loss, and *Strömstads Tidning* has met this in nursing homes. These accommodations survived for an unusually long time without any Covid-19 cases. They imposed a restraining order indoors but not outdoors as early as 19 March 2020. From the beginning of June, plexiglass was introduced on the tables to shield residents from visitors (ST 1 Sep 2020).

At the end of October 2020, the first cases of infection were confirmed at the Solbogården nursing home, while the other nursing homes escaped (ST 12 Dec 2020). The nursing homes in Tanum municipality avoided Covid infection in 2020 (ST 7 Nov 2020), but some cases were detected in January 2021. That month, individuals living in all nursing homes in Strömstad and Tanum received their first vaccine shots (ST 16 Jan 2021).

The couple Aud, 83, and Milard Andresen, 87, who have been married for 58 years, live at the Hunter nursing home. Their two children and grandchildren live in Norway. In October 2020, Aud remembered: “They have visited us outdoors in the spring, but then they have to quarantine themselves when they get back home”. After one daughter had visited, Aud exclaimed, “It’s hard not being able to hug. We’re very cuddly, but we’ll have to make up for that later.” Aud and Milard also have digital contact on Skype with the children and they send pictures to each other on Facebook. “It’s great to be able to follow their lives,” Aud said (ST 17 Oct 2020).

Several informants that *Strömstads Tidning* has spoken with have talked about difficulties in not being able to meet close relatives who have been seriously ill on the other side of the border. It has caused both discomfort and dissatisfaction. Aina Mittet lives in Strömstad and has four children and grandchildren



17. Plexiglass outdoors at a nursing home in Strömstad in the summer of 2020. Photo Victoria Petersson.



18. Aud and Milard Andresen at the nursing home Jägaren in Strömstad 2020. Photo Victoria Petersson.

in Norway. Due to new Norwegian restrictions that came into force on 9 November 2021, she must show a negative corona test that was no older than 72 hours when visiting these relatives (ST 12 Nov 2020).

Paramedics in the Strömstad area have felt greater stress when, after 17 March 2020, they were not allowed to transport emergency patients to Kalnes Hospital, which is twenty minutes away. Instead, they had to make a blue lights trip

90 kilometres long to the regional hospital NÄL in Trollhättan. This is 64 kilometres more than to Kalnes. Pregnant women had been able to turn to Kalnes for delivery – but no more. Heavily pregnant Petra Hedström in Strömstad had a planned caesarean section at Kalnes on 17 March 2021, but she was told the same morning by phone that she was not allowed to come. The hospital regretted that they could no longer receive Swedish patients. “It was like they were pulling the rug out from under my feet. I just cried so it was my husband who had to call NÄL” (ST 19 Mar 2020). One can speak of quick and inconsistent decisions in Norway that drastically affected Swedish border residents who needed urgent care. Ambulance driver Johan Andersson emphasized that “it becomes an ethical dilemma and a stress you have” (ST 9 Jan 2021).

## Border Meetings on the Old Svinesundsbron

When the national border was closed, people on both sides of the border could arrange meetings on the centre line of the old Svinesundsbron. These meetings included weddings, music events, family meetings, local politicians’ meetings, journalist meetings, but also ordinary personal meetings. The middle-aged identical twins Pontus and Ola Berglund belonged to the last category. They met every Saturday from April 2020 until the end of the pandemic restrictions. Pontus lives in the Swedish border parish of Lommelund and Ola in Halden, Norway. They have been very close throughout their lives and therefore felt a strong need for recurring personal meetings even when the national border was closed. *Strömstads Tidning* has made several extensive reports with pictures and texts about the brothers’ meetings. The first time was on 7 April 2020 (ST 7 Apr 2020). The newspaper wrote: “Each bringing his own coffee, they would sit down and start talking”. In October 2021, Norwegian television NRK filmed the two brothers (ST 5 Oct 2021). French journalists have also visited them. At the last

newspaper report on 30 December 2021, the brothers were depicted with Santa hats. They had also each put up a national flag on the bridge deck (ST 30 Dec 2021).

In early August 2020, Norwegian-born Heidi Caroline Nyström and Swedish-born Willy Lysell got married in the middle of the old Svinesundsbron through a civil marriage ceremony. The bride and groom live in Strömstad where they run the store 'Ditt och datt' which is very focused on Norwegian customers. Heidi is chairman of the Merchants' Association in Strömstad and wanted to send a message to the Norwegian government through the wedding in the middle of the bridge that the border should be opened. This wedding actually became an international novelty. French news agency AFP, the French morning newspaper *Le Figaro*, the French weekly *Paris Match*, tv station TVA Nouvelles in Canada, as well as the German morning newspaper *Bild*, which is the best-selling newspaper in Germany, wrote about this ceremony. It was perceived as a unique event (ST 13 Aug 2020).

A close collaboration during the pandemic between *Strömstads Tidning* and *Halden Arbeiderblad* was symbolically illustrated by journalists from the two newspapers meeting at the centre line of the old Svinesundsbron in early December 2020. Norwegian journalist Kristian Bjørneby stated: "For us in Halden, Svinesund and Strömstad are not another country.



19. Twin brothers Pontus and Ola Berglund have coffee together in the middle of the old Svinesundsbron on 3 April 2020. Photo Hannah Palmhagen.



20. Twin brothers Pontus and Ola Berglund with Santa hats and each national flag in the middle of the old Svinesundsbron between Christmas and New Year 2021. Photo Arvid Brandström.



21. Heidi Caroline Nyström and Willy Lysell give each other a wedding kiss in the middle of the old Svinesundsbron after the wedding ceremony in August 2020. Photo Thomas Bennelind.



22. Journalists at *Halden Arbeiderblad* and *Strömstad Tidning* met on the old Svinesundsbron in December 2020 to talk about the situation with the closed border. Photo Trine Bakke Eidissen, *Halden Arbeiderblad*.



23. The Working Committee of the Svinesund Committee gathered on the old Svinesundsbron in September 2020. Photo the Svinesund Committee.

For us, it's part of our neighbourhood." Swedish journalist Marita Adamsson replied: "How happy I am when I hear that" (ST 5 Dec 2020).

In September 2020, the Norwegian-Swedish Svinesund Committee's working group met at the border line on the bridge. They wanted to send a visible message about the need for cooperation across the border instead of Norwegians and Swedes blaming each other during the pandemic (ST 8 Dec 2020).

The Strömstad choir *Tontämjarna* had difficulties when they could not meet their Norwegian choir leader Martin Rasten, who lives in Moss, Norway, because of the border closure. After a long break, the choir and its leader met in the middle of the old Svinesundsbron on 18 May 2020. The choir director was on the Norwegian side and the choir on the Swedish side. Martin Rasten stated that the choir "wanted to manifest the ties between Sweden and Norway". Norwegian TV covered this unusual event (ST 23 May 2020).

The dance students in Strömstad's cultural school and in Halden Danseskole met in the middle of the bridge on 24 October 2020. Journalist Marita Adamsson, who followed the dance performance, commented afterwards: "We have just experienced a manifestation of why borders should be open, neighbours in border areas should not be separated. I have seen longing, sorrow and hope and I remain totally convinced that we must take care of our unique community here around the border. Maybe even a little more firmly convinced" than before the dance performance (ST 27 Oct 2020).

## Negative Rumours Spread as a Result of the Closed Border

When the border for entry into Norway was closed for a long period as of 17 March 2020, frictions arose between residents on both sides of the border. It took the form of rumour-mongering. This has been mentioned several times



24. Choir leader Martin Rasten conducted Strömstad choir Tontämjarna in the middle of the old Svinesundsbron on 18 May 2020. Photo Marita Adamsson.



25. Dance students in Strömstad's cultural school and in Halden Danseskole met in the middle of the old Svinesundsbron on 24 October 2020. Photo Marita Adamsson.

in *Strömstads Tidning*. Obviously, Swedish commuters suffered the worst consequences. Journalist Marita Adamsson wrote on 10 October 2020 about “a strange blaming tactic where it sometimes sounds as if only Norwegians spread infection, sometimes as if only Swedes do. An unpleasant way to unload anxiety through attack. But it doesn't stop at being rude. It's dangerous.” She continued: “The contradictions seem to have become more deeply rooted, more serious.” It has become an “us and them thinking” (ST 10 Oct 2020).

On the same day, 10 October, *Strömstads Tidning's* editor-in-chief Gunilla Håkansson wrote: “I have heard stories from both Swedish and Norwegian readers who describe a harsher tone between former friends, where Norwegians accuse Swedes of being irresponsible and only caring about the money in the border trade, and Norwegians being told to their faces that they ‘chickened out’” (ST 10 Oct 2020).

On the Norwegian side of the border, there have been stories about negative statements about people on the other side of the border. A former municipal councillor in Halden, Thor Edqvist, stated in February 2021 that “the border closures have led to a lot of throwing shit at our neighbours in the east, and that makes me sad. I think it will take a lot of time to rebuild a good neighbourly relationship after this” (ST 20 Feb 2021).

## Vaccination

The first vaccination dose was given on 27 December 2020 in Sweden (ST 29 Dec 2020). In Strömstad and Tanum municipalities, vaccination on a large scale started in nursing homes and in home care in early January 2021. Each care recipient would receive two doses with an interval of three weeks (ST 9 Jan 2021). At the nursing home Beatebergsgården in Strömstad, 72-year-old Håkan Wikström was the first to receive the vaccine. He stated

that “this might save the world. I myself have worked in the research world and know how difficult it is”. What he was most looking forward to was the car ride with his wife and hugging three children and four grandchildren (ST 5 Jan 2021). The vast majority of those in nursing homes accepted vaccines, although no one in Sweden can be forced to do so (ST 9 Jan and 16 Jan 2021).

When the first vaccinations were completed in nursing homes and in home health care, recipients of home care were next in line (ST 14 Jan 2021). Health care staff in Strömstad received their first dose on 11 February 2021 (ST 13 Feb 2021). About three hundred people were vaccinated on 11 February. Everyone had been given a specific time to arrive, so that not too many people would appear at the same time (ST 16 Feb 2021). The health care staff received their second dose on 22 May. Summer substitutes in elderly care also received a dose in May. One of them was 25-year-old Emma Thyft who was just then training to be a dental nurse (ST 29 May 2021).

In May 2021, Tanum municipality was in fifth place in the Västra Götaland region with 52 per cent in terms of how many people had received the first vaccine dose. Strömstad was significantly lower at 37 per cent. The higher figure for the Tanum municipality may be due to the fact that there are many elderly people in the population (ST 27 May 2021). In September 2021, 82 per cent of the adult population over the age of sixteen in Strömstad and 96 per cent of those over the age of 70 had received at least one dose. 72.8 per cent were fully vaccinated (ST 7 Sep and 18 Sep 2021). Tanum was slightly higher with 87.5 per cent with dose one, and 79.6 per cent who were fully vaccinated (ST 09/30, 2021). In several editorials the editor-in-chief of *Strömstads Tidning* has pointed out the importance of the newspaper’s readers getting vaccinated. This would promote contacts between people on both sides of the national border.



26. Håkan Wikström was the first to receive the vaccine in Strömstad at Beatebergsgården nursing home at the turn of the year 2020/2021. Photo Arvid Brandström.



27. Care staff in Strömstad received their first vaccine shot on 11 February 2021. Photo Victoria Petersson.

By comparison, three out of four Norwegians over the age of 18 had received at least one vaccine dose and 39 per cent their second dose in July 2021 (ST 24 Jul 2021). Vaccination became extra important for Norwegians when, on 28 December 2021, Sweden started requiring vaccine certificates or negative Covid-19 tests, taken within the last 48 hours, for arrivals from the Nordic countries.



28. Emma Thyft received her first vaccine dose in May 2021 before she was a summer substitute in elderly care. Photo Victoria Petersson.

## Returnees

As the Covid-19 pandemic brought teleworking in many occupational categories, many employees were able to carry out their tasks elsewhere, for example in their holiday homes. This led to some added permanent housing in the Strömstad area. The large majority of all these immigrants have had roots in this area and can therefore be described as returnees. In March 2022, *Strömstads Tidning* published a series of articles headlined “Returning home” based on interviews with these permanent immigrants. Until August 2022, 353 people had moved to the Strömstad municipality (ST 20 Aug 2022). This new immigration had a positive effect, contributing to increased tax revenues and a larger base for trade in the Strömstad municipality when Norwegians could no longer cross the border and spend money in the municipality.

Ingela Kvist, 60, was able to move from Gothenburg after 36 years, returning to her childhood home in Strömstad (ST 12 Mar 2022). Mathias and Anniken Persson Ölander, aged 41 and 40 respectively, have swapped Stockholm for Strömstad. For Mathias, that meant returning to the place where he grew up. He can now do his work in the IT sector from home (ST 1 Mar 2022). Ida Stålvall, 36, with roots in Strömstad and her husband Andreas Stålvall, 41, still have their jobs in Gothenburg but work from home after moving to Strömstad. Sometimes they need to go to Gothenburg (ST 10 Mar 2022).

Estate agents in Strömstad have noticed increased buying pressure from returnees where at least one party has roots in Strömstad. They feel that they get more living space for their money than in the big cities (ST 3 Mar 2022). Journalist Victoria Petersson was responsible for the article series “Returning home” and conducted the interviews. She noted afterwards that “reasons for ‘moving home’ have varied. Some, who have children, want to live closer to their family, for others it is the dream of a big house that



29. For Mathias and Anniken Persson Ölander, it became practically possible in the summer of 2020 to fulfill a longing to move from Stockholm to the West Coast and Strömstad. Photo Victoria Petersson.

recommendations to avoid crowding and large crowds remained in place for the unvaccinated. Test results from the public health agency were not reported anymore. From 1 April 2022, Covid-19 ceased to be classified as generally and socially hazardous in Sweden (ST 2 Apr 2022). After 12 March 2022, this disease has only been mentioned occasionally in *Strömstads Tidning* describing how Norwegians were returning to Strömstad when the border had finally been opened. When Norway removed all border restrictions on Saturday 12 February 2022, it had an immediate impact on border trade in Sweden. On 15 February the parking lots were filled the very same day by Norwegian-registered cars. The manager at Nordby business centre Ståle Løvheim stated: “It was the best sight I have seen in 23 months” (ST 15 Feb 2022). Systembolaget in Strömstad gained an increased customer influx right away. On 18 February the Norwegian newspaper VG (*Verdens Gang*) interviewed satisfied Norwegian border traders in the Strömstad area. The newspaper’s headline read: “Enjoying the opened border to Sweden – fantastic!” (VG 18 Feb 2022). On 9 February ColorLine began operating the Strömstad-Sandefjord route, but with only two departures per day at the beginning. At the same time, it was “a struggle to find people” for the ferry lines after a two-year hiatus. The old employees had disappeared (ST 2 Aug 2022).

At Easter in mid-April 2022, the presence of Norwegians once again became very noticeable after a two-year pause. Maximat got ready in advance by hiring 50 people. The recruitment of new staff was successful quite rapidly after advertising in both Halden and Strömstad. Store manager Ole Jørgen Lind emphasized that “everything happened so fast, it went from completely closed to completely open in a very short time” (ST 9 Apr 2022). Restaurants had a lot of trouble, however, in finding qualified personnel. Heidi Ljungdahl at Backlund’s restaurant in Strömstad stated on 5 April that the restaurant was “looking everywhere for trained staff”. Bakers, chefs and pastry chefs must be qualified (ST 5 Apr 2022).

can actually become a reality in Strömstad when in a larger city it was just a dream”. According to all interviewees, the permanent relocation would not have been possible without the pandemic that allowed remote work (ST 26 Mar 2022).

### Border Contacts after the Pandemic

Sweden opened the border three days earlier than Norway, on 9 February 2022. However, special



During Easter, Norwegian tourism also made its presence felt on the Koster boats that had to schedule extra trips (ST 21 Apr 2022). Norwegian boats dominated in the guest harbour in Strömstad. Port manager David Nikkinen Gravander stated that “Boats from Norway dominated with only occasional Swedish boats.” The number of paid guest nights increased sharply to the great benefit of the port treasury (ST 23 Apr 2022).

Norwegian youth celebrated Maundy Thursday in Strömstad in 2022. *Strömstads Tidning* had a headline entitled “Norwegians filled the city with cars and motorcycles”. A new feature was that Systembolaget dared to be open on this day after having been closed during the years before the pandemic (ST 16 Apr 2022; Gustavsson, 2019). About twenty Norwegian youths were taken into police custody for excessive alcohol use. Some Strömstad residents, who were interviewed by the newspaper, were pleased that the Norwegian young people had returned to their car and motorcycle driving. Nineteen-year-old Smilla Samuelsson emphasized that “this is a great tradition”. Since she was three years old, she had been with her mother “watching the spectacle every Maundy Thursday” (ST 16 Apr 2022).

Even during the Norwegian national day on 17 May many Norwegians made a border trade visit to Strömstad. In several cases women were dressed in bunad (national costume). The Norwegian newspaper VG had a big report in Strömstad that day and wrote: “No day is holy for Swedish border commerce. Norwegians go to Sweden to buy cheap barbecue food on the national day, many in their best dresses”. Outside Systembolaget in Strömstad the parking lot was full of Norwegian-registered cars. Kim Moen from Halden carried two crates of beer and stated: “When the beer costs half as much, it is no stress to make a shopping trip to Sweden on our National Day.” (VG 17 May 2022).

During the summer of 2022, the manager Ståle Løvheim at Nordby shopping centre noticed that the majority of customers came from the immediate area on the Norwegian side while the long-distance customers were gone compared to 2019. This may be because the higher fuel prices in 2022 affected those who live further away. At the same time, Oslo resident Jan Granås pointed out in early August 2022 that he was putting up with the increased fuel prices. He noticed that “here the petrol is four Swedish crowns cheaper than in Norway, so I will take the opportunity to fill my tank”. Maximat at Nordby had its best sales figures



30. Norwegian youths Tuva Opstad and Bror Harnes Sheide were pleased to be able to visit Maundy Thursday in Strömstad on 14 April 2022 after a two-year break. Photo by Moah Gustafsson.

ever. According to store manager, Alexander Johansson, there were as many customers at Systembolaget in Strömstad as in 2019 (ST 4 Aug 2022).

At the same time, the increase in Norwegian border trade in Sweden after 12 February led to a decline in grocery trade in Norway. It had increased by about twenty per cent during the pandemic. According to the Norwegian Central Statistical Office, Norwegians reportedly traded for over two billion kronor in Sweden from February to May 2022. This has led the Norwegian business community to put forward proposals for regulations to reduce this trade leakage to Sweden. In May 2022, the government stated that it wanted to take immediate action (ST 31 May 2022).

During the summer of 2022, the Norwegian tourist pressure became very strong. In the guest harbour in Strömstad, the Norwegian flags were flying again on the boats. Guest harbour manager David Gravander Nikkinen said: “It’s great that people are here again”. Line Nilsen from Fredrikstad has been a regular boat guest in Strömstad harbour and stated: “I love this place! People are so nice in Strömstad. The archipelago is fantastic” (ST 14 Jul 2022).

In the summer of 2022, campsites in Strömstad could rejoice, seeing Norwegians return but also in the fact that Swedes who had arrived there during the previous two years returned in 2022. “The Norwegians have come back and the Swedes have stayed.” The camp sites were fully booked. At the same time, it had been a struggle “to rebuild the workforce”. It’s been “harder than usual to find summer staff this year... Serving and kitchen staff have been most difficult”, said Lena Kempe CEO of Daftö Resort (ST 2 Jun and 12 Jul 2022).

Among the Norwegian-Swedish sports events that resumed in the summer of 2022 is the Grenserittet bicycling competition on 20 August between Strömstad and Halden. It had 1,100 participants, most of whom came from

Norway. It has been running annually since 1999, but had to take a two-year pause during the Covid-19 pandemic (ST 20 Aug and 22 Aug 2022).

Interest in Swedish commuting to Norway, which slowed down during the pandemic, increased again in the spring of 2022. At the same time, there remained a hesitation or caution after the difficulties that occurred during the pandemic. Kikki Lindset is an information officer at Grensetjänst Norge-Sverige and answers questions every day about working in Norway. Many people



31. The Norwegian boaters Tom Tevit and Gunnar Bjørnstad in the guest harbour in Strömstad in mid-July 2022. They have often visited this port during previous holidays. Photo By Moah Gustafsson.

who have called her want to work in Norway for the first time. They haven't had the experiences that former employees had during the pandemic. According to Kikki Lindset, the Swedes who stopped working in Norway often said that they "would never again work in Norway" (ST 21 May 2022).



32. Border Race 2022. Photo Thomas Bennelind.

The new cross-border trade, border tourism and commuting to Norway have contributed together to a marked drop in unemployment in 2022. The top level of 11.4 per cent unemployment was reached in April 2021, while it had more than halved to 5.3 per cent in July 2022. As a result, unemployment had decreased more in Strömstad municipality compared to other municipalities in the Västra Götaland region (ST 09/03, 2022).

After a two-and-a-half-year pause, on 1 September 2022, the Kalnes Hospital again offered care for Swedish women in the Strömstad area during their pregnancy and delivery. Swedish women are offered ultrasound in the eighteenth week of pregnancy and then delivery at the hospital's state-of-the-art maternity ward. This long-awaited decision was greeted with relief and great joy on the Swedish side of the border. Travel time was reduced from just over an hour and a half to the regional hospital NÄL in Trollhättan to about 20 minutes to Kalnes (ST 09/01, 2022).

Several politicians in the Strömstad area have made a critical evaluation of the situation in Strömstad and Tanum municipalities during the pandemic. Social Democratic municipal counsellor Kent Hansson raised this issue in his maiden speech in 2022. He said that "no municipality in Sweden was as hard hit as Strömstad". In addition, Nordic cooperation had "been freezing cold during the pandemic". Hansson said that "Nordic cooperation needs a totally new start" (ST 3 May 2022). Moderate Member of Parliament Johan Hultberg from Fjällbacka in Tanum municipality had the same opinion when he raised the issue of Nordic cooperation in June 2022 in an interpellation debate in the Swedish Parliament. "We have to learn from the crisis," he said (ST 14 Jun 2022). The chairman of the Green Party in Strömstad, David Nikkinen Gravander, emphasized that "Strömstad needs more jobs that are not border trade" (ST 23 Jul 2022).

Cecilia Nilsson is CEO of the politically appointed Norwegian-Swedish Svinesund Committee. She said that Sweden's and Norway's governments both tended to overlook the border regions. "Now we must get the public health authorities in Norway and Sweden to work more closely together, to plan and to think about consequences for border residents" (ST 14 Jun 2022).

## Summary

This study has investigated how people's social day-to-day lives on both sides of the southern part of the Norwegian-Swedish national border were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic during 2020–2022. Norway closed the border for entry on 17 March 2020. Restrictions issued by the Norwegian government were occasionally relaxed during the summer and later upgraded again. The short time intervals of the restrictions helped to create uncertainty and anxiety among the people affected. The short time between changes made it difficult to plan ahead. This applied to companies as well as to groups and individuals. All Norwegian restrictions were not lifted until 12 February 2022. Sweden closed the border only over a couple of shorter periods in early 2021 and 2022 and removed all restrictions on 9 February 2022.

In recent years, the Strömstad area is unique, partly through extensive Norwegian border trade and partly through significant tourism from Norway. Commuting, on the other hand, has primarily gone in the opposite direction from Sweden to Norway.

The main source for this investigation consists of extensive reports about the pandemic on both sides of the border in *Strömstads Tidning*, which also collaborated with Norwegian newspapers on the other side of the border.

The survey begins by following the various ups and downs of the spread of infection in Norway and Sweden and the restrictions that have been imposed at border crossings primarily to Norway. Swedish commuters to Norway have experienced significant difficulties with Covid testing and other restrictions at workplaces and at border crossings.

When Norwegian border trade and tourism ceased, it had tangible negative consequences for the economy and in terms of jobs on the Swedish side of the border. Extensive layoffs and notices of dismissals resulted. Social contacts between loved ones across the border suffered. There was negative rumour-spreading between Norwegians and Swedes. The infection situation improved more and more in 2021 in line with increasing vaccinations on both sides of the border. However, Norwegian cross-border trade and tourism as well as commuting to work were still negatively affected during that year.

When the Norwegian and Swedish border restrictions ended in February 2022, border contacts gradually increased, and they have increasingly begun to resemble the situation before the pandemic. At the same time, politicians in Norway and Sweden have recognized that lessons for the future must be taken from the special difficulties that arose in border areas during the two-year pandemic. This study can form the basis for further discussions on approaches and preparations to better cope with future crisis situations.

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