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Sweden's climate policy is off the rails

The list of Sweden's recent climate setbacks is long. This should serve as a wake-up call for other countries where the radical-right is seeking power

The current Swedish government has not yet been a year in office, but Ulf Kristersson's coalition of conservatives, liberals and Christian democrats, which govern at the mercy of the radical-right Sweden Democrats, already has a dire record. Has any government ever increased greenhouse gas emissions by so much, so quickly?

Even before they took office in October 2022, the four parties announced they would cancel plans – decades in the making – to update Sweden's 150-year-old railway infrastructure for high-speed trains. The new tracks would have brought a welcome alleviation to the overcrowded and increasingly accident-stricken Swedish network. High-speed trains would also have dramatically cut travel times in one of Europe's geographically largest countries: going from Stockholm to Gothenburg would have taken two hours rather than three.

Instead, the coalition parties promised investment in the maintenance of existing railways. The new government's first budget, however, moved the funds set aside (SEK750 million or around €70 million) to the maintenance of … motorways. In Sweden, there are no signs of an Austrian-style *KlimaTicket* or a *Deutschland-Ticket*. Instead of subsidising public transport, the right-wing government has lowered taxes on fossil fuel.

Taking several steps backwards in climate protection

Sweden's strategy to comply with the Paris Agreement of 2015 focuses on a milestone goal — to reduce carbon-dioxide emissions from domestic transport by at least 70 per cent by 2030 compared with 2010. The most important tool to reach this 2030 target has been to oblige fuel retailers gradually to introduce more and more biofuel into fossil diesel and petrol. But the new government has decided to cut the required share of

biofuel drastically, from 30.5 per cent in diesel and 7.8 per cent in petrol to just 6 per cent in 2024.

This is bad news for the Swedish biofuel industry, also key to realising the 2030 goal. The petrol company ST1, for instance, has just invested SEK3 bn in a new biofuel production plant. It will now have to export the renewable fuel produced in Gothenburg, according to its chief executive, while Sweden imports fossil fuel from abroad.

The government has also undone a recent reform of tax exemptions for commuters. The reform was designed to create incentives for commuting with public transport, while supporting car drivers in rural areas with poor public-transport infrastructure. The new taxation instead favours big-city car drivers.

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Those drivers will not be going electric either: the new government has also scrapped the climate bonus for electric vehicles. Fewer of the batteries produced in Northvolt's brand-new battery factory in Skellefteå, another symbol of Sweden's green industrial boom, will be used domestically. That is less of a threat to Northvolt, though, than another piece of the new government's policy — its frantic focus on nuclear energy.

Battery production, as with the production of fossil-free steel – another Swedish green pride – needs massive amounts of energy. The government is staking everything on expansion of nuclear power, cutting the subsidies for offshore wind farms. But while hydroelectric plants and wind farms can be expanded quickly, new nuclear-power stations will take at least a decade to put in place. Panic is spreading in the rapidly expanding climate-friendly industries: where will the power come from in the meantime?

Moreover, the nuclear-power plants might not be built at all, even in the future at least not the 10 reactors the environment minister promised would be ready by 2040. That promise was deleted from the government's website, provoking international embarrassment.

No trace of self-initiative left

Before Kristersson took office, Sweden's climate goals were attainable, according to the Swedish Climate Policy Council, a government oversight agency. Now, as bluntly affirmed by the Chair of the Swedish

Society for Nature Conservation, Beatrice Rindevall, Sweden's policies have gone from 'insufficient to catastrophic'.

One year into the new legislature, there are signs the government might give up on the 2030 target altogether and passively wait for the European Union to set the targets instead. A one-man inquiry was recently charged with finding out how Sweden could comply with the EU's ambitious 'Fit for 55' emissions-reduction agenda. That man, John Hassler, has publicly declared Sweden's 2030 target 'obsolete'.

The list of Sweden's recent climate setbacks is unimaginably long, yet still growing. It is a dire wake-up call for other European countries where radical-right populists are competing for power.

Sweden segues from aspirant leader of the transition to a country which inspires only incredulity at the speed green policies can be undone.

From the *Alternative für Deutschland* to *Vox*, these parties are increasingly feeding on the toxic combination of climate denial, racism and misogyny which the American political scientist Cara Daggett has termed 'petro-masculinity'. Kristersson's government is dependent on the Sweden Democrats — a party with predominantly male voters, infamous for attracting climate deniers, which has openly challenged the validity not only of Sweden's climate agenda but also European and other internationally agreed targets.

The Sweden Democrats shamelessly fuelled and exploited the discontent with increasing petrol prices stemming from the sanctions against Russia to increase their vote in the 2022 election. Now, they are tending to their electorate with lower taxes on fossil fuel, tax exemptions for car drivers and investments in motorways, while cutting down on finance for the green transition.

Rebecca Solnit is right: we cannot afford to be climate doomers — not least because doomsday scenarios will not convince the deniers. Green jobs however might, which makes Sweden's recent disinvestment in biofuels, batteries and fossil-free steel catastrophic, indeed.

So, Sweden segues from aspirant leader of the transition to a country which inspires only incredulity at the speed green policies can be undone. As for the minister in charge, she recently posed for a photo at the inner-city Stockholm airport the new government has opted to save from closure — about to board a plane to Gothenburg.



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