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War in Ukraine

Swedish Left's Perspectives on the War in Ukraine

- Debate - Ukraine -

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The Swedish left has come a long way since 2014. Though the tumultuous events that shook Ukraine that year never became a top priority for left debates in Sweden, the antifascist rhetoric mobilized by Russia did appeal to some. In March of that year, a near-fatal assault on a group of leftists in the city of Malmö by far-right activists [galvanized](#) the Swedish left around the antifascist cause. The fact that one of the assailants, as well as numerous other notorious [far-right figures](#), had close ties to like-minded groups in Ukraine and even joined their fight against Russian proxy forces in the Donbas, did not exactly cause Swedish leftists to feel solidarity for Ukraine.

While no leftists from Sweden ever joined the DNR/LNR side to fight, a grouplet calling itself the Donbas Association emerged out of the marginal milieu of the ideologically orthodox and electorally irrelevant Communist Party to [spread](#) conventional Russian propagandist tropes: The antifascist "people's republics" in Donbas were resisting an illegitimate junta in Kyiv. Though the group tenaciously plastered Swedish cities with posters and stickers for several years before withering away, they never managed to excite any significant segment of Sweden's progressives.

Most on the left felt ambiguous about the Ukrainian question and steered clear of it as much as possible. The Kurdish struggle in Rojava captured the attention of Sweden's progressives and informed their geopolitical views much more than the Donbas war ever did. Yet, whenever the conflict in Ukraine did come up, milder versions of pro-Russian narratives were not uncommon in leftist publications, [including](#) Sweden's top daily paper, the social-democratic-leaning tabloid *Aftonbladet*.

In addition to the perceived antifascist angle, another factor fostering Swedish leftist complacency toward the dynamics in Russia has been the age-old domestic debate over NATO. Defending Sweden's formal military non-alignment had been central to left identity for decades, while NATO accession, though until recently largely unpopular, had been a key demand of the right. As a result, leftists would habitually dismiss warnings about hostile Russian intentions (be it toward Sweden or Ukraine) as yet another scare tactic to push a skeptical population toward Swedish NATO membership.

Consequently, the full-scale attack launched by Russia on February 24 shocked and disoriented much of the Swedish left. As the historical significance of the invasion sank in and public opinion consolidated the overwhelming sympathy for Ukraine with concern over Swedish security, many, especially on the radical left, found themselves faced with a reality which their ideological lethargy of the past decade had ill-prepared them for. Though no relevant leftist force explicitly condoned the invasion (and even the Communist Party [condemned](#) it, despite its traditionally apologetic stance on any authoritarian regime deemed "anti-imperialist"), many on the left struggled to formulate a clear position in response.

Parliamentary Left's Perspective

Among the parliamentary left, Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson's ever-pragmatic Social Democratic Party, which has ruled Sweden for most of the past century, adapted to the new realities with relative ease. Though traditionally somewhat dovish, favoring diplomacy over military partisanship, the Social Democrats were keen to live up to their self-image as a "state-bearing" and only party capable of stewarding the country in times of crisis. The government acted swiftly, reaching out to opposition parties to demonstrate national unity, joining neighboring countries in condemning the invasion and vowing to support Ukraine. With parliamentary elections scheduled for September, this

decisive response was presumably also guided by electoral considerations. Unlike neighboring Germany, Sweden is not reliant on Russian energy and thus not at risk of the same social fallout if Russian oil and gas deliveries to Europe should cease. Additionally, Sweden does not have any major pro-Russian electoral demographic. On the contrary, [polls](#) have [shown](#) that Swedes are among Europe's most ardent supporters of Ukraine. Also, for the first time, more Swedes [favored](#) joining NATO than were opposed which meant that the Social Democrats' decision to suddenly favor accession made sense, at least electorally.

The oppositional Left Party had a harder time finding a footing. The party, which currently polls at just under 10%, unites a wide array of factions, from left social democrats to Trotskyists, and includes labor and social movement representatives as well as diaspora groups who fled political persecution in various corners of the world. Due to this and generational divides, the party's response to the invasion was quite muddled. While local party chapters in several cities quickly organized [rallies](#) denouncing Russia's aggression and expressing solidarity with the people of Ukraine, [others](#) within the party rejected active support of Ukraine's resistance as "warmongering." When the Swedish parliament in late February endorsed the government's proposal to send military aid to Ukraine, only the Left Party initially voted against it, citing the Swedish principle of not sending arms into active war zones, where they might fall into the wrong hands. However, after a day of heated internal debate, the party [backpedaled](#) and renounced its opposition to providing military aid. "Ukraine deserves to be defended; its war is our war," party leader Nooshi Dadgostar would [say](#) later, wearing a pin representing Ukrainian and Swedish flags on her jacket.

For one of the members of the Ukrainian socialist movement Sotsialnyi Rukh, Oleksander Kyselov, originally from Donetsk but now studying in Malmö, the Left Party's position on the war has at times been "weird and inconsistent." Since the beginning of the invasion, he has had several meetings with party officials to provide a Ukrainian left perspective, and has encountered mixed responses: "Amidst some common prejudices, abstract pacifism and westsplaining, Dadgostar's statement of solidarity and support from local activists here in Malmö has been like a breath of fresh air," he told Posle.media. Nevertheless, his impression is that the party remains divided on the issue and is avoiding it to prevent internal strife ahead of the upcoming elections.

The War in Media

Since the broader left movement is also diverse, its stance on the war has also been varied, something that has been reflected in Sweden's lively leftist media landscape. The weekly paper *Flamman*, which is politically close to the Left Party, has had a consistent editorial line from the start, publishing both [Ukrainian](#) and [Russian](#) left voices citing Russian imperialism as the main cause of the war. In contrast, the organ of the party's Trotskyist wing, *Internationalen*, has been more ambivalent, insisting on "[negotiations](#)" to resolve the war's "root causes", and publishing a piece by Russian leftist Alexey Sakhnin, in which he blames "[all sides](#)", including "Ukrainian extremists", for having made the war possible. One notable attempt to introduce Russian talking points into the broader left debate surrounding the invasion appeared in a [column](#) in the green-left daily *Dagens ETC*, in which Kajsa Ekman, one of Sweden's most prolific leftist and radical feminists commentators, criticized another left-leaning publication, the union-affiliated magazine *Arbetet*, for republishing social reportages by Ukraine's English language outlet *Kyiv Independent*, whose staff, she claimed, were neo-Nazis. After the author, in a debate that followed, painted Russian propaganda outlet RT as "quality journalism", her contract as a columnist for *Dagens ETC* was terminated. The libertarian left journal *Brand*, which prides itself on being the world's oldest anarchist publication, focused on publicizing the repression of the Russian peace movement, publishing [reports](#) on the topic by members of the Russian anarchist media project *moloko plus* and calling on *Brand's* Swedish readers to donate in support of independent Russian journalists.

Labor Movement's Perspective

Similarly, contradictory dynamics could be observed within the Swedish labor movement. Whereas the big mainstream labor unions, which are politically close to the Social Democrats, unequivocally condemned the invasion, the chairperson of Sweden's radical syndicalist union SAC, which is a significant force within the left despite its relatively small membership, [said](#) his organization "refused to ally itself with either one or the other nationalism" and condemned "both Russian imperialism and NATO expansion." At the same time, however, the union's construction workers' section, which includes many Ukrainian migrant workers, launched a [crowdfunding campaign](#) in support of members who happened to be in Ukraine at the beginning of the invasion, some of whom had joined the fight against Russia. An example of working-class internationalist leadership that rallied the support of many leftists, if only indirectly for Ukraine, was provided by the independent Swedish Dockworkers' Union. Not affiliated with either the syndicalist or the mainstream labor federations, the union enjoys great respect among the left for its stubborn, though ultimately unsuccessful struggle in 2018-2019 against legal changes restricting their right to labor action. To express solidarity with their Ukrainian colleagues, they defied the controversial restrictions by initiating a [blockade](#) against Russian freight ships and have faced legal repercussions as a result.

Among grassroots left groups, several solidarity initiatives emerged in the first weeks of the invasion. For example, the autonomous leftist association Allt åt alla [raised funds](#) for Sotsialnyi Rukh and joined a coalition of leftist student associations in their effort to call on universities to suspend tuition fees and provide other support to Ukrainian students in Sweden. Meanwhile, a survivalist network consisting of several dozen radical leftists in southern Sweden launched a donation drive to gather supplies for the Ukrainian anarchist group RevDia's paramilitary unit, and an anarchist group in Stockholm [collected aid](#) for Ukrainian grassroots antifascist groups.

Towards New Leftist Values

While the invasion prompted some difficult but healthy soul-searching among Sweden's left, the war's immediate political consequences soon cut this process short. On May 18, to the satisfaction of the right, Sweden followed its close ally Finland in [applying for membership in NATO](#). Given that resistance to NATO membership has been a unifying issue for both the broader movement and the Left Party hoping to present a unified image ahead of the upcoming elections, this quickly became the main focus of most progressives. When the accession process was stalled by Turkey insisting that Sweden hand over leftists and Kurds and demanding that Stockholm cut its ties with the administration of Rojava, Swedish leftists were back in their element. Russia's invasion disappeared from the pages of left publications and from the minds of activists, who were now busy organizing protests in solidarity with the Kurdish movement and trying to sabotage Sweden's accession bid at the last minute.

Time will tell exactly how the Swedish Left will position itself going forward. Swedish leftists are as reluctant to admit misjudgments and venture out of their ideological comfort zone as anyone else. Given that the Kurdish struggle provides a more appealing set of leftist values than the Ukrainian cause, the main focus of Swedish left internationalism, for now, remains on Rojava. At the same time, many understand that the battle between Russia's authoritarian imperialism and Ukraine's independence is a defining moment of our time. If nothing else, there are hopeful signs that Swedish leftists are moving on from the ideological complacency that until recently had made them vulnerable to the ersatz anti-imperialism and pseudo-antifascism peddled by Russian propaganda. And in this, Rojava might function as more than a distraction. After all, if the Kurdish cause has demonstrated anything, it is that world affairs cannot be reduced to vulgar campism, that to those truly fighting for a world free of imperialist domination, Putin's Russia is no ally, and that being supported by American military aid doesn't automatically mean one's struggle is not righteous.

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