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Sweden

Outcome of Swedish elections “confirms European trend”

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The outcome of the Swedish parliamentary election on 9 September confirms a general European trend: rising rightwing populism and a weakening Social Democracy. The traditional picture of Sweden as the home of a progressive social democratic welfare state has been fading away for several decades now.

Since at least the deep crisis of the Swedish economy in the early 1990s the Social Democratic party has accepted the general outlines of a neo-liberal economic policy including deregulations and privatizations of the public sector. At the same time the once so impressive party organization has been strongly weakened – the party has lost two-thirds of its members during the last two decades and the closely affiliated blue collar trade union confederation LO has lost 25 per cent during the last ten years. The party, which during there previous 85 years had been out of government for only nine, lost power to a rightwing government in 2006.

During the following eight years this government stepped up the pace in undermining the public sector through increasing privatizations and tax cuts. When the Social Democrats came back to power in 2014 they did so in an extremely weakened position. The party, that for a long time used to get around 45 % of the votes, just reached 31 %. Together with its co-party in government, the Green party, and with the parliamentary support of the Left party, the government still was a minority government. And it had neither the ambition nor the power to fundamentally change the policy of the outgoing government. The most spectacular outcome of the 2014 election was the rise of the right populist Sweden Democrats. They succeeded in doubling their vote to 13 %, which meant that none of the traditional political blocs were able to form a majority.

Unlike its twin parties in Denmark and Norway the Sweden Democrats has its roots in openly racist and pro-Nazi organisations. Since the late 1990s a new generation of young leaders has successfully managed to build an effective party organization, starting from some local strongholds in southern Sweden. Xenophobia and anti-immigration have been the main ideological platform of the party and the main reason for being able to win voters. As it has increased its parliamentary influence the party has made efforts to downplay the more openly racist rhetoric, expelling some of the most eager representatives. The party has also lately tried to stress the national-conservative features of the party, approaching similar currents in Poland and Hungary. Their economic and welfare policy is close to that of the Conservative party.

For a long time there was a de facto agreement between the traditional parties in the parliament to try to isolate the Sweden Democrats and to abstain from negotiation with them. This was why the right wing parties accepted the red-green coalition in 2014. The huge wave of refugees in 2014 and 2015 - 80 000 and 160 000 respectively came to Sweden - changed the political situation almost overnight.

Until October 2015 there was a broad consensus that the Swedes were prepared to “open their hearts” - to quote former Conservative party leader Fredrik Reinfeldt. Initially only Sweden Democrats criticized the massive immigration. When the party started to grow and the shortcomings in the organization of the reception of refugees became obvious most leading parties, including the Social Democracy agreed to make an immediate stop and adjust Swedish immigration policy to the minimum criteria of the EU. The change was not only a formal adaptation, it was accompanied by a rise in anti-immigrant sentiments, anti-muslim agitation and demands for tougher legislation directed towards what was claimed to be crimes related to immigrants coming also from the traditional parties, including the Social Democrats in government.

It is obvious that one reason for this change was the threat both Social Democrats and Conservatives felt from the

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Sweden Democrats. As could be foreseen from experiences from other countries the change of tactics did not work. The Sweden Democrats continued to grow at the expense of especially these two parties. The outcome of the election confirms this conclusion. The Social Democrats fell to 28%, their lowest result since suffrage was won in 1921. The Conservatives lost even more, 3.5 %. And the Sweden Democrats gained almost 5%, to 17.5 %. In a European perspective this result is perhaps not staggering. Sweden is adjusting to an international trend.

In a Swedish perspective however this is a new situation and the outcome is a serious setback in several regards. Two should be mentioned here. The first is the threat of a real influence from the Sweden Democrats over day-to-day governmental policy. There is at this moment a stalemate between the two traditional political blocs: who will be the next Prime Minister could be decided by the Sweden Democrats. The demarcation line that has existed until now between the traditional political parties and the xenophobic right-wing populists does not exist anymore. It is obvious that the Conservatives are prepared to enter formal or informal negotiations with the Sweden Democrats to be able to form a rightwing government. The Danish experiences shows how disastrous consequence could be letting such parties set the agenda.

The other setback is related to the left and the working class. It is true that the Left party – former communists – made substantial gains – from 5.7 to 7.9 % and above all were able to make an impressive election campaign among young people. However, the left has never been as weak as today, only around 35 %. And a majority of the working class is not voting left any more. Thirty years ago 80 % of the working class voted Social Democrats (and another 10 % communists). In 2014 still 50 % of the members in LO voted Social Democrats. In 2018 only 37 % voted for them (and another 10% for the Left party).

It is obvious that the main reason why the Social Democrats have lost their stronghold inside the working class is that they have abdicated from what used to be their main strength: the defence of a welfare state build on equality and solidarity. Nothing indicates that they have learned that lesson. The main aim of the party leadership is to solve the present situation by trying to form a coalition with bourgeois parties, which would mean a further weakening of the welfare state and more attacks on the rights of the working class.

PS:

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