

Ann-Cathrine Jungar

# The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis  
in Europe  
**Sweden**

**EUROPA**



## EUROPA

### Europe needs social democracy!

Why do we really want Europe? Can we demonstrate to European citizens the opportunities offered by social politics and a strong social democracy in Europe? This is the aim of the new Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung project »Politics for Europe«. It shows that European integration can be done in a democratic, economic and socially balanced way and with a reliable foreign policy.

The following issues will be particularly important:

- Democratic Europe
- Social and ecological transformation
- Economic and social policy in Europe
- Foreign and security policy in Europe

We focus on these issues in our events and publications. We provide impetus and offer advice to decision-makers from politics and trade unions. Our aim is to drive the debate on the future of Europe forward and to develop specific proposals to shape central policy areas. With this publication series we want to engage you in the debate on the »Politics for Europe«!

### About this publication

Sweden chose voluntary measures rather than mandatory “lockdown” restrictions to combat Covid-19. By November 2020 there had been more than 6,000 deaths. In the early phase of the pandemic there was an informal truce between the government and the opposition. Political friction grew with the increased number of deaths. The right-wing populist party the Sweden Democrats (SD) have voiced strong criticism of the Public Health Agency, the government and the nursing homes, particularly for not protecting the elderly. The public support for the SD decreased initially, but is now back to pre-pandemic levels.

### About the author

**Ann-Cathrine Jungar** is an associate professor in political science at the Department of Social Sciences at Södertörn University in Stockholm. She has a PhD from the Department of Government at Uppsala University. She has been a research leader at the Centre of Baltic and East European Studies, and Director of Studies at the Baltic and East European Graduate School. She has published on parliamentarism, government coalition and national parliament. Her current research deals with right-wing populism in Europe with a specific focus on the Nordic countries.

### Responsible for this publication within the FES

**Dr Philipp Fink**, head of FES in the Nordic Countries

**Dr Thomas Manz**, head of FES in France

**Dr Tobias Mörschel**, head of FES in Italy

Further information on the project can be found here:

[fes.de/c19rex](https://fes.de/c19rex)

# The Profiteers of Fear?

## Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe Sweden

In its response to the COVID-19 pandemic Sweden chose a different strategy to combat the virus than most other European countries, opting for voluntary measures rather than mandatory “lockdown” restrictions. Chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell of the Swedish Public Health Agency advised the public to observe handwashing and distancing recommendations, work from home if possible, and avoid unnecessary travel. But public institutions, education and the service sector were kept open as far as possible. High schools and universities provided online teaching. So there was a deliberate balancing act between the costs of isolation and the need to control the spread of the virus. It is also relevant that Sweden has no constitutional possibility to declare a state of emergency to allow a national lockdown.

### INCREASING DEATH TOLL, DECLINING SUPPORT

The Swedish strategy enjoyed strong public support: It waned as the number of deaths increased during the early summer. The support increased again during the autumn: In April 68 per cent stated that they trusted the Public Health Agency, in June the figure had decreased to 56 per cent, and in October it is back to 68 per cent. The outcomes of the strategy to date have been disappointing. By November there had been more than 6,000 deaths, almost 50 percent of them in the Stockholm area. 90 per cent of those who have died with COVID-19 have been older than 70, many of them living in nursing homes (DN 30.10.2020). Sweden’s rate of 60 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, is far higher than the other four Nordic countries. Yet the economic impact has been similar to other countries that adopted a stricter approach. Official and media investigations suggest several explanations for the high number of deaths in nursing homes: precarious employment conditions deterring staff with mild symptoms from staying home, a shortage of protective equipment, inadequate pandemic preparedness, slow responses, and a culture of silence. Chief epidemiologist Tegnell said in an interview that the poor preparation of nursing homes had come as a great surprise. All in all, the authorities have been accused of misjudging the trade-off between protecting every individual and ameliorating the economic, social and other consequences of the pandemic.

### THE SWEDISH OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE FOR FAR-RIGHT MOBILISATION

Given their authoritarian ideologies, one might have expected European right-wing populist parties to support the strict measures imposed by most of their governments to tackle the pandemic and its social consequences. In fact, the populist anti-establishment strand within their ideas led them to criticise the strict “lockdown” measures and the experts behind them.

In that context, Sweden’s voluntarist strategy created an unusual situation for the far-right Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD). Initially, the Sweden Democrats were part of the political consensus around the laid-back Swedish approach. As the number of deaths increased and public support for SD declined, the party became more confrontational. It criticised the failure to impose stricter measures and blamed the government and its experts for the large number of deaths.

### HOW THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS CHANGED THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Compared to other European right-populist parties, SD was a latecomer. It made its parliamentary breakthrough in 2010 with 5.7 percent of the vote, which increased to 13 percent in 2014. In the 2018 elections the Sweden Democrats received 17.5 percent of the vote, making them the third-largest parliamentary party. The other parties have pursued an isolationist strategy, referring to SD’s extremist roots and its positions on migration and integration. For a long time none of the other parliamentary parties were prepared to negotiate or cooperate with SD. This situation changed after the 2018 parliamentary elections, which left SD in a position of strength: neither the centre-left nor the centre-right has a majority without SD.

The outcome was a minority coalition of the Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokraterna, SDP) and the Green Party (Miljöpartiet) relying on the support of the Liberals (Liberalerna) and the Centre Party (Centerpartiet). The opposition was divided, with the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet) to the left of the coalition, and the Moderate Party (Moderaterna), the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna) and the Sweden Democrats on the right. The pandemic thus encountered a com-

pletely new political context. In the early phase there was an informal truce between the government and the opposition. The opposition parties voiced little criticism and in return Prime Minister Stefan Löfven regularly consulted them on the handling of the pandemic and its consequences.

## SWEDEN DEMOCRATS: THE PANDEMIC AS A MASSACRE

Political friction grew with the number of deaths. The Sweden Democrats concentrated on the issue of eldercare and the death toll in nursing homes, particularly in the Stockholm area, which was worst hit. SD leader Jimmie Åkesson used combat metaphors, describing the Swedish strategy as: "... a massacre. Thousands of people have died. Because of poor judgement by those responsible." (Aftonbladet 11.06.2020). In a parliamentary debate called by SD and the Left Party, the SD deputy Ann-Christine From Utterstedt characterised the failure to protect older people as a modern *ättestupa* or ritual senicide.<sup>1</sup>

The Sweden Democrats held the care homes responsible for failing to protect their residents. They pointed to a lack of equipment and material and inadequate professional and language skills among staff and demanded a commission of inquiry. While acknowledging that the health sector depends on migrant labour, SD demands fluency in Swedish be a condition of employment in eldercare. SD reiterated this demand during the pandemic and other parties that had previously criticised it now raised similar concerns.

The Sweden Democrats also criticised the use of eldercare as an integration project, in the sense of a low-threshold entry to the labour market for immigrants lacking qualifications. In other words, the party was blaming the nursing home deaths at least partly on supposed failures of integration – on the basis that fluency in Swedish had not been a requirement for employment. In fact, immigrant communities, particularly Somalis and Iraqis, and residents of areas with large immigrant populations have been overrepresented among COVID-19 deaths. The reasons for this include lack of information in relevant languages, cramped housing conditions and more exposed work environments.

## THE END OF THE PARTY TRUCE

By early June 2020, the party truce was definitely over for the Sweden Democrats. In an opinion piece in the largest Swedish newspaper, Dagens Nyheter, SD leader Jimmie Åkesson demanded the resignation of chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell for his failed pandemic response. Åkesson claimed

that the Swedish strategy was based on guesswork rather than evidence and argued that the country should have taken similar measures to other more successful countries. "The Swedish government has from day one chosen a different path than other countries. The strategy has not been to suppress the virus, but to let it spread freely while trying to protect risk groups. It has been a complete failure." (Åkesson 07.06.2020).

He also asserted that the government had hidden behind the civil service to avoid criticism and called on Prime Minister Stefan Löfven and his government to take political responsibility. As well as demanding stronger measures, the SD leader claimed that Anders Tegnell was politically responsible. This is not the case, as Tegnell is a career civil servant. The Sweden Democrats are the only Swedish parliamentary party to advocate the use of face masks in public places where it is difficult to keep a distance, in line with the WHO's recommendation. "Many other countries do and so should we," Åkesson said. Here SD is indirectly criticising the government and the authorities for not introducing rules requiring face-masks. The party has also proposed that Sweden should start producing its own vaccines in order to avoid becoming dependent on other countries.

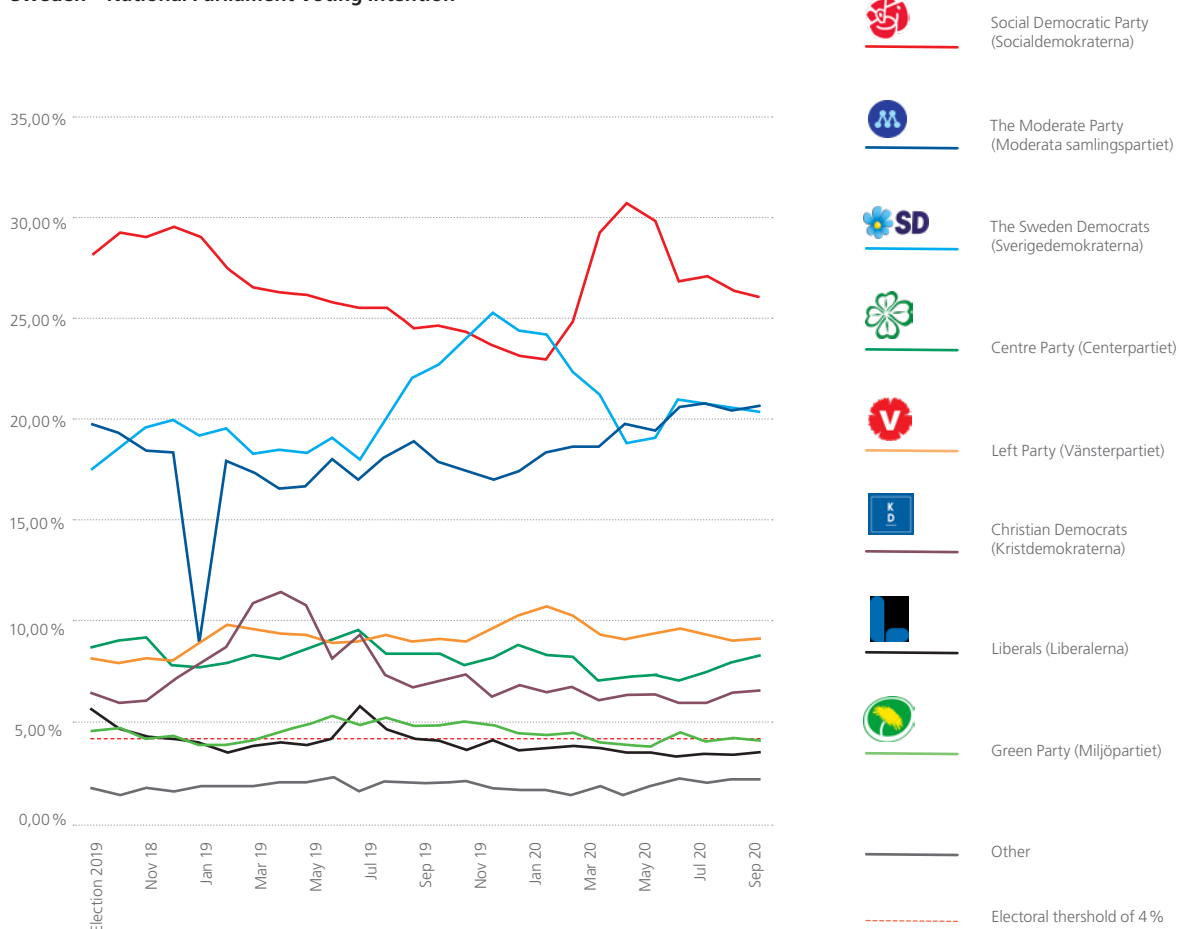
Right-wing extremist organisations like as the Nordic Resistance Movement have characterised the pandemic as one element of a systemic collapse, in line with their Nazi ideology. But the promulgation of conspiracy theories by the far right appears to be a marginal phenomenon in Sweden. The think tank Frivärld's report on disinformation during the pandemic found that – unlike far-right media in the United States – Swedish right-wing extremist websites contained virtually no conspiracy theories (Oksanen/Sundborn 2020). Henrik Sundborn, one of the authors, told the newspaper Expressen that they cannot explain why (Expressen 23.03.2020). The public belief in conspiracy theories in relation to the pandemic has been analysed. Whereas 70 per cent stated the corona virus is a natural virus, 13 per cent believed that it was a biological weapon manufactured by people. Lower educated, politically uninterested people with low trust in politics were more likely to believe in this conspiracy theory. Sympathisers with the SD were more likely to belong to this group: 10 per cent of the sympathisers of the SD and six percent of those who supported the social democrats believe that the corona virus is manmade (Ekengren Oscarsson / Strömbäck 2020). Seven per cent of those who believed in conspiracy theories stated that they supported other political parties than those presently represented in the parliament.

## REFUSAL OF SD SUPPORT FOR THE EU RECOVERY PACKAGE

The Swedish government has passed additional budgets and new legislation to stimulate the economy and to support individuals and enterprises affected by the pandemic. However, according to the Sweden Democrats it has not done enough. The SD argue that "The sky is the limit" in these extraordinary times: funds should be channelled especially to small enterprises and vulnerable industries; the state should

<sup>1</sup> This refers to the myth that in prehistoric times, old people threw themselves off cliffs, or were thrown when they were became to support themselves. Sveriges riksdag, Särskild debatt om åtgärder för att hindra smittspridning inom äldreomsorgen (2020-05-29). [http://193.11.1.138/sv/webb-tv/video/sarskild-debatt/sarskild-debatt-om-atgarder-for-att-hindra\\_H7C120200529sd](http://193.11.1.138/sv/webb-tv/video/sarskild-debatt/sarskild-debatt-om-atgarder-for-att-hindra_H7C120200529sd)

Figure 1  
Sweden – National Parliament Voting Intention



Source: Yle (27.10.2020)

fully cover layoffs caused by COVID-19; and unemployment benefits should be increased and eligibility broadened (SD 25.03.2020).

As a soft EU-sceptic party the Sweden Democrats no longer call for Sweden to withdraw from the EU, but they are critical of transferring more powers and resources to Brussels. The SD consequently opposed both the increase in Sweden's net contribution to the EU budget and the EU recovery plan to tackle the effects of the pandemic. However, the radical right is not alone on this: criticism of the €80 billion recovery package is much broader. Together with the Netherlands, Denmark and Austria, Sweden belongs to the so-called Frugal Four that are traditionally sceptical of increasing the EU's fiscal powers and budget.

Although he acknowledges the need for a recovery fund to help EU economies get back on their feet, Prime Minister Löfven would have preferred the EU recovery package to have been slanted more strongly to loans rather than grants. SD wanted no recovery fund at all, as it means transferring powers and resources to EU institutions. SD MEP Charlie Weimers pointed out that the recovery package would dramati-

cally increase Sweden's net payments and give the EU a greater say on budgetary matters, SD believes should reside with the individual member states (Weimers 25.03.2020). The Left Party agreed with SD that as a non-euro state Sweden should not contribute to the EU recovery fund.

## THE NORMALISATION OF SD

The pandemic had two contradictory effects on SD. Its support in opinion polls has fallen, while its parliamentary status has improved. Its parliamentary group leader Henrik Vinge said in May that the pandemic had been a turning point for the party and contributed to a parliamentary normalisation (SVT 02.05.2020). The previously isolated SD was invited to the prime minister's weekly meetings on the pandemic situation together with the other parliamentary parties. SD leader Åkesson highlighted how the relationship with Moderate Party leader Ulf Kristersson had intensified, with contact on a weekly basis. Not only did the pandemic speed up an already ongoing process of normalisation, but contacts also intensified with potential partners in the conservative block challenging for power in the next parliamentary elections in 2022.

Support for SD fell during the pandemic as citizens – as in other countries – relied behind government during the pandemic. Political debate was also dominated by the pandemic and its economic repercussions, largely squeezing out the issues – crime and integration – that had previously dominated. The electoral growth of the SD, like that of other far-right populist parties – has been closely tied to their political mobilisation against migration and European integration and for a tougher stance on law and order.

The pandemic has shifted the political debate to health, welfare and economic recovery, to the benefit of the government and particularly the larger coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party. The SDP increased its support from 25 per cent to 30 per cent in April and May, but it slowly decreased again during the summer. The SD went from record high support of around 25 per cent – sometimes even surpassing the SDP during the autumn 2019 and spring 2020 – back down to figures around its electoral result in 2018. Åkesson said: “We tend to lose in these circumstances.” “There is no political conflict, we have more or less had a political truce for four months. It is a difficult balancing act. No-one knows what is right or wrong. We have tried to criticise the government, but right now nothing flies. Sweden is united and that is basically something good.” (SVT 20.03.2020)

The effects of the pandemic on the political parties appear to be short-lived. In autumn 2020 the political debate has increasingly returned to “politics as usual” with issues including crime, law and order, and, last but not least, labour market legislation. The parties’ respective support in the polls also seems to be reverting to pre-pandemic levels too. The question is: Will the second wave change the situation?

# References

**Aftonbladet** (11.06.2020): "Åkesson om kontakten med M-ledaren", Aftonbladet, 11 June 2020. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/samhalle/a/0n5Vq0/akesson-om-kontakten-med-m-ledaren-vi-hors-varje-vecka> (11 June 2020).

**Dagens Nyheter** (DN 30.10.2020) "Förtroendet för Tegnell i topp när smittan ökar. <https://www.dn.se/sverige/fortroendet-for-tegnell-i-topp-nar-smittan-okar/> (30 October 2020).

**Jimmie Åkesson** (07.06.2020), Tegnell måste ta ansvar för misstagen och avgå, in: Dagens Nyheter, 7 June 2020. <https://www.dn.se/debatt/tegnell-maste-ta-ansvar-for-misstagen-och-avga/> (7 June 2020).

**Expressen** (23.03.2020) Så används coronakrisen av högrextrema krafter, in: Expressen, 23 March 2020. <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/sa-anvands-coronakrisen-av-hogerextremistiska-krafter/> (7 June 2020).

**Patrik Oksanen; Henrik Sundborn** (2020): Informationspandemi: Desinformation i skuggan av coronakrisen, Stockholm.

**Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson; Jesper Strömbäck** (2020): Covid 19: Kunskap och konspirationer. SOM undersökningen om covid. SOM institutet. Göteborgs universitet, <https://www.gu.se/sites/default/files/2020-10/7.%20Covid-19%20-%20kunskap%20och%20konspirationer.pdf>

**Sverigedemokraterna** (SD 25.03.2020): Regeringen gör inte nog. Här är vår krisplan, in: Expressen 25 March 2020, <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/sd-regeringen-gor-inte-nog-har-ar-var-krisplan/> (7. June 2020).

**Sveriges Television** (SVT 20.03.2020): Interview with Jimmie Åkesson, SVT, 20 March 2020. <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/akesson-tror-att-vi-missgynnas-i-sadan-har-kriser> (07.06.2020).

**Sveriges Television** (SVT 02.05.2020): Interview with Henrik Vinge, SVT, 2 May 2020. <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/coronakrisen-kan-bli-vandpunkt-for-sd> (07.06.2020).

**Yle** (27.10.2020) Yles partimätning: <https://svenska.yle.fi/artikel/yles-partimatning> (27.10.2020).

## Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany with a rich tradition dating back to its foundation in 1925. Today, it remains loyal to the legacy of its namesake and campaigns for the core ideas and values of social democracy: freedom, justice and solidarity. It has a close connection to social democracy and free trade unions.

FES promotes the advancement of social democracy, in particular by:

- political educational work to strengthen civil society;
- think tanks;
- international cooperation with our international network of offices in more than 100 countries;
- support for talented young people;
- maintaining the collective memory of social democracy with archives, libraries and more.

## IMPRINT

© 2020

**FES Rom in cooperation with FES Paris.**

The statements and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author and do not represent an official opinion of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

Front cover: ©Noé

Design concept: [www.bergsee-blau.de](http://www.bergsee-blau.de)

Layout: [www.zumweissenroessl.de](http://www.zumweissenroessl.de)



## EUROPA

In many countries the COVID-19 crisis had initially led to increased trust in government. The restrictions to personal freedoms, curfews, restrictions on social contacts, the closure of large segments of the economy as well as the widening of executive powers in many countries was largely accepted and supported by the public. However, frustration and distrust of government have been increasing the longer the restrictions have been in place. Some countries, such as Germany, witnessed large demonstrations against the counter measures. Moreover, the wide dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories are influencing the public debate on how to handle the pandemic.

Reports from Sweden, Finland, Italy, France, Spain, and Germany – all countries with large or growing right-wing populist movements and parties explore the question, if right-wing populism in Europe has been able to benefit from the Corona-crisis. A synopsis interprets and classifies the developments in the individual countries in a comparative perspective.

Further information on the project can be found here:

**[fes.de/c19rex](https://fes.de/c19rex)**