

THE ICEMAN

Managing Sweden’s influx of asylum seekers and refugees in times of crisis is a thankless task, society either accuses you of accepting too many or not enough.

Mikael Ribbenvik has been in charge of the Swedish Migration Agency since 2017, which deals with hundreds of thousands of cases every year – he has held down virtually every job the organisation has to offer and views migration as a ‘positive and potentially powerful force.’

MIKAEL RIBBENVIK / DG SWEDISH MIGRATION AGENCY

Mikael Ribbenvik has a track record of keeping his head in times of crisis – you might say he is ice-cool under pressure. The 52-year-old Director General of the Swedish Migration Agency (Migrationsverket) spearheads thousands of civil servants tasked with deciding who can live and work in Sweden. Livelihoods and dreams are at stake, so these decisions are not taken lightly – a huge amount of responsibility rests on Mikael’s shoulders. He calls migration “the greatest question of our time” and the last few years have really tested the government agency’s resolve, with catastrophic events like the Syr-

ian civil war fueling mass migration in Europe. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have appealed to Sweden for help. Fortunately, Mikael is able to draw on decades of experience when his crisis management skills are urgently required.

Upward trajectory

“I’ve spent the better part of my life in migration but I wasn’t always heading in this direction,” he says. “I studied law at Lund University in Sweden and read international banking when I started working for the country’s migration agency. I was absolutely blown away. I was suddenly exposed to the entire world, →





The agency is headquartered in Norrköping, Östergötland

it was like coming out from a very sheltered life and being made aware of everything that was happening. Every day there were new asylum seekers knocking on Sweden's door and I was listening to their stories – from this point on I was utterly consumed by migration and human rights, and all of the complexities that come with them.”

Mikael started off as a case officer and has held down most positions inside the Swedish Migration Agency on his way to the top. Before he was appointed Director General in 2017 he was Director of Legal Affairs, Director of Operations, and Deputy Director General at various times. Formed in 1969, Migrationsverket operates under the Ministry of Justice from about 40 offices nationwide and is headquartered in Norrköping, Östergötland.

“People love a good climbing story, whether it's about mountains or hierarchy, but I know the agency inside out, I know its people and culture,” he explains. “It's obviously a benefit but it doesn't automatically mean you will suc-

ceed, in fact it can sometimes be a disadvantage because there's a danger you can become too set in your ways. Leading such a big organisation is a huge challenge.”

After the situation in Syria went from bad to worse in the autumn of 2015, the Swedish Migration Agency rapidly grew to 9,000 employees – up from 3,000 – as the number of displaced people requesting help exploded. Training so many new recruits in such a short space was another hurdle, but the agency has a detailed system in place to ensure everyone is qualified to deal with any given situation. In 2014, it received 80,000 applications, however, the figure doubled in 2015 to over 160,000.

“ Migration is the greatest question of our time ”

More than 130,000 of these applications were made in just four months. “I was Director of Operations at the time so I was taking care of the crisis. I had to change my leadership, my normal philosophy switched to crisis management, there was no time to reflect or ask around to make sure everyone was on the same page. Crisis management is about time, you can't hesitate. You have to accept the fact that with such little time and oversight you will make some wrong decisions, but if you become afraid of making the wrong decisions you will become passive. You need to make timely decisions. I had a rule: every time I made a decision I doubled it, because things were getting out of hand. Luckily it worked.”

Patience is also a good trait to have if you are waiting for an answer to an application from the Swedish Migration Agency as it can take more than six months. The agency currently handles around 350,000 requests a year, 20,000 of which are asylum cases so backlogs occur, which is no surprise given the workload

has not decreased in the face of staffing cuts. Today, there are only 6,300 Migrationsverket workers due to slashed budgets, all grafting to ensure each case is pushed through as quickly as possible. Like many European nations, Sweden's population is ageing and there is a demand for young skilled workers from overseas, and while there has been criticism of the country's liberal legislation on labour migration, Mikael does not get wrapped up in the politics. He is focused on making sure the laws and strategy in place run as efficiently as possible. “If you have a lot of asylum seekers and unplanned or unregulated migration, people get scared and start looking for simple solutions – this has changed the political landscape in Europe over the last few years. The migration question creates a huge polarisation, some people want to shut down the borders, others become more liberal and look at the needs of the world. The former sentiment isn't great for labour migration, which in turn is a problem for the economy when companies are in need of a certain skills and they're not available. This will dampen growth.”

Winning strategy

While the number of Syrians fleeing war has dramatically reduced, a new challenge has emerged: the ongoing Brexit stalemate. Migrationsverket's Director General says he is incredibly sad to see one of “Sweden's best friends” leave the European Union but the reciprocity between the two nations remains strong. There are 28,000 or so Brits living in Sweden, and those who have applied for citizenship have been prioritised. Mikael says his organisation has prepared for a hard Brexit, at huge cost, in order to “honour our agreements with the UK.”

It is clear that Mikael and the agency are not willing to leave anything to chance. “The world has been handling migration as a temporary thing, but it isn't temporary, it's always been here and it will always be here – you need to think about how it will affect your organisation, country, and economy. It will affect you, it will affect the political landscape, it will affect demography, even if you don't see it today it will affect almost all levels of society. That's why it's so important to have a political and business strategy around migration. It's vital to think in a strategic way to work out how you can use this powerful force in our world,” he adds. 🌐



Migrationsverket's 6,300 employees process applications as quickly as possible