

The Swedish EU Presidency Under Far-Right Influence

Article by Anders Schröder

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The election of Sweden's new government in September was historic. Never in modern history has the country had a government as conservative as the current one. Given that Sweden has taken over the role of president for the Council of the EU for the first half of 2023, the right-wing turn could have implications not just for Sweden itself, but for all of Europe. But what does this new conservative government want, and how might it influence European politics?

It's 1941 and the Swede Gustav Ekström travels to Berlin to join the Nazi cause. For two years he creates propaganda for the Nazis at Lützowstrasse 48/49, the main office of the SS in Berlin. Only when the tide of the war turns will he eventually return to Sweden. He remained a Nazi for the rest of his life. In the early 90s, shortly before his death, he would defend his role in the Second World War as a just struggle against global Jewish domination. After 1988, he had secured his place in the history books, not for his part in Nazi regime but for co-founding the first local chapter of the Sweden Democrats - the party that today is a central part of the new government's coalition.

The story above illustrates why many people are rightly alarmed by Sweden's new government. The current government consists of three parties, two traditional conservative parties, and one liberal party. Together they amount to about 30 per cent of the votes in parliament, requiring the Sweden Democrats' 20 per cent to hold power. For a long time, no other party wanted anything to do with the Sweden Democrats because of their Nazi roots. Today however, Sweden's Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson likes to compare the Sweden Democrats to other Nordic right-wing populist parties like Norway's Fremskrittspartiet, or the Danish People's Party, which have both been part of conservative government coalitions for decades. However, Kristersson's argument conveniently ignores that neither of these parties has a Nazi or Neo-Nazi past. A more appropriate comparison is Brothers of Italy, a party who also have historical connections to fascist movements.

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That the influence of the far right has been on the rise in European politics is no news by now. But how much influence will the Sweden Democrats have on European politics in a coalition with traditional conservative parties? The answer will depend on what issue we are talking about.

Sweden's shifting place in Europe

As laid out by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson in a speech to the European parliament, Sweden's number one priority during its EU presidency is supporting Ukraine against the Russian aggression. While the Sweden Democrats have shown pro-Kremlin leanings in the past, there is no space for such ideas within the current Swedish government. The traditional Swedish right has a long history of being pro-European and pro-Western. Now, with Sweden (and Finland) applying to join NATO, with strong public backing, they feel vindicated. This decision has also re-energised their ambition to take Sweden from what they see as a role on the periphery of the western cooperation, to a position firmly within the western fold. This includes increasing both the armed and the humanitarian support for Ukraine, as well as strengthening the EU against other threats, including China.

The situation is somewhat similar when it comes to the rule of law. While Kristersson has declared his intention to continue the work towards protecting the rule of law within the EU, here too the track record of the Sweden Democrats is concerning. However, all other parties in the Swedish parliament are reliable supporters of rule of law and the Sweden Democrats are unlikely to want to spend political capital on Poland or Hungary, so attempts to hold such countries accountable for undermining of democratic institutions via Article 7 proceedings are likely to continue uninterrupted.

When it comes to the European Green Deal, Kristersson has uttered all the right phrases in his speeches. He supports the EU commitments to the Paris Agreement, and he is proud of Sweden's contributions to the green transition. However, his actions say otherwise. On the national level, the government has kept the relatively ambitious environmental goals of its predecessor. At the same time, they are slashing funding to the environmental agency, aiming for a more-than-half cut by 2025. The single reform that the government spent the most on in its 2022 budget was lowering taxes on and increasing subsidies of fossil fuels. According to the finance ministry's own assessment, the government's new policies are incompatible with the climate goals that they still pretend to support.

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The current governing coalition has never been an enthusiastic supporter of the European Green Deal. During a vote on it in 2021, only one of the four parties in the current governing coalition voted yes. Sweden is expected to support the European Green Deal with about 15 billion euros, but will only receive about 3 billion back. This has made the European Green Deal somewhat controversial in the Swedish discourse. If the government were to treat the European Green Deal the same way it has treated its national climate agenda, it would be devastating.

Another area where the Sweden Democrats influence can be felt migration policy. To keep the Sweden Democrats out of the government but still be able to rely on their support in the parliament, the governing parties had to make several political concessions to them. Naturally, the Sweden Democrats' main priority was a stricter migration policy. The

agreement reached by the parties was more far reaching than almost anyone had expected. Family reunification will be as limited as the EU law allows, deportation will be made easier including for “immoral behavior”, (what that includes exactly is still unclear), citizenships will be harder to obtain, decreased economic support to asylum seekers and asylum receivers. The list goes on. The outcome is perhaps best summarised by the lead negotiator for the Sweden Democrats, Gustav Gellerbrant who said that “it’s incredible really, we’ve basically agreed to implement the entirety of the Sweden Democrats’ migration policy”

Some might argue that while the Sweden Democrats have a large influence on Swedish migratory and asylum policy, the same might not apply for EU policy as it is run directly through government rather than through parliament. But they would be wrong. Initially, the government reassured everyone that the Sweden Democrats would not be allowed to influence any foreign or EU policy. But [internal documents leaked by journalists](#) showed that the Sweden Democrats will be consulted on several EU topics, including migration. In general, traditional right have largely internalised the Sweden Democrats’ view on migration and asylum. Unlike 10 years ago, the Swedish right no longer talks about the benefits of labour migration, or the respect for human rights. We should assume that this will be reflected in Sweden’s priorities in the ongoing negotiations of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.

The challenge for Greens

On one hand, Sweden is not Poland or Hungary, and will remain a reliable actor when it comes to European cohesion and the respect for rule of law. On the other hand, in key areas such as migration and climate action, Sweden is more than likely to switch roles from progressive champion to regressive conservative, focusing more on narrow national self-interest instead of the common European good.

For progressives, it is concerning enough that alliances of the traditional right and the populist right are seeing electoral success in many European countries. Holding the Swedish government accountable, particularly to the EU climate goals which they at least pay lip service to, will be an important job for Greens. Europe is facing the most challenging time in decades, but this is a reason to put more, not less, effort into protecting human rights including for refugees, and to speed up the green transition. Sadly, Sweden’s role as president of the Council of the EU is unlikely to help in that regard. But that makes it all the more important that others take up the mantle.



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