

The Growing Popularity of Far-Right Swedish Democrats

Despite having roots in the country's neo-Nazi movement, the Swedish democrats (SD) experienced an unprecedented surge in voter support over the last two election cycles and became the third-largest party in the 2014 parliamentary election. Their policy agenda is crystal clear – cast your vote in our favour and we will resolve the immigration issue. SD had launched a major campaign against large inflows of unregulated immigrants, especially those of Middle East countries and clearly it paid off. They have been receiving support from Swedish inhabitants as a response to the growing occurrence of rapes, violence, bomb attacks and assaults in this northern state had emerged. On the other hand the criticism of SD for being xenophobic and racist has appeared. So, does the party pose a real threat to the Swedish democratic system or could it be a catalyst for finding a long-term and much-needed solution to the immigration question? And if so, would the SD be allowed to contribute to the discussion at the negotiation table?

The secret of success

Before the SD entered the Swedish parliament, *Riksdag*, only a few parties represented the far right political scene, namely, New Democracy, *Ny Demokrati*¹; National Democrats, *Nationaldemokraterna*²; and Keep Sweden Swedish, *Bevara Sverige Svenskt*.³ While the SD was founded in 1988, it only came out of the political shadows during the general elections of 2006. Yet, it was unable to pass the election threshold and gain any parliament seats. In 2010 the party was more successful and scored 5.7% share of the popular votes and 20 seats. The SD maintained its upward trajectory of voter support in the last elections held in September 2014 in which it more than doubled its votes to 12.9% and 49 seats in the Swedish Riksdag (Election resources n.d.).

SD built up its programme on solving the immigration problem by regulating it unlike the two traditional Swedish parties – Social democrats (left wing) and Moderate party (right wing) who support Sweden's long tradition of generous liberal immigration policies even though criminal statistics prove otherwise.

1 Formed in 1991, the party was able to enter the parliament in the same year. Nevertheless, during the next year there appeared some disputes between the founders and it had dissolved after a series of embarrassments in 1994.

2 The party has been originally formed by radical wing that seceded from the SD in 2001 but reached such poor results in the elections that it also fell apart very soon (Larsson 2014).

3 Their catchword (same as name of the movement) appeared in several political campaigns of far right entities including SD (SD n.d.).

These two political subjects refuse to reform any immigration policy because they simply do not see immigration as a problem. This seems to be a decisive factor shaping voters' opinion and now is starting to backfire against the long-established parties. All this has been taking place against the backdrop where hate crimes have risen to 24% over the past five years. What's more, the 2012 report from the Swedish United Nations Association came with the information of about 5,500 incidents of hate crimes of which 74% are racially motivated, especially targeting African immigrants (Brå 2013). In addition, Sweden has the highest rape rate in Europe and ranks second in the global statistics on this crime. According to the available data, nearly a third of the women in Sweden has suffered rape mostly in their teens, an alarming number, which has quadrupled over the past 20 years. Immigrants, specifically Muslims, allegedly commit most of the offences (Muslim Issue 2013).

However, despite these statistics, the political leaders of the traditional political parties play the popular game of blame shifting and accuse SD leader, Jimme Åkesson, of being a populist, racist and even neo-Nazi instead of starting to dealing with the factor, which are taking the voters from them. For instance, the leader of Moderate Party, Frederik Reinfeldt, tried to approach the Swedish voters with a slogan *open your heart to refugees, our country can absorb more than you think* (Crouch 2014). In light of the alarming influx of immigrants (believed to be 120,000 in 2014), there is hardly much speculation as to why the Moderate Party in particular lost a considerable share of its voters to the SD during the last elections (The Local 2014). The SD refers to itself as social conservative party with nationalist ethos aiming to bring together the best of left and right wing. In their official program, it says that it recognizes a long series of values, among them traditions, family, nation, democracy, equality before the law and equality of women and men, as well as protection of the environment. Additionally, the party presents itself as fiercely anti-EU and perceives the European Union as a supranational project, which Sweden should leave and remain only in the European Economic Community.

When it comes to immigration, the SD highlights the urgent need to reform Sweden's current immigration policy, among other things, by distinguishing between the asylum law and the law on granting asylum, claiming that to have the right to grant asylum, the individual(s) have to fulfil the conditions agreed upon by the UN.

In the May 2014 European parliamentary elections, Swedish democrats received two seats and currently cooperate with the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group (BBC 2014; SD n.d.).

Provocative campaign

A major problem of SD is its links to neo-Nazi history. Many Swedish voters see the party as populist, reminiscent of the once popular movement *Bevara Sverige Svenskt* or *Ny demokrati*. Some commentators on the Internet even claim that Jimmie Åkesson is a white-collar racist. His persona is being mocked on the Internet, portraying him as a Nazi wearing the swastika symbol. Moreover, the party faced several scandals over the last year, when for instance one of its members was photographed with a swastika armband or another making racist comments on the Internet. Instead of investigation, Jimmie Åkesson has decided to solve the case by excluding the previously mentioned people from the party; therefore Swedish democrats avoided the court (BBC 2014).

Moreover, during 2009 Åkesson underlined the growing danger of Islamisation sweeping across Sweden and Europe in general, likening Islamisation to the biggest threat for Sweden since the Second World War: "*Islamism is Nazism and communism of our time*" (BBC 2014).

In 2010 the SD evoked emotive reactions while releasing their campaign clip for the upcoming elections, in which it depicted an elderly woman holding crutches attempting to escape from a group of Muslim women covered in burkas. The spot ends with slogan *You can choose between the immigration brake or the pensions brake*. In other words, the public is given the opportunity to decide whether the government should allocate a greater share of budget on immigration or pensions. Needless to say, one of the leading television networks, TV4, declined to broadcast the spot due to its racist and xenophobic content and on the grounds it violated the law on minority groups. Subsequently the SD accused TV4 of imposing censorship. The national newspapers – *Expressen*, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* have also joined the boycott. However, only *Expressen* kept its position, while the remaining two changed it in 2006.

This illustrates that the so-called censorship had only had the effect of peeking the curiosity among the Swedes, keeping the party from going to court. Instead, the party has uploaded the spot to the social

media, which turned into a perfect advertising strategy to illustrate how the system reacts when someone attempts to shed light on the country's social problems (Brown 2010).

Post-election crisis

While the centre-left Social democrats managed to gain the highest number of votes in the latest general elections in September, they were unable to reach an overwhelming majority in *Riksdag*. As a result two blocs were formed – on the left, the Social democrats joined their forces with the Green party (holding 138 seats) and on the right, so-called Alliance emerged comprising Moderate Party, Liberal People's party, Christian democrats and Centre Party (162 seats).

SD is not affiliated with any of these blocs and occupies the centre with 49 seats. In fact neither of the 2 blocs fancy cooperating with the SD claiming they are too radical, even though statistically, most of the time SD votes in favor of Alliance (Riksdag n.d.).

The uneven distribution of votes led the government to serious crisis in December 2014 when Löfven's Coalition sought support for the state budget. Unexpectedly, SD decided to use their power, tilting the balance in favour of the Alliance. The Coalition was left paralyzed and Löfven called an exceptional meeting with opposition figures (excluding Left party which supported the Coalition's proposal and the SD that wasn't invited either. As the situation was becoming critical, Löfven announced that if the two blocs fail to reach an agreement the Coalition would have to resign. In this scenario, early elections would be set for March 2015. In such a situation, the public opinion polls from the end of 2014 have put SD at 18% of the popular vote. What's more, with regard to Moderate party' loss of voters to SD, the far-right party could pull ahead to the second spot if early elections were held. This could have far-reaching consequences for Sweden as well as other European countries in which similar populist, anti-immigration and anti-establishment parties are gaining momentum.

Surprisingly, Löfven had caught second breath and announced just a few days before the New Year that he had reached an agreement with the Alliance. Moreover, they had signed a brand new coalition treaty valid until 2022 proclaiming that none of the six Alliance parties would block the vote on the budget (The Local Dec 27 2014). This was clearly shocking news to the SD who was excluded from the negotiations and yet and all the parties have again declared will to do everything in their power to prevent another success of SD.

What to expect in the near future?

Having searched for the mood of Swedish population as reflected in the current state of affairs in *Riksdag*, few things stand out. Both the Social democrats and the Moderate party are getting off on decidedly wrong foot. In fact, the SD isn't receiving as many votes only because of Jimme Åkesson's charisma – there are deeper reasons for their success.

Although the party could be considered populist, it has managed to shed a spotlight on the emerging problem of immigration. What's more, the Social Democrats and the Moderate party simply cannot ignore the growing violence as well as the shifting mood in the society. And if the ultimate goal is to isolate SD from taking active part on the Swedish political scene, perhaps the right way would be by tackling the immigration problem and showing that they really care about the issue, instead of blaming SD about their neo-Nazis roots. The current position of the two major parties has left Swedish people dissatisfied and surely we can expect massive support of SD in the next elections. And let's be honest – in the context of the recent events in Paris, postponing of finding solutions to the immigration problem might prove too dangerous.

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