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From beacon of democracy to cautionary tale

Shootings have skyrocketed in many cities, suburbs and towns in Sweden. The Social Democrats must provide a complete policy answer to these issues

Sweden, which was once seen as a beacon of democracy, has now become a warning example. If conservatives in Sweden are ready to claim power through the support of a far-right extremist populist party with roots in the white supremacy movements of the 1990s and Nazism of the 1940s, then it can happen anywhere.

Many say that 'Trumpism' reached Sweden. That crime and inflation led to a point where no sitting government could be re-elected. That's certainly one part of the story. However, Sweden is not an outlier, but part of a trend in which migration, centre-periphery division and anti-establishment sentiments have changed the political landscape. Considering this, it is surprising that Sweden's Social Democrats, after governing for eight years, still have the support of 30 per cent of the electorate.

Looking at the result of the recent elections, one cannot avoid mentioning the soaring crime rate in the country. Shootings have skyrocketed in cities, suburbs and towns in many parts of Sweden. Organised crime and infighting between gangs are behind most of it. The brutality is frightening, and the violence is affecting all sections of society. Even though ordinary people aren´t the targets, no one feels safe anymore.

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The police have received more resources and the punishments have become tougher, but more needs to be done to get legislation updated to the use of new technology, heavy weapons and the way that organised crime functions. Society has so far been unable to prevent the recruitment of adolescent males to different gangs, and without stopping that, the end to the

violence will not come. Today's young men in organised crime don't expect to live beyond 25 years. With 335 shootings leading to 46 deaths in 2021, internal security was certainly the main issue for voters in the last election.

Most of the people who lose their lives to organised crime have a migratory background and grew up in one of Sweden´s segregated areas; socio-economically vulnerable, with high levels of unemployment and a high crime rate. The state has definitely failed these areas and the people living there. Under-investments in welfare, the lack of settlement policy for refugees, migration and failed integration policies have pushed these areas and people into segregation. It has been a slow but steady process that reached its peak with the 'refugee crisis' in 2015.

While organised crime has its basis in these areas, the market in which money is made and jobs are created is elsewhere. The opportunity for people from these disadvantaged areas to integrate is slim. But in the eyes of many, it is 'the other' which is to be blamed – and the linkage to migration is made very quickly. This is precisely the connection that the far-right has been playing on the last decade. The progressives, in turn, weren't tough enough on crime and have been unable to change the socio-economic reality for many people who are struggling.

Globalisation and the perception of migration

Globalisation has lifted millions out of poverty, driven technological change and generated enormous economic value. But it also divided the world into winners and losers, or as David Goodhart frames it: ´anywheres´ and ´somewheres´. The re-allocation of capital, jobs and social status transformed nations, and the sense of community slipped away. In this narrative, migration and especially labour immigration play an important part for the 'losers' of globalisation. It is this perception of migration that links the issue of crime and the longer-term societal challenges in far-right storytelling.

The strategy of the right consists of a Swedish version of Trumpism, including a strong anti-establishment tone: 'Social Democracy has sold out Sweden to globalisation and migrants, look where it has led us in terms of crime and failing welfare'. In other words, they managed to interlink the immediate problems of crime to the long-term issues of a society that is gradually fragmenting.

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As Prime Minister and leader of the Social Democratic Party, Magdalena Andersson set out clear priorities: being tougher on crime and addressing its roots, investing more in welfare, ending privatisation and creating more jobs through green development. Her left coalition worked against the populist story, but the reality with regards to crime worked against them. Moreover, inflation hindered ambitious investments in welfare. Finally, due to the war in Ukraine, the agenda on fighting climate change was turned from one of opportunities to one of high energy prices and rising costs of living.

In the election, Andersson's enormous popularity was not enough. To a certain degree, it was democracy that was on the ballot and that won her votes in the middle class. However, the traditional male working class vote went to the Swedish Democrats. The Social Democrats managed to gain two per cent, but its coalition partners fell short. In a system of fixed coalitions, the major party must not only take responsibility for its own agenda but also for finding an electoral path of the whole coalition. The Social Democrats took votes away from their coalition partners but didn't manage to pull back any votes from the Sweden Democrats.

The need for a complete policy answer

For the left, the election was lost over the issues of crime and migration. But also, because progressives so far don´t have a narrative or policy for a re-balanced globalisation that, on the one hand, tackles climate change and, on the other hand, sets a course for social advancements and economic prosperity for all parts of society.

The creation of fossil-free welfare societies is an enormous opportunity for progressives to form an agenda on development, responsibility and the role of society for a more prosperous future. Making communities stronger and creating a new sense of cohesion through nation building, will give a strong counter-argument to far-right populism. This agenda will not solve the issue of crime, but an era of investments will provide opportunities to close gaps in society – and that will push back crime.

The centre-left will only govern again, if it has answers on how to end crime and campaigns on a future oriented agenda that brings communities together and forward. Realistic hope beats despair. But that will require an in-depth policy renewal. Fixing crime and migration will

not fix the problems of globalisation and climate change, but fixing communities and a green economy will provide ways to halt segregation and improve integration. A complete policy answer is needed.

No one should doubt what the origin and what the aim of the Sweden Democrats are. They are an authoritarian and racist party. The liberal-conservative government currently sits at their liking. The only question is how far the Sweden Democrats want to go during this legislative period. Their coalition parties will not be able to resist, because then the government falls. This fact has already changed and will further change Sweden.



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