EUROPE 10.09.2018 | Christian Krell

It's not all about migration

Christian Krell in Stockholm on why the Social Democrats did much better than expected in the Swedish elections

Read this interview in German.

The results of the Swedish elections, which took place on 9 September 2018, are confirmed, and although the shock everyone was braced for didn't materialise, the country's political spectrum has clearly shifted rightwards. The Sweden Democrats (SD) haven't become the largest party, but have redrawn a political map in which two blocks of parties lined up right and left of centre.

Joanna Itzek spoke to Christian Krell in Stockholm about possible coalitions and the reasons for Sweden's shift to the right.

Thus far, all parties have ruled out coalitions with SD; is that set to change?

First things first: the Social Democrats are still the largest party in Sweden and, at 28.4 per cent, secured a markedly better result than was predicted in every pre-election opinion poll. That puts them almost 10 per cent ahead of the second-largest party, the conservative Moderates. Nevertheless, the strongly two-block way of doing politics in Sweden is now probably very much history: neither progressive nor conservative parties can build a functioning majority and a minority administration looks unlikely; the Social Democratic Prime Minister Stefan Löfven is now trying to put together a majority across the traditional divide.

If he is unable to do that, might the Sweden Democrats become the pillar propping up a right-of-centre minority administration?

That is eminently possible, because the conservative block's only chance of getting into power is to have an administration tolerated by the right-wing populists. If it comes to this, we are likely to see a very

unstable government which the Sweden Democrats will have over the proverbial barrel.

The Social Democrats' election result was their worst for 100 years, and yet the red-green coalition in which they were the senior partners has a very good record: unemployment has dropped, the economic situation is very good indeed. Where does this dissatisfaction with the Social Democrats come from?

To understand what's going on, you've got to get behind the idealised visions of Sweden often coursing abroad: in Sweden, too, there has been a marked reduction in state social welfare provision since the 1990s; society has become noticeably more unequal. The difference in life expectancy between the poorest and richest demographics is now running at 16 years in Stockholm, for example, while temporary contracts and other non-standard forms of employment are growing. Citizens have the feeling that it is difficult to obtain treatment in the state health system and the decaying or non-existent infrastructure in rural areas is a real problem. In this climate of division, fear, and insecurity, right-wing populists peddling easy answers can thrive.

Did the Social Democrats opt for the wrong thematic focus during the election campaign?

No, or at least not in the final stages. The Social Democrats went for a mix of classic left-wing policy on one hand (jobs, accommodation, healthcare, education) and law-and-order with a tougher stance on migration on the other. Yet after they announced initiatives to tighten up immigration policy in May, the Sweden Democrats shot up in the polls. It looked as if the Social Democrats were coming round to the Sweden Democrats' point of view: 'I hate to say I told you so…' So in the final phases of the campaign, the Social Democrats refocussed on shoring up and expanding the welfare state, which got them support and, just as importantly, mobilised their own members for one last push. What that shows is that migration isn't quite the inescapable thematic black hole it is often thought to be.

How did the Social Democrats mobilise their supporters? And what role did technology play?

The app they used to contact voters was very impressive, actually, and it allowed anyone interested to take part in the campaign without much by way of formalities. From what we can tell at the moment, that gave the party a real boost in the final stages.

What are the conclusions which social democratic parties across

Europe should draw from the Swedish elections? Are there any lessons in how to deal with right-wing populists?

Lesson number one: aping right-wing populist policy does nothing except strengthen them. Lesson number two: drawing a *cordon sanitaire* around right-wing populists and lambasting them as fascists doesn't help – or rather, it helps them to stylise themselves as victims. Lesson number three: the left needs to avoid being driven into a corner in which all it can talk about is migration; it needs to keep discussion open so that it can offer solutions for typical social-democratic issues such as jobs, education, welfare, and family – including having more time to spend with one's family.



Christian Krell
Stockholm

Dr Christian Krell is director of the FES Nordic Countries office, based in Stockholm. Between 2006 and 2016 he led the FES's Academy for Social Democracy. He lectures at Bonn University and is a member of the SPD's Commission for Fundamental Values.