

LABOUR AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

# SWEDISH DISCONTENT

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This report summarises the book *Det svenska missnöjet* (Swedish discontent), which is based on over 300 interviews made in socio-economically disadvantaged locations in Sweden where the right-wing populist party – the Sweden Democrats – enjoys strong support.



The reports reveals how immigration is used as a scapegoat for people's poor life opportunities, thinned-out infrastructure, failing public services and fear of crime.

## SWEDISH DISCONTENT



This report summarises the findings from over 300 conversations conducted with people. The report describes the Sweden of the discontent – in their own words.



Poor infrastructure, low levels of public service, inadequate health care, poor prospects on the labor market, low levels of social welfare and a feeling of subjective insecurity are mentioned by the interviewees.



While none of this has anything to do with Swedish immigration policy, in those places where people are dissatisfied, immigration has always been addressed as the cause of their dissatisfaction. Instead, the policies that in recent years have slashed taxes, eroded welfare systems and allowed a market logic to enter the welfare system have escaped blame.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
<https://nordics.fes.de/>



# Contents

**INTRODUCTION**..... 2

**BRIEF SUMMARY OF OUR METHOD**..... 3

**CONTEXT: DECADES OF AUSTERITY POLICIES AND RISING INEQUALITY** ..... 5

**FORGOTTEN PLACES**..... 7

**DISSATISFACTION WITH THE WELFARE STATE** ..... 8

**LACK OF SAFETY** ..... 10

**A XENOPHOBIC NARRATIVE**..... 12

**THE OTHER REALITY OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA**..... 14

**CONCLUSIONS**..... 15

References..... 17

# INTRODUCTION

Discontent is on the rise in Sweden. Over the past decade, the proportion of people who believe Sweden is heading in the wrong direction has risen to record levels – according to the comprehensive annual surveys of Swedes' values and attitudes conducted by the SOM Institute at the University of Gothenburg (Andersson et al. 2020). However, discontent is not growing among everyone, and not to the same extent everywhere in the country. There are groups of Swedes who are more discontented than others, and there is a geography of discontent.

Swedes with lower incomes and lower levels of education are more likely to be discontented. And people living in low-income areas in sparsely populated rural parts of the country or in socially deprived areas in big cities are more likely than others to say that they are discontented with their situation, and that developments in Sweden are heading in the wrong direction (Andersson et al. 2020).

This discontent has already had major political consequences. Not least because one party, the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats, has been able to profit greatly from Swedish discontent. The discontented have flocked together in the Sweden Democrats, redrawing the country's political map.

The Sweden Democrats first entered the Swedish *Riksdag* (parliament) with 5.7 per cent of the vote in 2006. Sweden was no longer an exception. Up to that point, Sweden was one of the few countries in Western Europe without a right-wing populist party in its parliament (Rydgren/Meiden 2019). In the most recent elections in 2018, the Sweden Democrats won 17.5 per cent.

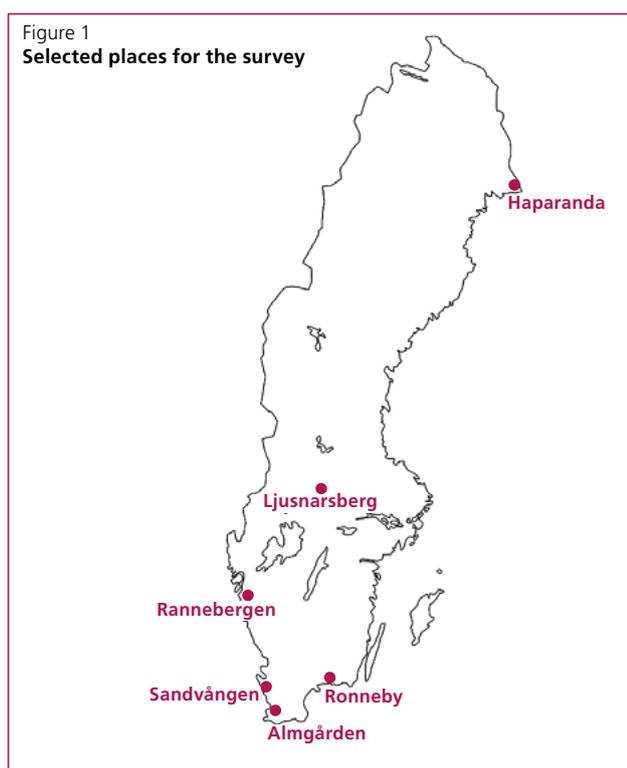
In the autumn of 2019, the authors from Arena Idé took a closer look at Swedish discontent. They wanted to give the discontented people a voice. The interviewees provided information about their daily lives, what they thought about their neighbourhoods and towns and how they saw Sweden. The findings of the survey were published in a book with the title *Det svenska missnöjet* (Swedish Discontent).

The book has received a great deal of attention, and several editions have been printed. Its main findings of the book are summarized in this paper for an international audience.

## BRIEF SUMMARY OF OUR METHOD

Political discontent should be understood as the consequence of unmet expectations on an aggregate level, according to political scientist Tommy Möller (2010). From this perspective, the most relevant starting point in a study on political discontent is people's expectations of what Sweden they desire, rather than how Sweden compares to other countries. People are more discontented when their expectations are not met, when they feel that things are heading in the wrong direction. In everyday life, in the place where they live, in their country.

Six socio-economically disadvantaged constituencies whose inhabitants have a low educational level and where incomes are below the Swedish average were selected. We also chose places displaying a comparatively high level of support for the Sweden Democrats in the 2018 parliamentary elections. These included two rural municipalities (Haparanda and Ljusnarsberg), two small towns (Ronneby and Landskrona) and areas in two large cities: Rannebergen in Gothenburg, and Holma and Almgården in Malmö (see Figure 1).



In total, 1,911 households were contacted – 1,242 did not reply, 351 people said they did not want to participate and 318 agreed to be interviewed. The interviews lasted between seven minutes and over an hour and a half. The interviewees remain anonymous. The answers were logged and the interviewees who gave their permission were also recorded. These interviews were later transcribed.

All interviewees were asked the same open questions, 15 in total. The questions were about what the interviewees see as working well and badly – in Sweden, in their local community and in their own daily lives. The interviewees were also asked who was most likely to solve the problems they experienced in their daily lives, and who was most likely to solve Sweden's problems. They were asked to try to put together an election pledge and say something about what makes them anxious about the future and what gives them hope. Each person was also asked a number of questions about their relationship with the media, where they get their information, whether they trust the media, and what makes them prefer the media they trust. Finally, they were asked two questions about their own political engagement: "How interested are you in politics?" and "Did you vote in the last election?"

The authors are deeply grateful to all the people who chose to talk to them and agreed to be interviewed. In their stairwells, on their front steps, in their kitchens. The ambition of the study was to try to reproduce their stories – in their own words.

### INSPIRATION FROM A FRANCO-GERMAN STUDY

This study is inspired by an interview study conducted by door-to-door canvassing in 12 socio-economically deprived locations in Germany and France in September and October 2017. The Franco-German study was carried out by the German progressive independent think tank *Das Progressive Zentrum*, supported by the research company Liegey Muller Pons, in rural, provincial and metropolitan areas. In all places, a large proportion of voters had voted for one of the following xenophobic parties of discontent: Alternative for Germany (AfD) or National Rally (at that time still known as the National Front) in France.

A total of 500 interviewees were asked similar questions to those posed by Emmanuel Macron during his French presidential campaign in 2017. There were 11 non-multiple choice questions. The key question was: “What do you think is a problem right now?” Interviewers asked people to describe what they perceived to be problems in their country, in their place of residence, and in their daily lives.

The results of the Franco-German study were published in the report *Return to the politically abandoned – Conversations in right-wing populist strongholds in Germany and France* by political scientist Johannes Hillje (Hillje 2018).

This study is the first to investigate discontented places in Sweden using the same methodology. In addition, we supplemented the questions asked in the Franco-German study with questions on the interviewees’ media consumption and their trust in the media.

## CONTEXT: DECADES OF AUSTERITY POLICIES AND RISING INEQUALITY

Compared to other countries, Sweden is a country with low levels of inequality. But between 1985 and 2013, inequality rose faster in Sweden than in any other OECD country (OECD 2015), and today Sweden is ranked only ninth in the equality index of the 35 OECD member countries (OECD 2020).

In the post-war period, inequality in Sweden was suppressed by strong state influence over the economy, taxation of capital, capital controls, financial regulation and a large public sector. The so-called ‘solidarity salary policy’ also contributed to income equalisation. Behind the policy was a trade union strategy to even out income inequalities. Employees in companies with high productivity held back their salary demands in central salary negotiations, to support increases for employees in the public sector and in companies with low productivity.

In 1990/91, Sweden was hit by a severe banking and financial crisis. The consequences of this crisis left their mark throughout the 1990s and saw the start of a number of neoliberal reforms that significantly changed the playing field for equality in Sweden.

One of the key changes was that the *Riksbank* (Sweden’s central bank) became independent and that its inflation target took precedence over the goal of full employment (Riksbanken 2020). In 1980, unemployment in Sweden was around two per cent. It rose to over eight per cent between 1993 and 1997 (Statistiska centralbyrån 2005), and has fluctuated between just under six to just over eight per cent since 2001 (Statistiska centralbyrån 2020a). Today, Sweden has the highest employment rate in the EU at 80.8 per cent (Eurostat 2021a), but also ranks first in terms of unemployment at 8.3 per cent (Eurostat 2021b). A large number of people are employed, but many who want to work and are able to work cannot find a job.

Since the 1980s, there profound structural change affected the economy and employment. Swedish companies had become increasingly integrated into global value chains. Currency restrictions were abolished in 1989. Sweden voted to join the EU in 1994, and since 1995, Swedish companies have had access to the European Single Market. Globalisation has contributed to rising income inequality, and the widening of Swedish inequality is thus also to some extent part of an international trend (Lindgren Åsbrink et al. 2019).

One of the drivers of this development was the reversal of the union’s wage setting strategy. In order to ensure the competitiveness of the Swedish export sectors and to control inflation, wage agreements in these sectors were considered a binding upper limit for the other branches mainly oriented towards the domestic economy.

In the decades after the Second World War, high tax rates helped to reduce income inequality, and tax revenues could be used to expand the public sector. In 1990, Sweden had the highest public expenditure as a percentage of GDP of all OECD countries. When what was known as the Lindbeck Commission presented its report in 1993, its members noted that the proportion of public employees in the labour force had increased from 20 per cent in 1970 to 35 per cent in 1985 (Lindbeck et al. 1993, p. 9). Since then, public expenditure has increased in almost all countries (on average, spending has increased by 3.4 percentage points, from an average of 16.7 per cent of GDP in 1990 to an average of 20.1 per cent of GDP in 2018). In Sweden, public expenditure has instead fallen, and the country is now ranked seventh in the OECD after France, Belgium, Finland, Denmark, Italy and Austria (OECD 2019).

When the then Social Democratic Minister of Finance Magdalena Andersson received a report from a comprehensive equality enquiry in 2019 (Molander 2019), she was asked what had contributed most to the rise in income inequality in Sweden. She highlighted changes in tax policy. What has been decisive, according to Andersson, was ‘the abolition of the wealth tax and the inheritance tax, and the changes to the 3:12 rules [for corporate taxation] that allowed high-income earners to receive very large incomes at very low tax rates.’ ‘Alongside this, our social insurance systems have not kept up,’ she added (Heimersson 2020).

### WIDENED GAP DUE TO CENTRE-RIGHT GOVERNMENTS’ POLICIES

Between 2006 and 2014, Sweden was governed by a centre-right coalition government. Known as the Alliance, it consisted of the liberal-conservative Moderates, the liberal Centre Party, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats. The Alliance implemented tax reforms that drove up income inequality even more. The most important reforms were a

number of tax deductions for earners, i.e. deductions from tax on earned income. Such deductions for earners widened the gap in disposable income between those who had earned income (and could therefore make deductions), and those who received their income from unemployment insurance, sickness benefits or pensions and were not entitled to make tax deductions. At the same time, access to social benefits such as unemployment- and sickness benefits were restricted and the caps on benefit levels were introduced.

Dal Bó et al. (2018) have described how this widened the gap between labour market insiders and outsiders, and between those who benefited and those who lost due to the Alliance government's policies. The thinking behind the reforms was precisely that: to increase the gap between those who worked and those who didn't. It was hoped that a greater gap would incentivise the unemployed and those on sick leave to take up employment by making it 'more profitable to work' and thus 'reduce exclusion'. (Nya Moderaterna 2006). To the extent that it was possible to influence the unemployed and those on sick leave to take up work using this type of incentive, it came at the price of greater downward pressure on salaries and working conditions, which in itself contributed to increased income inequality.

Furthermore, Inequality between the working class and socio-economically advantaged groups has been reinforced by a radical change in the Swedish education system. Since the early 1990s, Sweden's schools have been subjected to a neoliberal market experiment that has contributed to greater school segregation. In the early 1990s, the centre-right government introduced a voucher system, under which school funding accompanied each individual pupil. Since then, privately run but publicly funded schools have had the right to set up anywhere and to have their own non-transparent waiting lists. This has allowed privately run, for-profit schools, known as independent schools, to establish themselves in neighbourhoods where pupils are easy to teach – because they have parents with a high level of education, for example. At the same time, privately run schools have been entitled to the same funding as schools run by local authorities (the municipalities), which on average have pupils with greater needs. This has drained resources from municipal schools and in particular affected working-class children and immigrant pupils, who are over-represented in municipal schools. Schools with pupils who have extensive needs, mainly due to the lower educational level of their parents, have received fewer resources, while socio-economically privileged pupils have benefited. In a report, Arena Idé has described how school segregation not only affects metropolitan areas, but is a growing problem throughout the country (Kornhall/Bender 2018).

Inequality has increased in almost all OECD countries and the growing inequality in Sweden is thus part of an international trend. But the disproportionate rise in inequality in Sweden is the consequence of a number of domestic policy decisions. These decisions have benefited high-income

earners and put those in the lower half of the income scale at a disadvantage.

Overall, the changes in the Swedish social security system have been so great that it is no longer possible to describe Sweden as a welfare state, argue Daniel Barr and Joakim Palme (Barr/Palme 2021). The Nordic welfare states tend to be characterised by universal social security systems that insure citizens against loss of income in the event of illness, unemployment or retirement. The systems are financed jointly by contributions based on income, and the principle is that benefits should also be linked to income. The higher the salary, the higher the sickness and unemployment benefits, and the higher the pension. This is no longer the case, Barr and Palme argue, because compensation and benefit levels have failed to keep pace with real salary growth. Today, for example, as many as 40 per cent of earners have incomes beyond the maximum replacement rate guaranteed by health insurance in case of sickness. They therefore face large income losses in case of illness (Barr/Palme 2021). In the case of the size of public transfers (including child benefit, social assistance, disability benefits, pensions, unemployment and sickness benefits) in relation to GDP, Sweden now ranks 15th in the EU, behind not only all the other Nordic countries, but also behind countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. (Försäkringskassan 2021:18).

## FORGOTTEN PLACES

'The place is simply dying out, slowly but surely.'

It is not hard to understand why a person in the village of Ställdalen in the rural municipality of Ljusnarsberg would say this. The first thing you see when you get off the train in Ställdalen is a row of abandoned blocks of flats. The windows of the buildings are empty, and the facade facing the road consists of boarded-up shop windows: an abandoned supermarket, a pizzeria long since closed, a former florist's.

In the 1960s, Ställdalen had 1,500 inhabitants. Forty years later, the village is only a third of the size. In the early 2010s, refugees rekindled the hope that Ställdalen would grow again. An resourceful entrepreneur managed to rent out the flats to the Swedish Migration Agency as accommodation for asylum seekers and open the previously closed supermarket. Six hundred asylum seekers lived in Ställdalen when the numbers were at their peak. Refugees were then in the majority in the village.

In autumn 2019, when the interviews were conducted, there was not much hope left. Almost all the asylum seekers have moved out and the flats are falling into disrepair – the supermarket has once again closed. There is broken glass and rubbish in the stairwells. The front doors of several flats have been smashed in.

Instead of refugee families starting a new life in Sweden a new kind of newcomer had started to arrive in Ställdalen: disadvantaged people with social problems who had been helped by the social services in their home municipalities to rent cheap accommodation in the village, so-called social dumping. People with addiction problems who had been evicted for rent arrears and who, instead of a subsidised flat in their home municipality, had been offered a rental contract in Ställdalen. The village was first a refugee reception centre, now it has become the last stop for people with nowhere else to go. The locals had no say in any of this – all the decisions were made over their heads.

The lack of a local grocery store comes up in almost all the interviews in Ställdalen.

*'There should be a small supermarket here,' says a 44-year-old woman in Ställdalen, thinking of the elderly who may not be able to drive, 'just to be able to go and buy some milk and a loaf of bread.'*

One man remembers moving to Ställdalen in the 1980s and how much more vibrant he found the place back then.

*'In 1987, when I moved here, we had a post office and a bank. There was dancing in Folkets Park (the people's park) – I don't think that ever happens anymore,' he says.*

The closed supermarket stands as a symbol of a forgotten community and a village that no longer counts.

The austerity policies of recent decades have contributed to a feeling that the state has abandoned rural areas. Authorities such as the social insurance agency (*Försäkringskassan*) and the Public Employment Service (*Arbetsförmedlingen*) have closed their local offices and centralised their activities in larger urban areas. According to an estimate made by the Fackförbundet ST trade union, in 1997 the Public Employment Service, the social insurance agency, the Swedish Police, the Enforcement Authority, the Migration Agency, the Tax Agency, the Pensions Agency, the Swedish Mapping, Cadastral and Land Registration Authority and the Swedish Board of Student Finance, all public authorities, had a total of 1,559 service points throughout Sweden. Twenty years later, this number had fallen to 982, a reduction of 37 per cent. The physical accessibility of state services is deteriorating with people being increasingly referred to web-based services (Moberg 2019).

## DISSATISFACTION WITH THE WELFARE STATE

The perception of the people living in these areas is that they have been abandoned by society. This also applies to the welfare state.

In fact, disparities in access to health care have widened between urban and rural areas and between socio-economically strong and weak areas in Sweden (Andersson et al. 2021). This is particularly due to another neoliberal-inspired reform. Since 2010, what are known as ‘choice of care systems’ (*vårdvals*) have been compulsory in primary care throughout the country. The overarching aim of these systems has been to ensure people’s ‘freedom of choice’ by giving privately run but publicly funded health care providers the right to freely establish themselves in a similar way to privately run schools. This has led to an over-establishment of health care centres in socio-economically robust areas, while there is an under-establishment in sparsely populated areas and in socio-economically weak metropolitan areas (Dahlgren/Pelling 2020).

Even back in 2012, what was then the Swedish Agency for Health Care Analysis, found that 88 per cent of the privately-run health care centres established in the first few years after the mandatory introduction of choice of care systems were located in areas that already had a good range of services. At the same time, a 2014 audit by the Swedish National Audit Office showed that the choice of care reform led to 196 areas with a total of a quarter of a million inhabitants having to travel a longer distance to the nearest health care centre. Access to health care had decreased most in areas and locations with a low average income (Riksrevisionen 2014). In 2020, the National Board of Health and Welfare stated that people living in a metropolitan area were having access to more and better care than others when suffering from common diseases such as strokes or diabetes. (Socialstyrelsen 2020).

In our interview study, the most common everyday problems concern the individual’s own health and that of their relatives.

Many say they worry that their health will deteriorate. Will my back hold up? Will I be able to see a doctor when I need to?

*‘The biggest problem in my daily life? That would be all my illnesses,’* says a 59-year-old woman in Sandvången in Landskrona.

A 50-year-old woman in the same neighbourhood responds with a single word to the question of what the biggest problem in her daily life is: *‘Pain’*.

As a result, people worry that they will have to wait a long time for an ambulance to arrive, or to see a doctor. A woman in Haparanda gives an example.

*‘Just yesterday, I met a lady who had fallen while I was out walking in central Haparanda. I called the ambulance service, and we had to wait 45 minutes. Doesn’t seem right to me.’*

A 59-year-old woman in Sandvången says that the orthopaedic surgeon would be the person who could most easily solve her day-to-day problems. But it’s *‘one to two years’* wait, *‘I found out ten days ago,’* she says. *‘Am I supposed to live on painkillers for another two years? [...] The pain is terrible.’*

After personal health issues and dissatisfaction with the health care system, trouble making ends meet is the most common day-to-day problem. Many of those interviewed, especially those living on a pension or social security benefits such as sick leave or unemployment benefit, are concerned about their finances – because their pension is small, or because the payments from the social insurance agency are insufficient.

People talk about how they have to ‘scrimp and save’ to make their pensions last for the whole month, despite a lifetime of work.

*‘Making the money go far enough.’* This is the biggest problem in the daily life of a 69-year-old woman who lives on a *‘pauper’s pension’*, as she puts it. She receives just over 9,000 Swedish kronor (approx. 900 euros) a month.

However, it is not only pensioners and the sick who experience financial vulnerability. Working people also report that they fear that the money they earn will not be enough to cover their bills.

*‘I’m a freelancer, and it’s hard to earn enough money,’* says a 26-year-old woman in Landskrona.

*‘If you get a normal salary of 18,000 kronor (approx. 1,800 euros) and live alone, it isn’t enough for bills and so on. Take*

*me: I have a flat, no debts. But only 3,000 kronor (approx. 300 euros) left to live on. No matter how I do the sums, it doesn't add up,'* says a 24-year-old man in Rannebergen.

People are discontented that it has become more difficult to make a sufficient living. Problems with personal finances often involve unemployment, but also low wages and difficulties in making ends meet with income from work that is paid by the hour. For a 44-year-old woman in Ljusnarsberg, the biggest problem in her daily life is that there are no permanent positions.

*'They say there should be some in health care, but that's as a substitute paid by the hour. It's hard to make ends meet without a steady job. How much I get to work varies so much from month to month,'* she says.

A 19-year-old man in Landskrona interviewed in November said that he had been unemployed since June. He does have a job that pays by the hour, though, he says. *'But it doesn't offer many prospects. I work a maximum of 30 hours a month. You don't get anywhere with that,'* he says.

## LACK OF SAFETY

Many of the interviewees spoke of a growing sense of being unsafe. This feeling and the fear of becoming a victim of crime came up in several conversations, and many of the interviewees reported how feeling unsafe limits their daily lives. This is particularly true of the interviews conducted in one of the small towns, Ronneby in south-eastern Sweden.

In recent years, Ronneby has changed. When Blekinge Institute of Technology moved its campus away from the town in 2010, both jobs and students disappeared. Today, unemployment in Ronneby is high. Yet the Public Employment Service does not have an office there. When the Public Employment Service was restructured, the office in the town was closed, and those who wanted to use the service had to travel to Karlskrona, in the centre of the region.

After the Institute of Technology moved, 700 student flats became empty. As refugee migration increased in the mid-2010s, some of these flats were converted into housing for asylum seekers. This has contributed to a change in the demographic composition of Ronneby. In total, about 3,000 people from all around the world have moved to Ronneby over the past 20 years, and many of those interviewed in this study say that integration has been unsuccessful.

*'We haven't got the newly arrived migrants into work. I guess we're too small a municipality for that,'* says a 50-year-old woman.

Unemployment is high among foreign-born residents. In 2019, around 40 per cent of them did not have a job, placing Ronneby third on the list of municipalities in Sweden with the highest unemployment among people born abroad. A 47-year-old man puts it in very concrete terms when asked what worries him about the future. *'If we fail on integration,'* he says, *'then we're toast.'*

According to reports by both the municipality and the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (*Brottsförebyggande rådet*), people feel that safety in central Ronneby has declined in recent years. This may be partly due to a reduction in the local police presence since the Swedish Police was restructured in 2015 (*Brottsförebyggande rådet* 2020). The reduced police presence is yet another sign that the state with its institutions seems to have stepped back

and left these places to their fate. Ronneby had a fully equipped police station, writes journalist PM Nilsson in an opinion piece in *Dagens Industri*. Since 2016, Ronneby has instead shared a municipal police service with Torsås municipality 100 kilometres away (Nilsson 2018).

The local press often reports on fights in the town centre, and several people interviewed for this study say that they are afraid to go downtown nowadays. What people are expressing here is a feeling of a lack of trust. Lack of trust in their neighbours, in newcomers and in local and national politics.

*'We have no control over the judiciary or any security. It's a disaster. It's not the police's fault, it's the politicians'. That's what you get most upset about,'* says a man in his 70s, interviewed in Ronneby.

The fear of personally becoming a crime victim comes up in many conversations and this kind of lack of safety is not only raised by the residents of Ronneby but everywhere where we interviewed people. Background is the rampant, very violent gang violence that has captured Sweden in recent years and that strongly influences peoples' subjective sense of security.

Many of the interviewees are worried about someone breaking in through their front door, or being robbed in their home, in the town centre or on their way from the bus stop. Fear of crime is a common response to the question 'What is the biggest problem you face in your everyday life?'

This fear is ever-present, affecting their lives every day. *'You have to think about putting your car away in the garage and locking your bike and all that,'* says a 79-year-old woman in Ronneby.

It hasn't always been like that where she lives. *'You could leave your car overnight on the street, for example, if you got home late, and didn't put it in the garage. You wouldn't dare do that today,'* she continues.

It is striking that so many of the Swedish interviewees feel that violence and crime have increased in society. This is in line with findings from the Swedish National Council for

Crime Prevention's national safety surveys (Brottsförebyggande rådet 2020), which show that concerns about crime have increased by over 20 per cent since 2006 (despite no increase in self-reported exposure to crime). The link is also made between crime and immigration – it is a common view that crime is 'imported'. In addition, many of the interviewees believe that the Swedish legal system is not working properly. It is not surprising that these perceptions can be found in places and constituencies where the Sweden Democrats have substantial electoral support. In the SOM Institute's national survey conducted in autumn 2019, as much as 78 per cent of Sweden Democrat supporters said they were very concerned about organised crime, compared with only around 35 per cent of Left Party, Green Party and Centre Party supporters (Andersson et al. 2020 pp. 17–18).

A telling example of a person who prioritises being safe from crime above all other issues is a woman in her 40s. The question 'What works well in Sweden?' makes her think long and hard. *'Well, hmm, I don't know, maybe waste recycling, I think that works well here,'* she says. When instead she is asked to answer the question about what doesn't work well, in Sweden or where she lives, she simply can't stop. She doesn't feel safe in her daily life. She keeps coming back to this issue. *'Groups of men aren't a safe thing, not for men nor for women. And they stand around there all evening in the town centre. I don't feel safe walking around there,'* she says emphatically.

Then she describes how her own community involvement has completely changed focus – from environmental issues to safety issues.

*'I used to be an activist in the Green Party, back when environmental issues were the most important thing for me. Then this problem of immigration policy came up, and that's become the most important issue. For people who feel that their absolute safety is threatened, they can't think about the environment [...] there's a lot of focus on the environment when it should be the other way around – it should all be about focusing on the safety issues,'* she says.

Many of our interviewees link the crime they see and fear with immigration.

*'Too many immigrants have come here,'* says a 70-year-old woman interviewed in Almgården in Malmö. *'It's become unsafe, with crime and bombs, like the bomb that went off over there,'* she continues, pointing to the neighbouring houses.

## A XENOPHOBIC NARRATIVE

Many conversations turned to immigration, and immigration was the topic that came up most often in the interviews. This is not surprising. Few topics have been as hotly debated in recent years in Sweden as those related to immigration: the scale of immigration, the impact of immigration on the economy and its consequences for society at large, at present and in the longer term.

The Franco-German study concluded that, even in places where many people vote for anti-immigration parties such as Alternative for Germany and the National Rally in France, people are not primarily dissatisfied with immigration policy but with their economic and social conditions, such as a lack of local services, poor infrastructure and unemployment (Hillje 2018). However, this conclusion cannot be applied to Sweden.

Of course, it cannot be ruled out that people's attitudes and values regarding issues such as immigration differ from country to country.

Even in Sweden, people are dissatisfied with issues such as the shuttered supermarket, that buses run too infrequently, that it's hard to find a job that pays a living wage. But one conclusion of this study is that people's discontent is to a large extent explicitly linked to issues of immigration and integration in Sweden.

It's not as simple as saying that opposition to immigration is only about projecting discontentment with things unrelated to migration onto people who have immigrated to Sweden. There is also specific dissatisfaction with how the consequences of immigration in the form of unsatisfactory integration create problems in everyday life. How culture clashes lead to conflicts in housing estates, how local schools are affected by the fact that so many pupils do not speak Swedish as their mother tongue. The things that happen when newly arrived migrants don't get jobs, what young people who don't manage to integrate in society do during the day. Many of the people we spoke to are also discontented with the way they are treated when they raise concerns. They feel that it isn't possible to discuss certain kinds of everyday experiences without being accused of being racist.

People interviewed for this study feel that too much of the state's money is spent on immigration and too little on oth-

er things they find important. The national level of politics and administration tends to be held responsible for problems that people experience in their daily lives.

This is also true when people express their discontent with things that are dealt with locally. Sweden is, in many ways, a very decentralised country. For example, schools, care for the elderly and childcare are financed and run by Sweden's 290 municipalities. Health care and public transport are run by the 22 regions. These services are also largely financed by local taxes. This means that in Sweden, local politicians have greater power and influence than in many other European countries.

Furthermore, national-level politics is perceived as elitist and tone deaf. Many people do not seem to feel a sense of affinity with politicians in established parties. They feel that elected representatives do not understand them. Some of the people we interviewed who express this kind of distrust of politicians are older people who seem to think that 'things have changed too fast'. But there are also many younger people who have similar views.

While the discontent often concerns politics, economic power structures come up noticeably rarely in our interviews. Anger is not directed at those who have become richer as inequality has increased; employers are not held to account for low salaries, precarious employment or exhausting working conditions. You could say that the classic social democratic societal analysis is conspicuous by its absence.

### EXPLANATIONS FOR RISING SUPPORT FOR THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS

There have been many attempts to understand why a party like the Sweden Democrats has managed to gain so much support among voters who have traditionally voted for leftist parties, particularly social democratic ones. The study is limited to a few questions, and although the material contains many interviews, the interviewee sample is not representative enough to draw general conclusions.

Nevertheless, the interviews show that many respondents believe to find themselves in a competitive struggle with

migrants, which is defined by the scarcity of well-paid jobs, of public services and of the level of social transfers.

Many of our interviewees describe a battle for resources between things like health care and pensions on the one hand and the costs of immigration on the other.

*'Those who are here should get care, not the newly arrived migrants who now get free dental care,'* says a woman in Malmö who has recently retired, for example.

A typical statement is made by a 61-year-old man in Sandvången. *'Municipalities just make cuts and savings all the time and then they waste money on immigrants,'* he says.

*'Immigrants should get jobs and educate themselves instead of relying on local government handouts. The municipalities need money for other things,'* he continues.

For example, they are concerned about long waiting lists for health care, explaining that immigration has led to a lack of resources. They seem to be directing their discontent not at regional health sector politicians, but at national politicians responsible for immigration policy. They are upset that their pensions are too low and explain this by saying that newly arrived migrants are expensive.

What the Sweden Democrats or other parties offer their voters locally was not part of this study. Neither has it been looked into if the Sweden Democrats in the places that were visited have political solutions to the day-to-day concerns of the interviewees. However, it is clear from the interviews and from other surveys that the Sweden Democrats are perceived as the party that offers the most restrictive immigration policy. At the same time, we note that the Sweden Democrats have the support of more voters in the parliamentary elections than in the municipal elections, both in Sweden as a whole and in all the places included in this study. It is not possible to say with any certainty what this is due to, and the reasons may of course differ between municipalities. One reason may be that the Sweden Democrats have weak local representatives – it is a fact that it is the party with the most 'empty seats' in municipal and regional councils around the country, i.e. seats not occupied by an elected representative (Expo 2018). This suggests, that people feel that immigration has caused the shortcomings in welfare and safety that they experience in their daily lives and where they live. And immigration policy is determined nationally, by the Riksdag and the national government.

## THE OTHER REALITY OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

The Franco-German study that served as a model to study Swedish discontent did not include any questions about the media. In the present study, additional questions about which media people consume, and how they view the media. That way an additional driver of the discontent could be identified.

Some of the interviewees reported that they consume mainstream media but also turn to anti-immigration alternative media to ‘get the truth’. These anti-immigration websites are deceptively similar in appearance to online tabloid newspapers, but the content is completely different. Distrust and hatred of immigrants, especially Muslims, is a dominant feature of all types of content, from news reporting to opinion pieces. But these media outlets also focus sharply on crime. Several of them are similar and frame the news in similar ways, not infrequently borrowing news and angles from each other. Some are more blatantly Islamophobic and/or homophobic.

Compared to people who say they trust the mainstream media, those who turn to anti-immigration media are more likely to say that immigration is a major problem for Sweden. Researchers disagree on what is the chicken and what is the egg in this case – are those who already think immigration is a major problem turning to these media, or do they start thinking immigration is a problem once they begin to see the alternative media’s reporting? Or, more likely, is it a combination of the two?

For those who are receptive to the criticism of mainstream media coming from right-wing populist politicians and who perceive mainstream reporting on immigration issues as biased, there is probably a lower threshold to seeking out alternative media to obtain a different picture. The view of reality presented by alt-right media can lead to further radicalisation. Simplistic explanations, negative stereotypes and prejudices are consolidated and reinforced in a destructive spiral.

Some of the major anti-immigration alt-right media sites, such as *Samhällsnytt* (formerly *Avpixlat*) and *Nyheter Idag*, are run by people who hold or have held official positions within the Sweden Democrats. Researchers warn against exaggerating the impact of alternative media on how people vote. But it is clear that the Sweden Democrats them-

selves attach great importance to alternative media. The editor-in-chief of *Samhällsnytt*, the former Sweden Democrat MP Kent Ekeröth, replied as follows when the investigative programme of Swedish Radio (*Medierna i P1*) asked him ‘Is there a difference between the work you did for the Sweden Democrats and the work you do for *Samhällsnytt*? Or is it kind of the same thing?’

*‘Well, I have to say it’s kind of the same thing. My views have not changed in Samhällsnytt compared to when I was in the Sweden Democrats. It’s the same thing. And there are a lot of similarities – that’s why alternative media was created. Alternative media, for example, once helped the Sweden Democrats enter the Riksdag, and it still helps the party,’* said Kent Ekeröth in the interview (Medierna 2021).

In 2020, four of the largest alt-right, anti-immigration media outlets – *Nya Tider*, *Exakt24*, *Samhällsnytt* and *Swebbtv* – have together been granted more than SEK 14 million (about 1,398,800 euros) in state press subsidies. The Sweden Democrats themselves are investing in media, such as the television channel *Riks*, launched in January 2021. This means, of course, that these outlets will be able to expand their reach even further. They are greatly aided by the social media algorithms, which form a substantial part of the Swedish alt-right echo chamber with significant implications for the public discourse.

## CONCLUSIONS

Discontent is omnipresent in the constituencies of interest for this study. When discontent is measured, it tends to be more widespread among people with little education and low income.

The places we visited are places where people have specific, material reasons to be dissatisfied with how society is developing. The Swedish economy grew throughout the 2010s. Accordingly, prosperity in Sweden has increased. However, it has not been distributed equally. Above-average earners have benefited from the tax policies of the 2010s, while those with no earned income – such as people on sick leave and pensioners – have been at a disadvantage. At the same time, the state has withdrawn from rural areas or those areas suffering economic and social decline, as observed by the interviewees. The Public Employment Service has taken down its sign in Ljusnarsberg, the roads are getting worse and worse in Haparanda, and throughout the country there are long health care waiting lists. After 2010, the number of police officers per capita decreased in Sweden (Nitz/Ramsten 2021).

The uniquely liberalised Swedish market-based education model has favoured socio-economically privileged pupils and has disadvantaged working class children and newly arrived migrant pupils. Some municipal schools, such as Vätleskolan in Rannebergen, a disadvantaged area on the outskirts of Gothenburg, have such a high proportion of newly arrived pupils that it is difficult to provide good teaching with the resources available. At the same time, many privately run schools have hardly any newly arrived pupils at all.

As a nation, Sweden may have become richer, but the older interviewees reported that they are struggling to make ends meet on their pensions, and others are seeing how those retiring today are retaining a lower proportion of their income than previous generations. People from Malmö to Haparanda are wondering: how will I cope when I get older?

In the places visited for the study, unemployment increased in the 2010s. People in Ljusnarsberg and Ronneby have seen how jobs have become fewer in number and more precarious. Many people find it difficult to make a decent living from the insecure hourly work they can get. At the same time, support from the Public Employment Service has grown more distant – often even physically.

In addition, the interviewees complained about a deterioration in their subjective sense of security. Many felt that there was a lack of police in their neighborhood and they were concerned that it takes so long for the police and ambulances to arrive when they call.

The unequal distribution of Sweden's resources is the result of conscious political decisions regarding tax rates, pension levels and social insurance, about the location of state services, about the level of funding for health care, education, social care and the judiciary. Yet it is immigration that comes up over and over again in the conversations with the interviewees.

The interviews showed traces of a xenophobic narrative, which defines immigration as the overarching societal problem and limits policy alternatives to reducing immigration. The narrative of 'us – Swedes' and 'them – immigrants' sets the political agenda: everything comes down to the problems linked to immigration. Moreover, this narrative reinforces xenophobic attitudes: it describes immigration and other cultures as a threat to Swedish society, to our way of living as a community and to our welfare.

The policies that have increased inequality forced down taxes, eroded welfare systems and allowed market logic to enter the welfare system escapes any blame. Instead, immigration is used as a simple explanation for complex social problems and as a convenient scapegoat.

This not only has political consequences, it affects the co-existence of locals and migrants. As it fuels prejudice and discrimination. The people who were interviewed testified that the prejudice in their surroundings result in newly arrived migrants being isolated.

The results of the study suggest that social cohesion in Sweden is at great risk. Sweden is a multicultural, multilingual country, and people will continue to move here in the future. This means that there is a need to find a way of talking about the challenges this entails – a way that neither magnifies nor denies the problems. What kind of Sweden do the people want and how should society and life be organised in the future? How can the xenophobic narrative be defused? How can a new narrative be created that makes it possible to live together in Sweden and to solve the social

problems that are currently overshadowed by the immigration debate? The task of formulating answers to these questions cannot be handed over to the high-income middle or upper classes, nor xenophobic parties and forces. The results of this study are a contribution to the long-overdue debate on how to strengthen social cohesion in Sweden.

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