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Paving the way for radicalised violence

After a far-right attacker killed a woman at a festival in Sweden, the centre-right should rethink their legitimising of the Sweden Democrats

On 6 July 2022, Sweden was struck by a right-wing terror attack, carried out by a man who had been radicalised as an activist in the openly neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement, including as a regular contributor to its paper, the *Nordic Front*. The victim was Ing-Marie Wieselgren, a well-known advocate on healthcare issues, including mental health. She was stabbed in the throat and, despite bystanders rushing to give her first aid, bled to death.

This atrocity struck at the heart of Swedish democracy. Not only was it carried out in broad daylight but amid thousands of citizens filling the picturesque, pebbled streets of Visby to attend the annual Almedalen Week, a political festival which marks the zenith of the Swedish political year.

Celebrating democracy

During the week, democracy and dialogue are celebrated, with more than 2,000 events in tents, classrooms and gardens across the town. A tradition initiated by the former Swedish prime minister Olof Palme, who used to spend his holidays here, the Almedalen Week is now a must-attend for all party leaders.

While Palme (who was himself to be the victim of an assassination in 1986) used to give a fairly spontaneous speech from the back of a lorry, the addresses by the current party leaders are carefully scripted, down to the last word. Particularly in an election year, as this one, every sentence of their speeches, broadcast live, is analysed and scrutinised.

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The perpetrator had chosen carefully the time and place. According to preliminary investigations by the police, he followed his victim from event to event, up and down

Visby's winding streets and alleyways, over several days. This is easy in Almedalen: all events and their locations are listed online and, with a few exceptions, are open; visitors do not have to register or go through an entrance check.

Decisive step

Inevitably, the attack overshadowed this year's festival. It also, though, overshadowed a key message delivered by Ulf Kristersson, leader of the Moderates — the Swedish affiliate of the European People's Party — from the Almedalen stage just two days previously.

Kristersson is the main competitor of the social-democrat leader and prime minister, Magdalena Andersson, in the election due on 11 September. In his speech he took another decisive step to legitimise the radical-right-wing Sweden Democrats — a party sprung from the same violence-prone, neo-Nazi scene as the attacker.

As the leader of the Swedish conservatives looked out over green sward in what was formerly the harbour of this Hanseatic city, sheltered by the remains of the medieval limestone city wall, beyond the park the Baltic Sea expanding towards the horizon, he presented his vista for a new government coalition. 'We do not agree on everything,' he declared, 'but we know what needs to be prioritised.'

He thus celebrated his envisaged Christian-democrat partner, for standing up for accessible health care. And he praised the Liberals, for their focus on better schools and the rights of LGBT+ citizens.

Yet he also hailed a third party, the Sweden Democrats ... for their immigration policy. 'No other party has, like the Sweden Democrats — in strong headwinds — stood up for the fact that we cannot increase immigration, if we are to have a chance to cope with integration,' Kristersson said.

History whitewashed

Of course the Sweden Democrats have never cared for integration: they comprise a classic ethno-nationalist party, which opposes all kinds of immigration and all kinds of integration. If anything, its demand is complete assimilation of all immigrants into a taken-for-granted and pre-given 'Swedish nation'.

The Nazi origins of the Sweden Democrats were recently confirmed in their own 'White Book'.

Kristersson's declaration makes it clear that his party and, by implication, the Christian Democrats and Liberals in his putative coalition are ready to govern with the support of the Sweden Democrats — not despite their stance on immigration but because of it. In so doing, the leader of the Swedish conservatives is helping to whitewash the history of a party which, at the end of the 1980s, was founded by neo-Nazis.

The Nazi origins of the Sweden Democrats were recently confirmed in their own 'White Book'. This describes how the founders stemmed from the fascist New Swedish Movement, the skinhead scene and the racist and often violent organisation Keep Sweden Swedish (*Bevara Sverige Svenskt*). These roots, and the recurrent subsequent outpourings of racist sentiments, are the reason the Sweden Democrats have faced such fierce opposition — those euphemistic 'strong headwinds' — over the years.

Cultivating polarisation

This is how far the radicalisation of the Swedish conservatives has gone. In her best-selling recent book, *Radicalised Conservatism / Radikalisierter Konservatismus*, the Austrian political scientist and journalist Natascha Strobl describes how established conservative parties become radicalised as they borrow language and strategies from the far right. In the process, they normalise radical-right-wing parties and the non-parliamentary, often violent, extreme right.

The killing of Wieselgren, which the Swedish police are now treating as an act of terrorism, did not happen in a vacuum.

Strobl details how the US Republican Party under Donald Trump, the British Tories under Boris Johnson, and the Austrian People's Party under Sebastian Kurz followed similar strategies to remodel their parties around their purportedly potent male leaders. Cultivating an increasingly polarised political debate — where opponents are stigmatised as illegitimate enemies ('Lock her up') and professional media (particularly public-service media) are disdained as biased and even hostile ('fake news') — these figures managed to create an environment which could be presented as excusing their own calculated, strategic violations of the formal rules and informal conventions of politics.

The killing of Wieselgren, which the Swedish police are now treating as an act of terrorism, did not happen in a vacuum. Part of its context was the longstanding existence of a neo-fascist, anti-immigrant party, the Sweden Democrats — political expression of a violent, openly neo-Nazi milieu, including organisations such as the Nordic Resistance Movement which radicalised the murderer in Visby.

The other part is however the increasing legitimisation of this xenophobic party by the centre right — the most recent step being the leader of the Swedish conservatives inviting the Sweden Democrats to support in parliament a government he would lead. Not despite their history. Because of it.

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