

CENTURY OLD 'WHITE SUPREMACISM' AND THE FAR-RIGHT'S RISE IN SWEDEN: A CREDIBLE CHALLENGE TO PROGRESSIVE VALUES AND POLICIES?

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2017 might be called the golden year for far-right movements in European Union countries. Anti-establishment populist movements and new formations like the alt-right (alternative right) -breeding from the century-old eugenic thought, white supremacism, white nationalism, and covert or overt racist approaches overlapping with Neo-Nazism have gained considerable ground in most of the prominent EU countries (today, all of these terms are frequently used interchangeably, which calls for a thorough research on the distinctions between these related terms). France, the Netherlands, Germany, and lastly Austria are examples in this respect. Austrias new government now even includes the far-right Freedom Party.[1]

Another important EU member state, Sweden, is set to hold its elections in less than a year. According to 2016s polls, the Sweden Democrats (SD), said to be rooted in the white supremacist movement, has boomed in popularity. Its support has reportedly climbed up to 22 per cent, just three per cent behind the leading party, the Social Democrats.[2] In spite of the latest polls indicating that there is a certain decrease in this popularity, it is claimed that at its current level of support, the Sweden Democrats would still have enough clout to block either the center-left or center-right blocs from forming a government after the upcoming election in September 2018, should such blocs fail to reach a majority.[3]

For many years now, Sweden has represented a progressive paradise where healthcare and university tuition are free, workers get a world-record 480 days of paid parental leave. Tax rates are among the highest in the OECD,[4] and inequality is very low, ranking 142 out of 145 globally. So, despite these accomplishments, why is Sweden experiencing the same rise in anti-establishment nationalism and the more severe white supremacism as the rest of Europe?

The narrative of the Sweden Democrats is much of the same ethnical and nationalist

claims put forward by other far-right parties and movements we witness elsewhere. They stress the importance of national identity and use cultural themes for defending their positions. In spite of the fact that they disavow their roots in the white supremacist movement, their main platform remains a goal of zero for asylum-based immigration. According to the polls, it seems that the electoral support to the Sweden Democrats, from time to time, exceeds the level of 20%. This means that one fifth of the Swedish voters, under certain conditions, consider voting for the far-right party.

It should be noted that white supremacy in Sweden is not a new phenomenon, since one of white supremacys branches, white nationalism, already had a following in the country. To clarify, white nationalism, as a branch of white supremacist ideology, argues that the national identity of a country such as Sweden was built for and by white individuals. [5] Going back to our topic, Sweden has been considered a key center of white nationalism for decades. In the 1990s, for example, it was a world capital for white power heavy metal bands. Today, it teems with websites and podcasts promoting a new language of white identity.

Meanwhile, the roots of the Swedish white supremacism should be academically searched in the Scandinavian eugenics movement that peaked before the First World War and turned into practice in the 1930s and 1940s. In that period, Sweden was the only country with a national eugenics society. It is quite noteworthy that Sweden used sterilization policies between 1934 and 1976. In the case of Sweden, legislation on sterilization is the prime example of how eugenics theory was transformed into political action. The first Swedish law on sterilization came into force on 1 January 1935, and was expanded in 1941. Sterilization without the consent of the patient was permitted. For example, the mentally impaired were sterilized on a large scale up to the early 1950s. When the 1941 Sterilization Act was discussed by the Swedish Parliament, race rhetoric was considered to be quite acceptable. Then Minister of Justice K. G. Westman characterized the proposed law as an important step in the direction of a purification of the Swedish stock, freeing it from the transmission of genetic material which would produce, in future generations, such individuals as are undesirable among a sound and healthy people.[6]

Many years later, this inhumane practice was condemned by the Swedish government. In August 1997, Margot Wallstrom, the then Swedish Minister of Health and Social Affairs issued a belated reaction and stated that what went on [was] barbaric and a national disgrace, pledged to create a law ensuring that involuntary sterilization would never again be used in Sweden, and promised compensation to the victims.[7] Ultimately, the Swedish government not only apologized to the many thousands who had been sterilized without their knowledge or consent, but also put in place a program for the payment of reparations. The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs announced in 1999 that it would pay up to £13,430 to each surviving victim of the 1934-76 sterilization program.[8]

It is possible to detect the traces of this grim and unforgotten past in the rising support for the far-right Sweden Democrats. Fixed ideas of the past and obsessions with a purified society now demonstrate itself in xenophobic and immigration-skeptic tendencies of certain part of the Swedish society and voters. It might be considered that this limited support is not enough to bring the far-right party to the level that it will be able to govern

the country by itself. However, there is a serious probability that such a party, like in Austria, may become a key partner for political coalitions in the foreseeable future. EU countries, especially countries like Sweden, should very seriously consider whether this is the new European reality. If this is the case, then Europe should prepare itself to re-witness the horrors of the past.

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*Image: Sweden Democrats party logo (https://sd.se/)

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