

Krumrey, Peer; Schymik, Carsten

Research Report

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Sweden: Right-wing Populist Yet EU-friendly

The Electoral Success of the Sweden Democrats Overshadows the Increasing Approval of the EU in Sweden

Peer Krumrey / Carsten Schymik

The outcome of Sweden's general election held on 19 September 2010 was widely seen as yet another example of a right-wing populist party on the rise in Europe. However, Sweden's case also shows that growing right-wing populism does not necessarily go hand in hand with growing opposition to the EU. Although the Sweden Democrats advocate both anti-immigrant and anti-EU ideas, the latter hardly contributed to their success at the polls. On the contrary, Swedish society – often referred to as traditionally eurosceptical – has “mentally” joined the European Union.

On 5 October Sweden got a new government, which in fact is a well-known one. Fredrik Reinfeldt is the first centre-right prime minister in almost 90 years who has succeeded in being re-elected for a second term. However, his Alliance for Sweden – a four-party coalition formed by Reinfeldt's Conservative Party (*Moderata samlingspartiet*) together with the Liberals (*Folkpartiet liberalerna*), the Centre Party (*Centerpartiet*) and the Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna*) – will be forced to act as a minority government. Due to the success of the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*), there are no clear-cut majorities in parliament. The party managed to gain 5.7 per cent of the vote in the general elections, thereby surpassing the 4-per cent threshold and entering the Riksdag for the first time ever.

A European trend towards right-wing populism

Many commentators took the electoral success of the Sweden Democrats (SD) as the latest evidence of a European trend. After Belgium and the Netherlands, Sweden seemed to provide another example of a right-wing populist party making a breakthrough in a country that was long known for its liberal immigration and integration policies. Sweden had indeed been the last Scandinavian country without a significant right-wing populist party. In Norway, the Progressive Party entered parliament for the first time almost 30 years ago, and in the 2009 general elections it became the second largest party. The Danish People's Party has been supporting a centre-right minority government for almost 10 years

now, thereby forcing through increasingly restrictive immigration policies.

The rise of right-wing populism in Europe is perceived as a threat not only because it is conducive to xenophobic and racist attitudes, especially in respect of Islam, but also for its negative views on European integration. Most right-wing populist parties are anti-EU parties. Their continued political ascent could weaken the already crisis-ridden European Union even further.

The equation of xenophobia and scepticism towards the EU does not apply to the Swedish case though. Certainly, the Sweden Democrats' success must be seen as an expression of xenophobic attitudes in parts of Swedish society. However, it is hardly proof of growing EU scepticism in the country. Quite the opposite is true. The European Union has in recent years continually gained acceptance among both politicians and in the Swedish population at large.

Growing support for the EU

Swedes are often referred to as reluctant Europeans. This image is essentially based on two landmark decisions on Europe taken by referendum. While accession to the EU was supported by just a narrow majority of 52 per cent of the electorate in 1994, a clear majority of 56 per cent rejected the introduction of the euro in 2003. Moreover, Sweden was long to be found among the EU member states that showed the highest shares of critical or negative attitudes towards the EU in opinion polls like the Eurobarometer. Swedish euroscepticism also became evident in the 2004 elections for the European Parliament when a party called June List, which campaigned against the Constitutional Treaty and for a permanent opt-out for Sweden from Economic and Monetary Union, managed to secure 15 per cent of the vote and 3 of 19 Swedish mandates in the EP.

Against this background, there have been remarkable changes in Swedish public opinion in the last years. EU membership is hardly controversial any longer. In summer

2009, just prior to the country's second presidency of the EU, an absolute majority of Swedes endorsed EU membership for the first time. At the same time, the proportion of people who reject any transfer of power to the supranational level has diminished significantly. The EU's impact on Sweden's economic, environmental and employment policies has been rated ever more positively by the respondents over the past 12 years – a trend that can be observed in all social groups and political camps alike. By the same token, Sweden's possibilities to influence European decision making have been deemed ever more optimistically.

Increasing support of the EU also became evident in the European elections in 2009. While the June List failed to be re-elected and the EU-critical Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*) lost almost half of its support, more pro-EU parties like the Liberals gained in strength. In addition, Sweden was one of the few member states where electoral turnout did not fall but increased, by eight points to nearly 46 per cent – well above the EU average. In light of these figures, there is hardly reason to speak of sustained EU-scepticism in Sweden. On the contrary, 15 years after its accession, the country now seems to have “mentally” joined the European Union.

Dwindling potential for dissent

The more positive image that the EU enjoys in Swedish society today has also been translated into politics. The pro-EU turn was fostered by changing dynamics of party competition and parliamentary majority building. It has become a rule in Swedish politics to form party blocs with a view to securing majority governments. This is in contrast to the traditional way of minority governments, which tried to get support from all parties represented in the Riksdag. In doing so, minority governments were able to maintain a certain degree of strategic freedom. The need for programmatic conformity was limited because, in case of conflict, one could simply turn to another partner. The main beneficiary of this

system was the Social Democratic Party (SAP), which used to cooperate with parties on both sides of the political spectrum.

The emergence of a centre-right coalition, which led to the replacement of the Social Democrat minority government under Göran Persson in 2006, deprived the SAP of this option. In return, the party formalised cooperation with the Greens (*Miljöpartiet*) and the Left Party with a view to forming a coalition government with its own parliamentary majority. Hence, in the last elections voters were offered a clear-cut choice between two party blocs.

The emergence of party blocs has effectively reduced the degree of polarisation over EU issues. In the past the Greens and the Left Party had been promoting EU-sceptic views as part of their ideological profile. Yet joining a left bloc together with the more pro-EU Social Democrats put tremendous pressure on the Left Party to adapt and harmonise positions.

The development had already started in autumn 2008 when the Greens removed the demand to leave the EU from their party programme in order to prepare the ground for a common campaign platform with the SAP. Although the Left Party postponed a similar decision to its next party congress in 2011, it did not pursue its anti-EU stance during the election campaign. Instead, both parties endorsed a joint red-green manifesto on Europe in which they accepted, for the first time, fundamental aspects of European integration. The Greens acknowledged the principle of supranationality, albeit restricted to environmental policy and fighting cross-border crime. The Left Party, in turn, accepted the principle of solidarity within the Union, even in military issues. Both parties in effect approved the Lisbon Treaty, to which they had originally been opposed.

The common currency remains an exception though. The red-green election manifesto ruled out a new referendum on the introduction of the euro in the coming legislative period. The governing centre-right parties kept the option open, but

made a precondition to secure a broad consensus in parliament and society in favour of the euro. This caveat was tantamount to an objection in principle because the popularity of the single currency in Sweden has suffered in recent months. By means of devaluating the crown, Sweden managed to get through the global financial crisis comparatively well. The continued precarious situation of the euro and the fact that two important partners of Sweden – Denmark and the United Kingdom – remain outside the euro zone contributes to the persistence of Swedish euro-scepticism.

Implications of the success of the Sweden Democrats

Unlike in Denmark there was no intense public debate on migration policy prior to the success of the right-wing populists. In the case of Sweden, it was instrumental that a marginalisation strategy pursued by all mainstream political parties and the media turned out to be ineffective, paving the way for the SD. Given the parliamentary representation the Sweden Democrats now possess, it seems questionable whether sticking to this strategy of marginalisation is appropriate.

This, in turn, leads to two possible scenarios for future handling of the Sweden Democrats. One option could be to continue marginalising the SD and putting all hope into a factional dismantling process driven by internal conflicts and dismay. History would repeat itself, as another right-wing populist party – New Democracy (*Ny Demokrati*) – suffered a similar fate in the early 1990s when the party disappeared after just one term in the Riksdag. The fact that the Sweden Democrats lack a similar acceptance in society – compared to, for example, the Danish People's Party – supports this argument. SD's management is by far not as charismatic nor as established on the scene as its Danish counterparts. Moreover, most Swedes are aware of the party's descent, which traces back to the

neo-Nazi milieu rather than a civil unrest movement like other right-wing populist parties in Scandinavia. This has until now undermined a broader public acceptance of the party.

The second scenario equates to the Danish case. A continued marginalisation of the Sweden Democrats proves to be ineffective or is jeopardised by a maverick party, respectively. Since the SD thus is not challenged politically, they are able to exploit the set-up by setting the agenda and establishing themselves as a player on the scene. The mainstream parties will try unavailingly to pocket – partially or entirely – the SD's positions in order to regain lost voters. However, the SD gains more support in elections and will soon reach a tipping point, making it impossible to brush them aside any longer. In Denmark this process took six years.

Paradoxically, the newly introduced pattern of thinking along bloc lines hampers an effective marginalisation of the Sweden Democrats. A traditional Swedish governmental approach would have easily provided a minority government with the means to form majorities in ever-changing constellations. Ultimately, only stable political blocs enable the SD to toy with a role as kingmaker. At the same time, the bloc formation has proven to be a vehicle for increasing compliance with the EU among the mainstream parties, turning the SD into the only openly EU-hostile party in parliament. Thus, the SD could be tempted to supplement their anti-immigrant programme with anti-EU pledges. Whether that puts them into a position to tab new voter groups remains questionable though.

From the domestic perspective, Prime Minister Reinfeldt's minority government is heading towards choppy seas. Sweden's EU policy, though, is not about to change. She will continue on the path taken in 2006 in order to turn Sweden into an involved and proactive force in the European Union. Thus, Sweden will proceed to be a reliable partner for Germany within the European Union.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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