

Sweden's Green Transition Abandoned

Article by Henrik Jalalian

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Since winning big in the 2022 elections, the Sweden Democrats have been working their leverage over the government. From environmental policy to biodiversity and migration, the Sweden Democrat influence is far-reaching and devastating for the country's green transition.

Sweden was once – at least by some – considered a beacon of progressive politics. In the aftermath of the [September 2022 elections](#), this reputation has taken a hit. The country's new right-wing government, a curious mix of the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Liberal Party, has taken power with the far-right Sweden Democrats pulling strings from behind the scenes.

With a stunning 20 per cent of the vote the [Sweden Democrats](#) are the country's second largest party, making the government entirely dependent on them to secure a majority in parliament. A political party founded by neo-Nazis, including a former SS volunteer, now wields significant influence over Swedish politics.

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In their first months in power, the new administration has made the shift from Sweden's progressive past crystal clear. The government's first hundred days were spent rolling back environmental regulations, slashing climate funding, cutting taxes for the wealthy and pursuing some of the harshest migration policies in Europe. Other parts of Sweden's welfare system remain intact, such as generous parental leave and unemployment funds.

Many reforms bear the hallmark of the Sweden Democrats. The other parties in the coalition aren't big champions of the climate, refugees or environment either. But it's unlikely the situation would have shifted so dramatically, if it were not for the administration's reliance on the far right.

The Sweden Democrats are still too controversial for their coalition partners to join forces with them in the official government. But the price of keeping them out of the government, while still needing their votes, has meant making significant political concessions. Every government decision must pass a special body made up of staff from the Sweden Democrats, and the written agreement between the coalition partners – consisting of 200 reforms – mainly adhere to the Sweden Democrats agenda.

Even some of the positive aspects of the new administration, such as preserving essential parts of the welfare system, are largely attributed to the Sweden Democrats and their commitment to their working-class base.

Rolling back green policies

From a green political standpoint, the administration's shift on environmental policies is among the most concerning. Sweden, once at the top of sustainability rankings, is now likely to fall behind other European countries in the coming years.

One of the new government's first decisions was to essentially dismantle the Ministry of Environment, symbolically marking the beginning of Sweden's new, less environmentally friendly era. The ministry taking its place is named the Ministry of Climate and Enterprise, but the new policies revolve more around enterprise than climate, if anything at all. Experts estimate that Sweden's carbon emissions will rise by at least 10 per cent, mainly due to prioritising lowering the cost of diesel and petrol.

Other noteworthy alterations to previous policies are the reduction of the budget for climate and environment (a decrease by 58 per cent over the next three years) and funds being reallocated from investments in new railways to building new highways. The planned construction of a high-speed railway in the south of Sweden has been abandoned altogether.

The government's only clear "ambition" on climate is building new nuclear power plants. The election was partly won by blaming anti-nuclear policies for the high electricity prices, conveniently ignoring the war in Ukraine, and the fact that Sweden is a net exporter of electricity to the rest of Europe. It is unclear whether the government will succeed in their ambitions since most of the industry wants to go for the cheaper and quicker option of renewable energy.

The business community's reaction to the government's changes are interesting. While Swedish politics may have taken a regressive turn, many businesses are outspoken about their concerns. In December, 200 representatives of Swedish companies signed an appeal for the government to increase the pace of the green transition. Between them, the signatory companies represent almost 20 per cent of Sweden's GDP.s GDP.

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency has warned that the government's severe cuts to the environmental budget could result in the extinction of several threatened species and pose a major challenge to the preservation of biological diversity. These cuts include reductions in funding for protecting threatened species and forests, and combating invasive species, all of which are expected to have significant consequences on biodiversity. Without going into too much details, the government's environmental policies are as inspiring as watching paint dry.

The governments eel-illegal activities

While these changes have not been widely covered by international media, other more blatant examples have sparked international concern for Sweden's new stance on environmental issues.

The recent government mandated wolf hunting, which allows hunters to shoot 75 wolves, has received widespread criticism from NGOs, international media, and the EU. The decision is a glaring violation of EU conservation law and the European Commission has said that the wolf population is too small to allow licensed hunting. The wolf population stands at 460 (since the hunt began we are likely under 400) and is considered genetically isolated. This should of course be compared with the population in other European countries: Spain's 3000 wolves, Germany's 1500 and Poland's 2000.

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over Swedish politics.

But perhaps nothing illustrates the administration's attitude better than its unfortunate handling of the acutely endangered eel. The European Commission proposed an extended ban on eel fishing for three to six months, at the same time that recreational eel fishing is stopped. But the Swedish government said no. Shortly after, the administration also paused the environmental assessments of hydropower as a major threat to the eel.

This could have gone largely unnoticed (apart from concerned environmentalists) if it wasn't for what happened next. The prime minister's closest aid, PM Nilsson, admitted to illegal eel poaching after lying for weeks about it to officials and the police. The prime minister Ulf Kristersson saw no reason to let him go. But after being on top of the news cycle for weeks and another investigation being launched, he finally resigned. Importantly, this scandal cemented the public's perception of the government as eco-unfriendly.

“Wir schaffen das nicht mehr” : Shutting out refugees

In 2015, Germany and Sweden were known for their welcoming attitude towards refugees during the Syrian refugee crisis. Angela Merkel's famous phrase, “*Wir Schaffen das*” (We can do it), was echoed in Sweden by “*Öppna era hjärtan*” (Open your hearts).

Those days are long gone. Even the previous Social Democratic-Green government made significant changes to Sweden's migration regulations, resulting in stricter and less open policies. The Greens initially held their ground but finally agreed, while receiving humanitarian concessions for unaccompanied minors claiming asylum in return.

With the new government's policies, the situation for refugees has gone from bad to worse. The administration is proposing holding asylum seekers in transit zones, incentives to increase repatriation of refugees and to adapt migration policies to an absolute minimum (as low as they can go while still adhering to EU law). The government and embassies will launch PR-campaigns in other countries to discourage refugees from migrating to Sweden and humanitarian aid will, in some cases, be conditional on preventing migration.

The agreement, reached between the coalition and the Sweden Democrats, also proposes tighter citizenship requirements, and reduced rights to family reunification. Sweden's new mantra is quite obviously “*Wir Schaffen Das Nicht Mehr*”.

The Greens in opposition

There is some hope for Sweden, from a progressive standpoint. The new administration faces record low poll numbers as scandals and a failure to deliver on campaign promises become increasingly apparent. In a recent poll, six out of ten Swedes thought the government is doing a bad job.

Even among the conservative rank and file, the actual cost of the populist election campaign that brought them to power is questioned. Adding fuel to the fire, individuals linked to the Sweden Democrats burned the Quran outside the Turkish Embassy, infuriating Turkey and obstructing Sweden's path to NATO – a top priority of the administration.

Considering all this, the Swedish Greens should have a good chance at forming a strong and effective

opposition. More than the other opposition parties, the government's policies hit at the core of the green ideology.

While being clearly against the populism of the Sweden Democrats populism, the Social Democrats largely agree with stricter migration policies and are considerably less vocal on climate issues. The Greens uniquely could be voicing criticism against this new regressive direction.

Unfortunately, quite the opposite is happening. The Social Democrats are experiencing a boost in popularity, with nearly 37 per cent backing, while the Greens are crumbling with only 4 per cent support. Despite all the criticism against the environmental backlash, the Greens' support has dwindled since the election result of 5.1 per cent.

The recession and unstable security situation could be part of the explanation. Bad times usually favour more established and traditional parties.

But the Green Party has also received criticism for being strangely silent since the election, apparently struggling to find a new role. They quickly need to find their voice to get Sweden back on track.



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