Examining Emerging Xenophobic Nationalism in Sweden: Transformations Between 'Good' and 'Bad' Civil Society

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Introduction

This chapter draws on ethnographic fieldwork on refugee resettlement in a Swedish village- to shed light on the emergence of increasingly xenophobic, nationalistic and ‘far-right’ political communities within Europe and the West more broadly. It mobilises a transdisciplinary approach, drawing on a long-standing dialogue between scholars within International Political Sociology (IPS), and Linguistic Ethnography (LE) to trace the ‘conditions of sayability’ around xenophobic and anti-refugee sentiment through a range of different communicative relations in which I was embedded (See Mc Cluskey and Charalambous 2022). In fostering this approach, it explores the ways in which a humanitarian, open and pro-refugee sentiment became recontextualised within a more xenophobic discursive framing. With these more xenophobic and anti-refugee utterances thus becoming more ‘sayable’, it examines how these sentiments of suspicion and exclusion towards refugees circulated within society and different social universes more broadly.

The chapter proceeds in the following way. The first section asks what it means to see the emergence of the ‘far-right’ through communicative relations. In rejecting the reifying ‘single story’ of far-right voters as told by Political Science, it takes up the call of anthropologist Hugh Gusterson (2017) to study the emergence of what he labels ‘nationalist populism’ - with more nuance and care, particularly in relation to the interplay between politics of race, humanitarianism and xenophobia. I argue that the rich instrumentarium of Linguistic Ethnography can complement an IPS sensibility in tracing and explaining the connections the between ‘small-scale interactions’ in one village, and ‘large-scale sociological effects’ (cf. Jacquemet 2011). In moving to my ethnographic data, I examine four scenes which show the almost imperceptible ways in which a humanitarian logic and sentiment was recontextualised into more xenophobic frames. Lastly, the chapter asks what it means to ‘scale up’ and draw links to the wider shifts in political constellations taking place in Sweden and the West more broadly.

Seeing ‘far right’ emergence through communicative relations: Tracing ‘conditions of sayability’

The past decade has witnessed the emergence of political communities throughout the West which identify as increasingly illiberal, xenophobic and nationalistic. In the European context, the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 and 2016 has been held responsible for the precipitation of increasing xenophobic and nationalistic sentiment (Inglehart and Norris 2019). Political constellations have shifted in ways that have

normalised previously marginal discourses and actors, and positions once considered as rather fringe became acceptable rather quickly (for an outline of these developments, see Antonsich 2017). In contemplating this transformation, from fringe to mainstream, much political science literature sees these shifts as a backlash to globalisation, and dissatisfaction with the effects of thirty years neo-liberal, technocratic politics (see most notably Goodwin & Heath 2016).

Writing from a US perspective, anthropologist Hugh Gusterson (2017) labels the rise of this 'far-right', xenophobic sentiment amongst large swathes of populations as 'nationalist populism' which he equates with the occurrence that Makovicky (2013) classifies as "authoritarian populism," Aciksoz and Yıldırım (2016) call "right-wing populism," and Gillian Evans (2017) refers to as "cultural nationalism.' Careful however not to reify these phenomena under a 'single story', Gusterson (2017) notes an absence of in-depth, granular and ethnographic study of groups attracted to these movements. In the wake of the US presidential victory of Trump, and in contemplating the rise in popularity of this so-called 'nationalist populism' across the Western world, Gusterson in fact raises an interesting conundrum. Though asserting that: "This political and ideological movement has arisen in reaction to reconfigurations of power, wealth, and identity that are endemic to global neoliberalism" (Gusterson 2017: 209), and hence the impossibility to untangle the emergence of xenophobic national politics from the effects of the neoliberal political and economic order which has been in existence since the 1970s, the anthropologist does not end the explanation here. In contemplating this arising or emergence, Gusterson warns fellow anthropologists to take care in rushing towards essentialising or 'single story' explanations. Focusing on the US context, Gusterson (2017:211) cautions against the 'domestic orientalising' of populations which voted for Trump as simply a 'white working class' backlash. Complicating the narrative of a straightforward emergence of nationalism, xenophobia and populism, the author hints toward the unintended interplay of politics of race, humanitarianism and xenophobia: "Writing at a moment when Americans have astonished and moved me by showing up en masse at airports to cheer arriving Syrians and Iranians, I think it is clear that the post-civil-rights neoliberal force field has morphed the politics of race in ways we are only beginning to understand" (Gusterson 2017: 212).

This chapter takes up the call of Gusterson to understand the emergence of nationalist populism, particularly one rooted in the politics of race and xenophobia with more nuance and care. In doing so, I draw on a transdisciplinary dialogue between scholars in the field of Linguistic Ethnography (LE) and International Political Sociology (IPS) to revisit ethnographic fieldwork around a refugee resettlement centre in Sweden just before the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015-16.

Drawing on this rich cross-fertilisation, I draw on the notion of 'conditions of sayability' to examine the ways in which xenophobic discourse became normalised at the level of everyday interaction between Swedish villagers in which the Syrian refugees were resettled. A central tenet of LE is the belief that language and

discourse play a central role in the production and legitimation of social relations (Rampton 2017; Blommaert 2013), and should thus be studied in its own right. Communicative practices are always situated within different ecosystems, which confer legitimacy on whatever is being said. Contexts for communication should therefore be explored, rather than assumed:

> "Meaning takes shape within specific social relations, international histories and institutional regimes, produced and construed by agents with expectations and repertoires that have to be grasped ethnographically" (Mc Cluskey, Rampton and Charalambous 2022: 21).

In revisiting my Swedish fieldwork (Mc Cluskey 2019), I examine the conditions of possibility for previously 'unsayable' sentiments towards Swedish asylum policy or the migrants themselves to become sayable. Once recognised as 'legitimately sayable', or able to be voiced in polite company without rebuke, I examine how these communicative contexts allowed for the creation of solidarities between people identifying with 'far-right' discourses for the first time, normalising these sentiments as acceptable, and thus enabled to be circulated more broadly within society and throughout different social universes.

Borrowing from LE's rich *instrumentarium*, also allows me to 'scale up', tracing and explaining the connections the between "small-scale interactions" in one village, and "large-scale sociological effects" (Jacquemet, 2011: 475). Jan Blommaert (2013) outlined this conceptual apparatus in an examination of a Belgian asylum interview, whereby he mobilised ethnography and interactional discourse analysis of the procedure to speak to wider structural inequalities and societal norms. There is no such a thing as communication practices that exist outside our broad assumptions about the world.

The most immediate manner through which meaning is construed is thorough the concept of inferencing, which refers to the interpretive work carried out by individuals, in their communicative practices, when they construe the weight of an utterance or an action by comparing it against what they were expecting, based on their personal experiences and perceptions of the setting (Blommaert 2013; Mc Cluskey, Rampton and Charalambous 2022). Secondly, the principle of adjacency sheds light on the ways in which people's expressions uttered in conversations are constrained by what has just been said; the repertoire of available actions available to those within interactional exchanges is quite narrow if one wishes to maintain a discussion or be recognised as a legitimate player in the communication practice (Blommaert 2013; Mc Cluskey, Rampton and Charalambous 2022).

Scaling up even further, it's then possible to pay attention to communicative *genres*, sets of stylised expectations about noticeably distinctive sets of practices and activities, such as an argument or a sales pitch (Blommaert 2013; Mc Cluskey, Rampton and Charalambous 2022). Generic expectations contain an essence of the discourses and relations usually involved, a guide to the aims at play. In short,

genres can be seen as procedures directing ‘legitimate’ action from moment to moment. Finally, text trajectories examine how signs and texts transform as they circulate through different settings; how these materials are entextualised, decontextualised and recontextualised, made sense of in different ways as they become embedded in different situations (Blommaert 2013; Mc Cluskey, Rampton and Charalambous 2022). As Rampton (2017) points out, processes of the kind outlined above take place simultaneously, and the goal of linguistic ethnography is to understand their interplay. In the story of Oreby, the transformation of far-right and xenophobic sentiment -from taboo to sayable - took place across these scales, from a shared glance and nod of acknowledgment to public declarations that the once ‘off limits’ Sweden Democrats were the only answer to the ‘burden’ that Sweden was being placed under.

Bringing together the rich conceptual apparatus of LE, which attends to this granular and dynamic analysis of how previously ‘far right’ sentiment and discourse becomes sayable, with IPS’ commitment to studying practices in ‘situation’, both spatially and historically (cf. Bigo 2017: 32)prevents a reified and ‘single story’ version of far right political communities as pre-fabricated or possessing certain essential characteristics. The next section turns to my empirical research of refugee resettlement in Sweden, in which the de-and re-contextualisation of humanitarian sentiment to xenophobic logics demonstrates that thinking transversally about ‘far right’ communities means paying attention to seemingly unrelated phenomena, and being open to the element of surprise, to the unintended and the accidental (cf. Fuji 2014).

The story of Oreby, Sweden and the recontextualization of humanitarian logics

Sweden is a curious case through which to examine the emergence of a strengthened and normalised ‘far right’. A state which adopted a relatively ‘open’ approach to asylum seekers during the so-called 2015 crises that other EU member states, Sweden was labelled a ‘humanitarian superpower’ and lauded by UNHCR, pro-refugee NGOs and figureheads such as Pope Francis (Mc Cluskey 2019). Indeed, Sweden’s 2013 decision to grant permanent residence to all Syrian people arriving at its borders came well ahead of similar moves by Angela Merkel in Germany and the so-called ‘long summer of migration’. This imaginary of Sweden as a humanitarian, open and generous was however quickly destabilised by November of 2015, when the Swedish government adopted some of the most stringent asylum policies in the midst of the ‘crisis’, including reintroducing border controls at the southern border, brining in restrictions to family reunification, and granting Syrians arriving at the border only temporary residence once again. With the failure of the European Union to form a coordinated response, these measures were framed by the Swedish government both in terms of ‘burden sharing’, but also in security terms, rationalising the restrictions in terms of anti-terrorist and public order measures (Lofven, cited in Crouch, 2016). During this time period, the anti-immigration, Sweden Democrats (SD), also gained a great deal of support from the electorate,

increasing their vote share from 13 to 19 percent between September 2014 and September 2018, rendering SD the state's third largest political party.

Between February 2013 and September 2014, I was based in a village in Southern Sweden called Oreby, around forty minutes from Malmo, the closest city. A rather quiet and bucolic place, Oreby was home to around 1600 inhabitants, mainly middle-class families and retired elderly couples, living in spacious and well-groomed detached houses which lined either side of the main road. A couple of weeks before I arrived, the Swedish Migration Board informed the residents of the village that they had acquired several apartments, built around the village green, in which they planned to resettle a few dozen newly arrived Syrian migrants. It was somewhat by chance that I made contact with a resident in Oreby, Bodil Persson, and was invited to join her small, grass-roots non-governmental organisation that had been hastily assembled to help welcome the Syrians and get them settled into village life. My role in this tiny organisation was to translate documents from the Migration Board to the refugees from Swedish into Arabic and English, as no translation services were offered by any government agencies. Though I had heard about some initial unease amongst the villagers about the resettlement of Syrian refugees, any anxiety or opposition to the resettlement of the Syrian migrants was not palpable when I began my fieldwork. Indeed, Bodil's organisation, the 'Friends of Syria', mobilised the entire village to collect a huge array of donations: warm clothes, bicycles, children's toys and furniture, which accumulated to such an extent that it required an entire vacant apartment in which it could be stored. Different events were organised to 'welcome' the refugees; a barbecue on the green and children's football matches. The head of the resident's association, a genial and open elderly man, referred to the new arrivals as 'our Syrians' and organised a children's swing set to be erected on the grassy area outside the apartment blocks. Similarly, many of the Syrian people that I spent time with spoke of their appreciation of the warm welcome that they received, particularly from the 'Friends of Syria' group and Bodil herself, whom was referred to by many as a 'gift from God'.

Over the course of the next year and a half however, the dynamics within Oreby transformed to such an extent that this dominant pro-refugee narrative, rooted in practices of generosity and humanitarianism slipped into discourses and practices of xenophobia and hostility towards the Syrian migrants. The narratives and sentiments of the 'far-right' anti-immigrant Sweden Democrat party, which the villagers of Oreby had initially expressed revulsion and disdain towards, became normalised within polite discourse, including amongst the volunteers who had set up the 'Friends of Syria' organisation. Several of the volunteers - good, humanitarian and generous people - admitted to me voting for the party as 'the only option' after Sweden's 2013 decision to grant permanent residency to every Syrian person arriving at the border, even though this decision was largely academic in relation to the everyday happenings within the village.

This chapter describes the disbanding of the social relations between the Swedish villagers and the Syrians, and the bringing into being of a ‘far-right’ or xenophobic political community which did not previously exist. Borrowing the conceptual tools of ‘conditions of sayability’ from LE, I trace the moment to moment interactions which illuminate this de-contextualisation of humanitarianism as openness and generosity, recontextualising the same practices as a ‘burden’ or threat to the social fabric and public order in Sweden.

Scene one: The guarding of the ‘welcoming’ discursive frame

The refugees arrived in Oreby in the depths of one of the coldest winters in decades. As I arrived in the village a few weeks after the initial Syrian people had been settled there, it was difficult to piece together the events which preceded my arrival. Most people stayed inside their homes, and besides the minimart and pizzeria, spontaneous conversations with the Oreby dwellers were quite hard to come by. I had heard rumours from Bodil about some initial resistance towards the refugees being placed in Oreby and managed to track down everyone present at an early meeting, where some of these concerns had been raised.

One of these attendees, an elderly lady named Annika, invited me into her house for coffee and biscuits and began to speak about the events of the last few weeks. She claimed to have been a little upset about the Syrians being ‘dumped’ in Oreby with little warning and questioned whether such a tiny place would really be sufficient for the needs of these young families. Surely Malmo, with its large Arab community and facilities would be much more suitable. Annika pointed to the poor transportation links serving the village, and the distance that the Syrians would need to travel to ‘Swedish For Immigrants’ SFI classes. Upon hearing his wife voice these ideas, Annika’s husband Bengt noisily entered the room and quickly steered the conversation towards less controversial terrain:

“We’re all very welcoming here in Oreby, I think what Annika means is that the Syrians might feel more at home in Malmo, with all the hustle and bustle, but we villagers are very kind and have made sure that they’ve had a very warm welcome”. Annika, though appearing fleetingly puzzled, agreed with her husband. Of course the Oreby folk had made sure that the Syrians feel at home, that went without saying. That’s simply how things were done around here.

One of the core tenets of LE, from which I take inspiration, is that the contexts for communication should be investigated rather than assumed. Meaning takes shape within specific social relations and interactional histories. There would have been many ways of hearing and appreciating Annika’s narrative about the Syrians being ‘dumped’ without any consultation, or consideration of their needs, however, in this setting, her husband framed her intervention in terms of a criticism of the migrants themselves, as a support of a more restrictive asylum policy or as an expression of a desire for the segregation of the ‘foreigners’, away from the Swedish people of

Oreby. Marianne Gullestad (2002) in her research into Norwegian ‘kitchen table’ politics, spoke about how voicing certain anti-immigration opinions in 1990s middle-class Oslo circles would immediately render one to be labelled as a ‘dreg’: a poorly educated person who represents the lowest of the low. In the example of Annika and Bengt, even statements which could possibly be interpreted as critical of Swedish asylum policy would be well outside the ‘norms of sayability’ around what could and could not be voiced to a foreign researcher. Bengt, and to some extent Annika made sure that their utterances, though ambiguous, could not be construed in a way that could frame them as ‘dregs’: xenophobic or racist. This early communicative interaction between the elderly couple and me led to the ratification, not the refusal of their identity as Swedish village dwellers as open, humanitarian and welcoming.

Scene two: ‘Jokes’ as an acceptable expression of inclusion and exclusion

Samar and Khaled were two of the first migrants to arrive in Oreby. A young couple from Aleppo, the pair were obviously rather wealthy, or had a rather comfortable existence in Syria before they left. The married couple, who had been childhood sweethearts, dressed in equally glamourous clothes; Samar with a different silk, Hermes hijab every day and her husband displaying a perfectly manicured hand against an expensive looking gold watch. Unlike many of the other young families arriving, Samar and Khaled did not really engage with the volunteers much, did not require any donations, and spent most of their time either in their apartment, or out exploring the area, Malmo, Copenhagen and beyond. The only time that either of the two engaged with the volunteers was to ask for documents to be translated from Swedish.

Though the couple never openly complained to the volunteers, they often confided to me that they were rather bored in the tiny village. They were used to vibrant nightlife, festivals and weekly concerts back in Aleppo, going out for dinner with friends at least twice a week for meals which extended well into the early hours of the morning. In contrast, Oreby was a tiny and quiet place. The only spot that stayed open past 5pm was a takeaway pizzeria, ubiquitous in every Swedish village. I never conveyed Samar and Khaled’s boredom to the rest of the volunteers, however the disdain towards the pair from the group was often quite obvious; the glamorous couple never really tried to hide their disappointment with the slow pace of village life. Bodil often rolled her eyes or gave a sideways glance whenever either of the pair left the activity centre. Venturing any vocal criticism of either Samar or Khaled however, was not considered legitimately sayable. ‘Jokes’ about how drab and dowdy we all were in comparison to the fancy ‘Aleppo glitterati’ were permitted, however any stronger disapproval from any of the volunteers, bordering on denouncing the couple’s brashness or vulgarity was quickly censured by Bodil, with an ‘each to their own’ type of platitude.

Words, phrases and sentences always represent more than simply their literal meaning or dictionary definition; instead they are always indexical. In this sense,

they project and arouse particular imaginaries and associations, which are construed through the lens of the participants experiences and expectations. In the example of Samar and Khaled, outright denunciation of their dissatisfaction with Swedish life by the villagers was still deemed somewhat distasteful, associated with ‘xenophobic’ or right-wing tendencies, so was often subtly admonished. Jokes however, which could be quickly disowned, permitted an ‘acceptable’ discursive framework through which to express the logics of social inclusion and exclusion (Weaver, 2011).

Scene 3: ‘Testing the waters’ of acceptability

The month of Ramadan in 2013 took place at the height of the Swedish summer in July. It was the Syrian migrants’ first summer in Oreby, and by that point, a routine of sorts had been established. The Syrian children had been attending the local school, with a great deal of support from the principal and a new Arabic-speaking teacher, until they had broken up for the summer holidays in June. The ‘Friends of Syria’ group had organised informal Swedish language classes in the activity centre, in addition to the official ‘SFI’ state-run lessons. The activity centre was also the site of cooking classes, board games and general ‘hanging out’, albeit often populated by the same regular faces; some of the younger, professional individuals from Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama who had quickly progressed with learning the language. By this point, the volunteers within the Friends of Syria had begun to express a little more suspicion towards Samar, Khaled, and the other Syrians who kept themselves to themselves. Though still formulated mostly through ‘jokes’ or light-hearted comments and never in an obviously hostile way, references would be drawn to their lack of integration, an absence of gratitude towards the Swedish people, or throwaway remarks about how surprising the resilience of the Syrian people was, considering they had just travelled from a war zone.

At the start of Ramadan however, the discursive terrain began to shift more noticeably around the imaginaries of the Syrians as legitimate refugees, as worthy of the generosity and humanitarian goodwill of the Swedish people. The first day of Ramadan brought about a change in the rhythm of everyday life amongst the volunteers and the Syrian migrants. Though we usually didn’t arrive until at least 11am, and all cooking and language lessons took place in the afternoon, Ramadan saw much quieter days altogether. Moreover, socialising and celebration between the Syrians extended well into the night, with the grassy area outside the apartment blocks now adorned with fairy lights and the scene of late-night family barbecues, children playing on the swings and slides, and general festivities. It was a few days into the holy month when we received a knock on the door of the activity centre from Goran, a respectable and friendly neighbour who had lived a few doors away from the apartments. Commending us on doing such a good job, Goran expressed how nice it was to see ‘our Syrians’ so relaxed and happy again, after everything that they had been through in their home country. Sensing that it was perhaps safe to do so, Goran went on to ‘test the waters’ around the conditions of sayability; “I am not so sure that I would be in the mood to party all night if I were them, having supposedly

just fled a war zone, with half of my family still left behind". This was the first utterance that pushed the norms of acceptable communicative practice into a new terrain; suspicion of the refugees themselves, the idea that all was perhaps not as it seems, and the possibility that the good Swedish people could be being taken advantage of. Bodil's recognition of Goran's complaint: her smile of acknowledgement and her assertion that something was indeed amiss, accepted this contribution as legitimate, one that could now be reproduced in other arenas. Humanitarian registers were recontextualised and inserted into discursive regimes more associated with xenophobia or the political 'far right'. Though Goran had simply subtly probed the prospect of suspecting that the Syrians were dishonest or undeserving, the recognition by Bodil that this was now an acceptable stance to be voiced publicly, shifted the 'norms of sayability' quite considerably, re-contextualising the logics of openness firmly within a discursive framework of suspicion.

*Scene 4: Changing the stakes; setting the context for 'acceptable' xenophobic sentiment*The morning of the news of Sweden's decision to grant permanent residents to all Syrians arriving at the border was a mild and sunny autumn in Oreby. At that point, I had been volunteering with the grassroots NGO for around seven months. Reports I read in the Swedish press stated that around half of the Syrian people arriving in Sweden at that point were until then granted three year temporary residency for humanitarian protection, with the other half already receiving permanent residency – were mostly factual and devoid of further analysis. The migration minister simply commented that this was a legal measure, a result of the deteriorating situation in Syria. Sweden would be the first EU member state to offer all Syrian people permanent residency, a point which I noticed was supported by all the major political parties at the time, apart from the Sweden Democrats.

Immediately after arriving at Oreby, Bodil summoned me into the kitchen to ask for my opinion on the matter and to confide that this was a huge mistake. It was only destined to attract more refugees to Sweden, and that would be a disaster for the country. For some weeks now, she had been openly voicing how she had suspicions about one or two of the new arrivals, who claimed to be from Syria but did not seem to speak Arabic. Bodil also claimed that another villager had heard about a Syrian man travelling to Denmark every day to find work, which was clearly forbidden.

The unilateral granting of permanent residence to all Syrians arriving at the border brought about a clear shift and crystallisation around the notion of all of the refugees as 'suspicious'. As the only EU country at that stage to offer unilateral permanent residency to all Syrians, some two years before Merkel's Germany, the notion was interpreted by the volunteers as a 'burden' on Sweden, with the refugees recast as people taking advantage of the generosity and naivety of Sweden. Though the announcement by the Swedish government would have no tangible effect on the day-to-day goings on at Oreby, it enabled the acceptable recontextualization of Sweden's 'humanitarian' stance, an identity reproduced by the villagers themselves

at the start of my fieldwork, firmly within the discursive framing of the Syrians analogous to that produced by the Sweden Democrats.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the emergence and mainstreaming of ‘far-right’ or xenophobic political communities, through examining the ‘conditions of sayability’ around far-right sentiments. In describing certain communicative practices between the villagers of Oreby, the Syrian refugees, and myself, I combined an IPS sensibility with the tools of Linguistic Ethnography to shed light on the different ecosystems in which these communicative practices were situated in, examining the ways in which legitimacy was conferred on utterances previously deemed xenophobic and hence ‘low-class’ and ‘indecent’. Tracing the de-contextualisation of humanitarian sentiment into its recontextualization in more xenophobic and anti-refugee discursive frames, I traced how ‘suspicion’ around the refugees, their behaviours and their stories became increasingly acceptable.

In late 2014, before the 2015 policy change which brought about the much more restrictive measures, both Bodil and the other volunteers had been very open with me about their support for the Sweden Democrats, urging me to write about the reckless approach of Sweden. For Bodil, the Sweden Democrats were the only party who could be trusted to block any more refugees from arriving, a necessity not because Bodil considered herself as racist or xenophobic, but because Sweden could no longer cope with this ‘burden’ alone.

When ‘scaling up’, it is possible to draw links to the wider shifts in political constellations taking place in Sweden, and indeed the West more broadly. As I have previously stated, there is no such a thing as communication practices that exist outside our broad assumptions about the world. Hence, the transformation in conditions of sayability is one which can be seen to circulate more broadly and within different social universes. Swedish party politics for example, has seen the Sweden Democrats, long shunned by all other political parties, enter the mainstream, with moves to create a conservative bloc together with the two mainstream centre-right parties (Helmerson 2021). Moving away from Political Science analyses of ‘far right’ voters, which tend to reify ‘xenophobic’ political groups, endowing them with pre-existing characteristics or super-imposing pre-fabricated socio-spatial frameworks, tracing conditions of sayability allows us to see these groups as emergent (cf. Guillaume and Huysmans 2019), and in relation to so-called ‘good’ civil society, such as those who consider themselves humanitarian and open.

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