

SWEDEN



The repercussions of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on the populist Radical Right in Sweden

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Abstract

The populist Radical Right Sweden Democrats (SD) have long been excluded from cooperation with other parties. As other parties have moved closer to the party's more restrictive migration policy, and as older party leaders from the extreme Far Right have departed, some of the arguments in support of isolating the SD have waned. However, the party is still criticized for its ambiguous attitude towards Russia. But although individual politicians have openly expressed pro-Russian views, the current SD leadership has repeatedly rejected such accusations. The party's position became increasingly relevant in 2022 when the Russian invasion of Ukraine coincided with the parliamentary elections. This article analyses the attitude of the SD towards the Putin regime and how this developed in response to the invasion of Ukraine. It also looks at how this has affected the public perception of the party and to what extent its position on Russia will continue to be important in the public debate.

Keywords: *Radical Right; Sweden Democrats; Russia; Ukraine; elections*

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Introduction

There has long been a debate about the stance of European populist Radical Right parties towards the Putin regime. Traditionally, many of them are described as pro-Russian parties and are often criticized for their admiration of the Kremlin. In Sweden, the picture has been mixed. Their political opponents have repeatedly criticized the populist Radical Right Sweden Democrats (SD) for their ambiguous attitude towards Russia. However, although individual politicians have openly expressed pro-Russia views, the leadership of the SD has repeatedly rejected such accusations.

The party's position became increasingly relevant in 2022 when the Russian invasion of Ukraine coincided with parliamentary elections. With mainstream parties on the Right having, in many ways, moved closer to the SD on immigration and law and order issues, the stance on Russia was potentially one of the key remaining obstacles to ending the party's isolation. In this report, I analyse how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has affected the SD. More specifically, I describe the party's stance towards the Kremlin and how this has developed in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Further, I discuss how the invasion has affected the public perception of the SD and how the party's position on Russia will remain relevant in the public debate. The analysis is based on available research, media reports and official party documents.

The Radical Right scene in Sweden

With the partial exception of the short-lived populist New Democracy party in the early 1990s, Sweden, unlike many other European countries, had not experienced an electorally successful populist Radical Right party at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Rydgren, 2002). Since then, the story has changed drastically. The first SD members were elected to the national parliament in 2010, and their progress ever since has been remarkable, to say the least. In fact, the party has yet to experience an electoral loss and has increased its vote share at every election since it first ran in 1988. In terms of Radical Right electoral success, Sweden is no longer an exceptional case (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019).

Even though the SD have steadily increased their support in the electorate, the party has long been completely excluded from cooperation with other parties. An important reason for this *cordon sanitaire* can be found in the SD's history. Unlike

most other parties in the populist Radical Right family in Europe, the party was founded by outright racist groups with links to neo-Nazism (Larsson & Ekman, 2001). Although the party has worked hard to build a more respectable facade, the SD's marginalization has remained. After the 2014 parliamentary elections, six parties concluded the so-called December Agreement to ensure that the SD would remain without influence while at the same time allowing a government to be formed without an explicit majority in the Riksdag (Aylott & Bolin, 2019; Bjereld et al., 2016).¹

Government formation was even more difficult after the 2018 election. The four parties of the centre-right Alliance could have formed a government if they had been willing to rely on the parliamentary support of the SD. However, two of them, the Centre Party and the Liberals, preferred the incumbent centre-left minority coalition to continue rather than make any kind of concession to the Radical Right (Teorell et al., 2020). The agreement between the Social Democrats and the two centrist liberal parties ended a decade of wide-ranging cooperation between the four parties of the Alliance. It also had implications of great importance because it was decisive in bringing the SD in from the cold. The Moderates and the Christian Democrats immediately began to initiate a policy of *détente* with SD. The *cordon sanitaire* that had prevailed until then was lifted. Later, the Liberals also decided to withdraw their support for the centre-left to reunite with their former Alliance partners.

Even though they all lost ground compared to the 2018 election, their joint election result in September 2022 with the SD was enough for a majority. Thus, they were able to form a government by the end of the year. Although the SD is not formally a member of the governing coalition, it has concluded a far-reaching agreement with the three centre-right parties, securing formal political influence for the first time (Aylott & Bolin, 2023).

The Sweden Democrats and Russia

As other parties have moved closer to the party's more restrictive migration policy, and as older party leaders from the extreme Far Right have departed, some of the arguments in support of isolating the SD have waned somewhat. For example, in recent years, the SD's stance on international cooperation and the European Union

1. The Left Party was the only other party not included in the agreement.



(EU) has come to the fore. Relatedly, there has been a recurring debate on the SD's position towards the Kremlin. Critics argue that the party, or people associated with it, have shown sympathy for Putin's government and have taken positions aligned with Russian interests. For example, a report on how the European Parliament voted on Russia-related matters in 2014 found that the SD were one of the most Russia-friendly parties (Bolin, 2015). Indeed, the two Sweden Democrats MEPs were the only Swedish representatives voting against ratification of an Association Agreement with Ukraine (Christodoulou, 2014).

Similarly, people closely associated with the SD, unlike politicians from other Swedish parties, have on several occasions participated in Russian state-supported media platforms such as Sputnik and Russia Today (RT). Researchers characterize the latter as "an opportunist channel that is used as an instrument of state defence policy to meddle in the politics of other states" (Elsawah & Howard, 2020, p. 623). In addition, there are several examples of how leading SD politicians have expressed appreciation for Russia or participated in contexts that have been interpreted as indirect support of the Putin regime. On several occasions, both former and current MPs have expressed themselves in favourable terms about election processes in Russia after being invited by the regime to function as election observers or having participated in conferences arranged by the regime (Sundbom, 2018).

Those who harboured suspicions about the SD's attitude towards the Russian regime were given further fuel when in an interview just a week before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the party's leader, Jimmie Åkesson, refused to say whether he preferred Joe Biden or Vladimir Putin as a political leader (Odmalm, 2022). The leadership of the SD has, however, denied all accusations of being a pro-Russian party. It is also hard to find Russia-friendly statements in official party documents. Russia was not mentioned in the early party programmes and election manifestos. However, in recent years, especially since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the party has become increasingly critical of Russian developments (e.g., Shekhovtsov, 2018, p. 238). For example, the latest election manifesto for 2022 states that "Sweden should advocate clear sanctions against [...] Russia and other countries with negative development" (Sweden Democrats, 2022, p. 57).

There are also signs that the SD have become more critical of Russia in practical politics. In stark contrast to the report mentioned above, a recent assessment of the degree of "assertiveness towards Russia", SD comes out as the most critical of Russia among all Swedish parties represented in the European Parliament (VoteWatch,

2022). The appreciative attitude towards the Kremlin among some of the other Radical Right parties has also been presented as a reason the SD chose not to join the same party group in the European Parliament as, for example, France's National Rally and Italy's Lega (McDonnell & Werner, 2019).

The impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Swedish domestic politics

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 made it even more pressing to fend off any accusation of complicity towards Russia. Among other things, it significantly impacted the willingness to join NATO. Although Sweden became a member of the EU in 1995, it has maintained a policy of nonalignment and did not join NATO during the Cold War like neighbouring Nordic countries, Denmark and Norway. However, relations with NATO have developed considerably. In the 1990s, Sweden began cooperating more closely with NATO on peacekeeping missions and crisis management operations. Although Sweden is not a member of NATO, it has increasingly participated in the alliance's activities and developed close relations with NATO countries (Wieslander, 2022).

Even though Sweden's relations with NATO have become closer, there has always been a party-political divide, with centre-left parties opposing NATO membership and centre-right parties being more supportive of it. As late as November 2021, the Social Democratic defence minister assured its party congress that as long there was a Social Democratic government, an application for NATO membership was unthinkable. The SD have also been against NATO accession historically, and they have instead called for increased cooperation with other Nordic countries, including developing a joint Nordic defence force (Sweden Democrats, 2019). Despite the long-standing opposition to NATO, Åkesson declared in April 2022 that the party was ready to support a Swedish application for NATO membership if Finland applied simultaneously (Arenander & Nilsson, 2022). When the Social Democrats also made a 'drastic U-turn' (Hinnfors, 2022), the Swedish government took the same path as Finland and decided to apply for NATO membership (Aylott & Bolin, 2023).

Despite SD's more openly critical stance towards the Russian regime and its new position on membership in NATO, political opponents still consider the party's position untrustworthy. That this is still thought to have a deterrent effect on the



electorate became apparent when the Social Democrats called a press conference just a week before the election to report on cases where the SD had acted in favour of Russian interests and thus posed a security risk. The Moderate prime ministerial candidate, Ulf Kristersson, was asked how he would prevent the SD's links to Russia from affecting Swedish foreign and security policy if the election resulted in a parliamentary majority for the right-wing opposition. Åkesson unsurprisingly rejected this and tweeted that the statements were reminiscent of how the opposition would be dealt with in a dictatorship. More startling, however, was that Kristersson also came to the SD's defence and argued that the Social Democratic stunt was unworthy, not least as it was the simultaneous positional changes in the Social Democrats and the SD that made a Swedish NATO application possible (Petersson, 2022). It was clear that alleged connections between SD and Russia were no longer seen as an obstacle to including the SD as part of a new political majority.

The demand for the Radical Right in the aftermath of the invasion

The last parliamentary term has been clearly marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This has meant that the main political issues of SD have been less salient in the public debate. These crises also seem to have affected support for political parties somewhat. A rally around the flag effect can be observed, where both the outbreak of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 and the Russian invasion in the spring of 2022 boosted the popularity of the governing Social Democrats (Esaiasson et al., 2021; Novus/SVT, 2022). Support for the SD also seemed to decrease somewhat in connection with the outbreak of the war, but the impact on the electoral outcome of 2022 was small. Some of the political issues that became important in the 2022 election campaign, partly because of the war, were favourable to the SD, and the party won 20.5% of the vote, becoming the second-largest party in parliament.

Despite the spectacular Swedish shift in attitude towards NATO membership and the fact that there were still parties that opposed this, the issue was absent from the election campaign. Other issues indirectly connected to the war, such as rising inflation and electricity prices, gained great importance (Aylott & Bolin, 2023). While the governing party blamed the war in Ukraine and chose to refer to it as "Putin's price hikes", the opposition argued that it was mainly about how the government had mismanaged Swedish fuel and energy policy for years. Judging by

the exit polls, the opposition benefited the most from the salience of these issues in the campaign.

The Sweden Democrat's traditional issue, immigration, came further down on the list of voters' most important issues. A possible explanation is that several other parties have altered their policies in a more restrictive direction and, in this way, narrowed the distance of the mainstream to the SD's position. In addition, it is noteworthy that the SD was positive about receiving Ukrainian refugees. According to the party, this was in line with its previous policy that Sweden should help countries in its nearby area. Åkesson (2022) also justified the position on both cultural and economic grounds as he argued that Ukraine is both religiously and culturally more similar to Sweden "compared to clan societies in the Horn of Africa" and that Ukrainian refugees differ from previous migration "of low-educated, or even completely uneducated, people". As a result, Åkesson claimed, "the burden on society, economically, socially and culturally, will not be as devastating as with previous mass immigration from culturally distant countries" (ibid.).

Concluding remarks

Despite its continuous electoral progress, the Sweden Democrats have been in the political cold for a long time. Not until the two liberal centre parties chose to support a Social Democratic government in 2018 did the Moderates and the Christian Democrats approach the SD seeking to return to office. Previously, the SD's history and attitude toward immigration had been the main reasons for excluding the party from cooperation. However, in the wake of the 2015 "refugee crisis" and the SD's electoral progress, other parties have also moved towards a more restrictive immigration policy. The SD's deviant approach to international cooperation and its ambivalent stance towards Russia have remained obstacles to it being fully accepted as a political cooperation partner.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine meant that the SD's attitude towards the Kremlin was given further attention. Officially, the party has also taken a stand against Russia's actions and for support and assistance to Ukraine. The party has even advocated a relatively generous reception of Ukrainian refugees. Given the party's very restrictive immigration policy, this can be seen as a departure from its traditional line.



Despite the clear stance on Ukraine, the SD are not yet rid of their Russia-related problems. While the current parties in government no longer see the SD's position towards Russia as problematic, both the opposition and political commentators continue to argue that the party's murky connections to Russia are an acute security risk and that the leadership should more clearly uphold a red line against any actions that are in Russia's interests (Johansson Heinö et al., 2023). The issue was given further attention again at the beginning of 2023 when a central figure in the alternative media environment around the SD, previously accused of Russian connections, helped the anti-Muslim activist Rasmus Paludan to get permission to burn a Qur'an near the Turkish embassy in Stockholm. The incident worsened already strained relations between Turkey and Sweden, further frustrating Sweden's NATO application (Rankin, 2023). In addition, political opponents criticized the SD for being "useful idiots" for the Kremlin (see, e.g., Lindberg, 2023) and not taking responsibility for people associated with the party, thus potentially serving the interests of Russia. However, the SD leadership rejected any responsibility for the incident and, more generally, any alternative media favouring Russian interests even though individuals associated with the party frequently appear in them.

Although there is much to suggest that the isolation of the SD is a thing of the past, it cannot be ruled out that the issue of NATO and, indirectly, the SD's relationship with Russia will influence these relations. There is no evidence that the SD has direct links to Russia. Nevertheless, SD members and persons associated with the party appear from time to time in contexts that can be interpreted as pro-Russian. As a result, the SD leadership probably will be wary of any pro-Russian sentiments among its ranks and will continue to reject any accusation of acting in accordance with Russian interests. However, it is doubtful that this will prevent the opposition from criticizing the party's connections to Russia.

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