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Experts call this normalisation

Four years of right-wing rule have shifted Sweden's political centre. Can the left reverse the trend?

'Do you miss Mogadishu? The return grant will help you get home.' This sentence appeared on public buses in western Sweden in August, in paid campaign advertising by the Sweden Democrats (SD). One provocation among many. Civil society, trade unions and the media reacted with outrage. Particularly remarkable, however, was that around 20 bus drivers of Somali origin called in sick: out of fear, they refused to drive the vehicles. This time, the clearest protest came from the people who keep the place running. Moments like these are shaping Sweden's polarised 2026 general election campaign, with voters heading to the polls on Sunday.

For four years, Sweden has shown what happens when the firewall against the radical right falls. On 14 October 2022, the Moderates, Christian Democrats and Liberals signed the Tidö Agreement with the Sweden Democrats — described by the government as 'the most comprehensive reform agenda in recent times'. It is a symbol of a different Swedish future. The SD, which emerged in 1988 from the milieu of the militant right, officially supports the government from the second row, but in practice acts as its driving force. It works well with its coalition partners while offering its voters a pragmatic form of nationalism.

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SD leader Jimmie Åkesson is using this springboard to demand half of all ministerial posts, including three of the four most important portfolios and the Migration Ministry; the coalition partners have promised him negotiations. Åkesson is leading the government bloc, setting the terms. By 2030, he wants to be prime minister.

Coalition arithmetic

The Social Democrats remain the largest party, polling at 26.6 per cent

according to the latest Novus survey. That is their lowest level in more than 100 years. The centre-left is nevertheless ahead with 50.7 per cent to 48.1 per cent, although this is within the margin of error. A 10-point lead has melted away, while the Liberals, written off by many, are on course to return to parliament with 5.8 per cent, which benefits the current government. Leader of the Swedish Social Democratic Party Magdalena Andersson can still win the election. All the more interesting, then, is her strategy for regaining power after four years of Tidö.

The election campaign is heavily focused on coalition arithmetic: who can govern with whom, and which small party will hold the balance of power? At the same time, the parties have moved closer together in terms of policy. The right-wing bloc has adopted social-policy demands from the Social Democrats, while the Social Democrats have in turn adopted positions from the right on migration and security. Even the conservative Moderates are now promising free childcare after school — a proposal that was still considered too radical when the Social Democrats put it forward. The question of what can still be done to mobilise new voters is therefore becoming all the more important.

Bringing the SD into government has neither moderated nor weakened the party; instead, it has increased its influence over government policy and the political agenda.

Andersson is therefore trying to reach beyond bloc politics, offering to work with everyone except the SD — with the Christian Democrats on care and the Centre Party on energy policy. In her campaign launch speech on 3 August, she set out three principles: security, prosperity and solidarity. And she made a remarkable statement: 'In difficult times, Sweden must stand together. We refuse to accept that our country is divided and that differences are made between people on the basis of their origin, religion or gender.' With this, Andersson is trying to reclaim 'solidarity' as a social-democratic concept rather than leaving it to the right.

Four years of Tidö have socially polarised Sweden. The wealthy have benefited from tax cuts, while child poverty and unemployment have risen — Sweden has one of the highest unemployment rates in the EU. Civil society in particular has been hit hard: party-affiliated organisations, providers of political education and NGOs engaged in democracy education have faced massive cuts and are being consulted far less often than Sweden's democratic tradition would dictate. The tone of politics and public debate has changed.

This is not democratic erosion in the sense seen in Hungary or Poland — the institutions are holding. But it is a narrowing of Sweden's democratic culture: less consultation, less dissent and fewer spaces in which politics is developed together with society. This narrowing has contributed to making political confrontation more hostile. At the same time, the social conflict has shifted towards material questions. In the perception of many, Tidö is pampering the rich while everyone else pays the price: falling ill at their desks, struggling with overpriced dental care and worrying about the housing market, pensions and schools. The government says it cannot afford relief measures.

The Social Democrats' platform counters this with concrete, easily communicated promises: abolishing the qualifying day, cheaper medicines, a dental reform with a maximum 10 per cent co-payment, no market rents and a ban on profits in schools. Anyone who considers this an underfunded wish list is forgetting that Andersson was finance minister. Moreover, Sweden is not short of money. The government has cut taxes by more than 100 billion kronor, mainly benefiting top earners. The increase in RUT and ROT tax deductions for domestic services and renovations alone costs more than it would cost to provide all working households with healthy dental care. According to Ipsos, household finances and health have overtaken crime as the most important election issues.

Although the Social Democrats support a restrictive migration policy, the Sweden Democrats have made them the target of their culture-war campaign, portraying them as a risk and even accusing them of 'protecting criminal foreigners from deportation'. The government has largely implemented the SD's migration policy, including the first elements of 'remigration': in 2026, the return grant was increased to 350 000 kronor (around €30 000) per adult; the waiting period for citizenship was extended, stricter assessment criteria were applied retroactively to ongoing citizenship applications, and it became possible to revoke citizenships that had already been granted — legally contentious territory. Following a disastrous decision, underage children of parents with valid residence permits received deportation orders. The government appeared to have gone too far: demonstrations followed. The Social Democrats apologised; even Ebba Busch, leader of the Christian Democrats and a Tidö coalition partner, has expressed regret.

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political agenda. The end of the firewall does not mean the end of democracy. But it can normalise the radical right, increase its power and change political culture. Anyone who wants to prevent this must organise political majorities before the firewall even becomes the final question.

The Social Democrats did not leave voters' concerns to their opponents, but they have understood that an election campaign that simply chases the issues set by right-wing parties will lose, as it did in 2022. By now, they are setting the agenda themselves: abolishing the qualifying day, dental reform and schools that are not driven by profit. The wind has shifted; suddenly, the inclusive narrative is getting through. For the first time in 10 years, the Sweden Democrats' agenda is receding into the background. Andersson's statement against division based on 'origin, religion or gender' frames 'solidarity' as a social-democratic project.

Sweden's Social Democrats are therefore entering the election with a clear left-wing economic policy profile and more concrete proposals than in 2022. At the same time, they are holding firm to their boundary against the far right. Whether this strategy pays off will be decided on Sunday.



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