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THE SWEDISH POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN TRANSITION

After the election in the beginning of September 2018, Swedish politics has been deadlocked and Sweden is still without a government. For the time being Sweden is being governed by what is called an “interim government” and a new election in 2019 is still a distinct possibility. The principal reason for this deadlock is the increase in the share of the vote achieved by the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats (SD) in the election. The centre-right parties are unwilling to participate in a government which would be dependent on the support of the SD. But it remains to be seen whether parliament is prepared to approve a government led by the Social Democrats. This kind of deadlock is nothing new. In fact, the political situation has been unchanged for the last eight years. The only difference is that SD is considerably larger and stronger than previously and has declared its intention to impose more specific demands on any centre/right government as the price of their support.

Background

Although the Red/Green parties achieved a larger share of the popular vote than the centre-right block in the 2014 election, they did not command an overall majority. This was due to the emergence of a third block in Swedish politics with the Sweden Democrats taking their place in the Swedish parliament for the first time. So far, no party has been willing to negotiate with the Sweden Democrats on any political issues on the table in the parliament and neither block is prepared to form a government dependant on their support. The reason behind this is, of course, fascist history of the Sweden Democrats. They have tried hard to change the party and its image, but it is still a national-conservative party with a radical agenda. There has, however, been much discussion and disagreement within the centre-right block, with two of the parties (the Moderates and the Christian Democrats) indicating that they might be prepared to do so after the next election while the other two (the Liberals - formerly the Peoples' Party – and the Centre) having so far rejected the possibility.

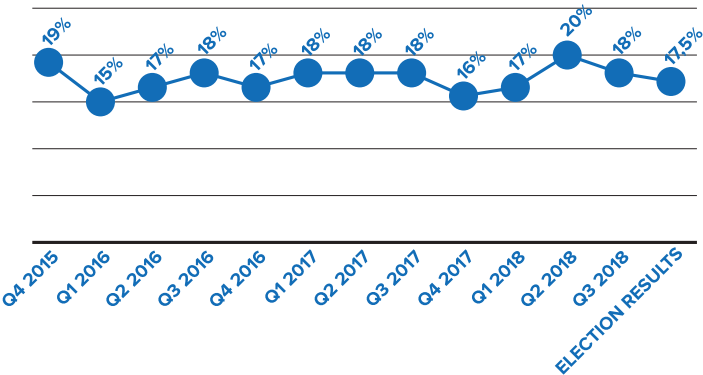
In 2014, the Social Democrats formed the government with the support of the largest block in the Parliament, but they still lacked a majority. Sweden has a long tradition of minority governments and such a situation is not considered unfavourably by the Parliament. It has enabled the formation of governments which have reflected the system of proportional representation but has also provided the scope for negotiations between parties which are not within the government thus enabling them to exert a degree of influence despite their being in opposition.

But now the situation has changed. The emergence of a large right-wing populist party which, so far, no other party appears willing to cooperate with or even to negotiate with makes it more difficult for

a minority government to govern effectively. This is exactly what this social democratically lead government has encountered.

In principle the result of the election has not changed the balance of power. The red/green parties are still bigger than the centre-right coalition, although the margin is smaller than previously (now by only a single seat). However, what is most significant is that the Sweden Democrats have increased their share of the vote and strengthened their position, taking 17.5 percent. This is remarkable since the party only gained entry into Parliament for the first time in 2010. This further complicates the conditions for future governments and could potentially redraw the political map.

POPULARITY OF SWEDEN DEMOCRATS
(OPINION POLLS AND ELECTION RESULT,
AMONG LIKELY VOTERS)



Source: Populism Tracker

Although the Social Democrats share of the vote fell from 31 to 28.3 percent, the result of the election is considered something of a success. Compared with developments in many other European countries, despite this apparent decline in support, the Social Democrats have maintained a strong position and are by a considerable margin still the largest party.

What kind of party is the Sweden Democrats?

The current leadership has attempted to transform the party from a marginal and often violent fascist party with Nazi connections when it was founded in the 1980s. The party is the outgrowth of fascist and Nazi groupings and movements which came into being during these years. In fact, the party was marginalised for some considerable time. The current party leadership and its chairman Jimmie Åkesson decided to make the party more respectable and more like other Nordic right-wing populist parties. This strategy has paid dividends. The party's electoral support has increased from 1.4% in 2002 to 17.53% in 2018. The party has increased its share of the vote in every election since they first entered the lists in 1988. And this will be the third successive term in which they have been represented in the parliament.

The party has deleted some of the most extreme aspects of its program and describes itself as "social conservative". It has isolated and expelled considerable numbers of members who have opposed the leadership or who have expressed extreme racist views. This has given rise to the formation of alternative and more radical parties to the right of SD on the political spectrum but none of these have been successful. SD has succeeded in establishing itself as the major right-wing populist party in Swedish

politics. The party seems constantly to practice brinkmanship trying to present itself as normal and acceptable to the general public. At the same time, it appeals and belongs to the broader racist movement often through personal and /or informal links to more extreme fascist groupings and networks. It describes itself as democratic but in the final analysis it is a party opposed to immigration and promoting the repatriation of as many immigrants as possible - even those with Swedish citizenship and residence permits.

However, it would be more accurate to describe the party as “national conservative”. In the party’s mindset/worldview, the open, democratic society is a threat to the nation and to social cohesion. Demands for homogeneity correspond closely with the notion of “illiberal democracy” and is based on an intolerant form of nationalism and opposition to “alien cultures”. SD’s agitation regularly targets the media, the academic, cultural and political elite which has betrayed the people. Many of the key elements in our democratic model are the targets of their fierce criticism. It is a pattern familiar from many other countries and forms a network of the right-wing populist parties throughout Europe. Many of their pronouncements, including leading figures within the party, reveal all too clearly that the party is still tied to its radical – almost revolutionary - roots and traditions. After the election Mathias Karlsson, one of the party’s leading lights declared on Facebook: “Our opponents have really compelled us to engage in an existential struggle to defend our culture and the survival of our nation. It is now a simple choice – victory or death!”

The main plank in the party’s platform is, of course, immigration. This has never previously been so high on the agenda of the Swedish political debate as it is now. In recent years however, it has become a critical and divisive issue. The wave of immigration which swept through Europe in 2015 caused a paradigm shift

particularly since Sweden was the country which took more immigrants per head of population than any other European country. Previously, all parties apart from SD were in favour of a generous immigration policy – particularly as regards the granting of permanent residence permits and the reuniting of families. Labour migration from outside the EU was liberalised. In general, the level of immigration into Sweden has been high during the last decade. This all changed after 2015 and now the number of asylum seekers and refugees accepted by Sweden is among the lowest in the EU. This more restrictive policy has the support of several political parties and was passed into law on the initiative of the Social Democrats. The more conservative centre-right parties have not only supported this change in policy but demand an even more restrictive policy while others express varying degrees of support for the relaxation of the restrictions and a return to the previous liberal asylum and refugee policy.

SD has described these developments as a triumph for the party's position on immigration and confirmation that they were right all along. There is some truth in this assertion but not without qualification. The party conducts and advocates an even more restrictive refugee policy. In practice SD wants to block any possibility to apply for asylum in Sweden. It advocates repatriating large numbers of immigrants including those who have permanent residence permits and even those with Swedish citizenship. Furthermore, it demands that anyone with a foreign background who commits a criminal offence should be exiled.

The act of terrorism which occurred in Stockholm in 2017 transformed the tone of the debate and the political agenda in a more alarmist direction while crime and the growth of organised criminal networks have taken centre-stage in the media's attention. Furthermore, Sweden has the largest number of shootings related

to criminal gangs in the EU. The combined effect of this has made crime a key issue for the electorate and a political question of much greater significance than previously.

So, from being a marginal issue in public opinion, immigration and crime have come to dominate the debate since 2015. It is not uncommon to highlight a connection between the two. And as a result, the issues favoured by the SD have taken centre stage to a much greater extent than previously. Moreover, they are no longer the only party which is prepared to emphasise these issues.

At the same time SD has, in keeping with similar parties, also profiled itself on the issues relating to the need for better welfare for ethnic Swedes and contrasted this with the effects of immigration. They claim that it is they who are now the custodians of the Social Democratic Folkhem (Peoples home). It is of course a more homogeneous and less egalitarian Folkhem which they are envisaging and advocating. The Party has appealed to the elderly primarily as having inherited the role previously performed by the Social Democrats. It is of course linked to a particular form of cultural identity and “Swedish Culture”. The Social Democratic Folkhem as a nostalgic dream of a society and an age without corruption.

Health Care is another area which has been in the focus of much attention, not least since SD has attempted to capitalise on demands from both trade unions and Social Democrats for better employment conditions in the public sector. Such demands have been particularly aimed at female voters. However, the female dominated public sector has shown itself to be much less amenable to SD’s ideas than other trade union members.

At the same time, the Party has moved to the right on many economic issues. When it comes to labour market issues, taxation,

market models and such controversial issues as the role of private companies in the public sector, the SD is much closer to the centre-right alliance. The SD has also clearly stated that they wish either to govern or to support a centre-right government - but only together with the two other conservative parties; thereby excluding the liberals and neo-liberals who tend to be opposed to SD's national conservative policies.

The election campaign of the Sweden Democrats

The election campaign itself and SD's election posters proclaimed a very subdued message. The emphasis was placed on individuals rather than any clear message, and pictures of well-dressed political leaders. Immigration policy was dressed up in the slogan "Help there – Not chaos here". Moreover, they used slogans as "Law and Order", and "Time for real change!" All this indicates that the SD aimed to create the impression that they were a "party" like any other – a further step towards becoming a "normal" party – while many national and local politicians still expressed racist and provocative views, not infrequently on social media. However, apparently, SD's electoral strategists were convinced that the changes in the political climate since 2015 would favour the party to such an extent that it was best to give the appearance of being a "serious" and "well-balanced" party. Leading figures in the party were convinced that SD could become the largest party in the parliament or at least the second largest and would thus become the natural opposition to the Social Democrats. Expectations were clearly enormous and that could well have affected the electoral strategy. But although the outcome of the election was a success for the SD, they only became third largest.

Who voted for the Sweden Democrats?

SD recent electoral success took voters from both left and right but primarily from the Moderates (the liberal conservative right-wing party) and the Social Democrats. It is clearly the case, however, that those who vote SD consider themselves right-wing to a greater degree than left-wing. Only 8 percent declare themselves to be left-wing. Research suggests that many of those Social Democrat voters who transferred their allegiance to SD now sympathise with the centre-right parties' demands, for example, for cuts in taxation. More men than women vote for SD. The party has less support in the female dominated public sector than in the male dominated private sector, such as the construction industry, transport etc. In the previous election many Moderate voters defected to SD, but in the recent election the defectors came from the ranks of the traditional Social Democratic blue-collar workers although their numbers were not so high as many had feared. Although the Social Democrats are still the largest party among workers, SD has made inroads in winning over this support. The SD strategy has been to target workers, particularly women, in small towns.

SD's support was particularly strong in southern Sweden and traditional industrial towns throughout the country which have been particularly hard-hit by industrial closures and the resultant unemployment. The election of 2018 marked a considerable breakthrough for the SD in these constituencies. In some municipalities, the SD has become the largest party and has been able to exercise control over the local government. Their support in major urban areas and university towns is less impressive, although this tended to vary between city centres and the suburbs. The unemployed, who are dependent on unemployment benefits or participate in some form of support activity account for an

exceptionally high proportion of support for SD - just as they do for the Social Democrats.

Generally speaking, the party has considerable support among those who have experienced a significant decline in their economic situation, over recent decades, both directly and relative to those in employment, due to the austerity which has characterised the policies of successive governments. The same applies to those who consider themselves in danger of being made redundant or who are employed with little or no job security: the “outsiders” of the labour market are more likely to vote for SD than the “insiders”. More workers and owners of small companies vote for SD, fewer white-collar workers and farmers. The level of education also appears to be a factor. Those who have undergone higher education are less likely to vote for SD than others.

Counter-strategies

Until recently, the choice of strategy by other Swedish parties vis-à-vis the Sweden Democrats was simply to reject any form of cooperation – not even to conduct a dialogue with SD or its representatives. It must be borne in mind that SD is a party with its roots in fascism. A kind of cordon sanitaire still dominates relations with SD, although two of the centre-right parties have indicated a willingness to form a government with the support of and dependant on SD in parliament. It must be remembered that SD holds the balance of power in the parliament and has resolved several disputes between left and right over the last eight years. This has occasionally favoured the left but generally SD has tended to support proposals from the centre-right parties.

Over the years - and especially since it has become apparent that SD as a party is here to stay - mainstream parties and the trade unions have made great efforts and allocated considerable resources to combating racism in general and SD in particular through education and providing information. It must however be admitted that this has not been entirely successful since it has failed to stop the growth of SD. However, the process itself has created a knowledge base to enable us to understand right-wing populism and achieve an insight into its nature and strategies.

During the election campaign in 2018, parties focused on offering more effective integration and on combating crime. Furthermore, the election witnessed a change in social democratic strategy with slogans proclaiming a safer and stronger society. At the same time, the Social Democrats attempted first and foremost to profile themselves more offensively and more clearly in relation to welfare issues and the socioeconomic dimension in politics, in order to shift the focus away from the conflict between liberal/conservative, between libertarian/global and between authoritarian and nationalistic. The Social Democrats presented a range of initiatives prior to the election but it is too early to say whether this had any effect on the outcome. The Social Democrats and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) made a clear case for the need to sort out the labour market. It is, however, indisputable that the Social Democratic election result was better than the opinion polls had forecast with a greater number of LO members voting Social Democrat than expected.

To summarise, there is still no concerted strategy for dealing with the SD. No political party is prepared to initiate formal cooperation with it. However, two centre-right parties, which are positioned furthest to the right and are more conservative, are willing to form a government with the support of SD's votes. Other parties

ranging from the centre of the political spectrum to those on the left refuse to contemplate such a move. As a consequence, there is no uniform approach to dealing with the SD. More importantly there is no cohesive strategy for confronting them or for recovering the electoral support gained by SD in recent elections. In particular, it is becoming obvious that there is a varying degree of insight and much political discord regarding many of the issues which the SD prioritises in its desire to influence cultural policy towards a more nationalistic bias: the position of the media, in particular the public service media's role in a democracy and the intellectual freedom of the universities.

The Future

In the short term, the SD has benefitted from the post-election uncertainty and turbulence which has characterised Swedish politics, with agreement on the formation of a government so far proving elusive. According to the latest opinion polls SD is currently the second largest party. It is primarily the right-wing Moderates who have lost voters since the election.

The SD has become an established party which has grown in each election since it first entered to the parliament. This means that they will be part of the Swedish political landscape and will influence the political debate for the foreseeable future. At present there are no signs that the party will fragment or of any internal schisms. It is a party in which the current leadership has control over the party apparatus and the growing resources which the electoral successes have generated.

On the other hand, success is never eternal or given. When the current party leader and his immediate circle retire, the party could well face many new challenges. SD has succeeded in expanding its support by articulating popular discontent regarding immigration, globalisation, the EU, the culturally diverse society, and to some extent the effects of austerity on welfare. Therefore, the future of SD's status and power base is to a very great extent in the hands of the other parties: how they deal with these issues and what kind of political alternatives they offer.

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FEPS is the first progressive political foundation established at the European level. Created in 2007 and co-financed by the European Parliament, it aims at establishing an intellectual cross-road between social democracy and the European project. It puts fresh thinking at the core of its action and serves as an instrument for pan-European intellectual and political reflection.

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Policy Solutions considers it important that political research should not be intelligible or of interest to only a narrow professional audience. Therefore, Policy Solutions shares its research results in conferences, seminars and interactive websites with journalists, NGOs, international organisations, members of the diplomatic corps, leading politicians and corporate executives.

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Populism Reports

The past few years have seen a surge in the public support of populist, euroskeptical and radical parties throughout almost the entire European Union. In several member states, their popularity matches or even exceeds the level of public support of the centre-left. Even though the centre-left parties, think tanks and researchers are aware of this challenge, there is still more that could be done in this field. There is occasional research on individual populist parties in some member states, but there is no regular overview – updated on a quarterly basis – how the popularity of populist parties changes in the EU Member States, where new parties appear and old ones disappear.

That is the reason why FEPS and Policy Solutions have launched this series of reports, entitled 'Populism Report'.

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