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European Sovereignty

Commentary on the Findings
of the Survey in Sweden

EUROPA



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EUROPEAN AND NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY FROM A SWEDISH PERSPECTIVE

The survey of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Fondation Jean Jaurès shows, among other things, that more people in Sweden are positive about sovereignty and fewer have a negative view than the European average. The proportion who are positive about Sovereignty increases with age and income. Relatively many Swedes highlight self-government, independence and individual freedom as positive concepts.

On the other hand, power and nationalism rank low. Swedes seem to appreciate and understand the meaning of European sovereignty. In this context, two thirds of Swedes consider that external borders controls are particularly important.

In contrast to the other countries in the survey, slightly more than half (56%) of Swedes have a positive view of European sovereignty. The Swedish view of European sovereignty differs depending on the age group, but Swedes generally think it is important to strengthen it.

In this respect, countering terrorism is ranked before tackling climate change as issues that a sovereign Europe should address, but Europe's role in meeting and countering China's and Russia's power ambitions is also considered an important task. All in all, this gives a rather fragmented picture of the Swedes' view of national and European sovereignty. How can we understand the results of the survey from a historical perspective?

HISTORICAL LEGACIES

The overarching question is whether the Swedish idea of independence and sovereignty of Sweden has special features for the EU.

To do this, it is necessary to examine whether the Swedish self-image is related to the fact that Sweden is a constitutional monarchy that has been associated throughout the 20th century with democracy, a high degree of equality, a developed welfare state, an extremely strong trade union movement and, at times, a politically dominant social democracy. This paradox – that the historical strongholds of social democracy emerged in the Nordic monarchies – is interesting in itself. However, as in other Nordic countries, the role and power of the Swedish royal house was gradually reduced to purely ceremonial obligations.

Moreover, unlike many European countries and its Nordic neighbours, Sweden has not been involved in a war for over 200 years. Compared to others, the country has a peaceful history without many long-term battles or conflicts. Unlike its Nordic neighbours, Sweden managed to avoid being drawn into the Second World War. Sweden has a long, unbroken tradition of national independence that has been protected and promoted in many ways and is deeply rooted in its national identities.

There are relatively few violent political events in Swedish political history. The coup d'état of 1809, following the loss of

Finland to the Russian Empire, was comparatively painless; and the end of the Union with Norway in 1905, must surely be described as a relatively happy divorce. Although events during the First World War and the revolutions in Europe after 1917 were conflictual even in Sweden, the transition to democracy was not marked by the same massive violence as in other countries. A notable exception to this in Swedish history is the Ådalen shootings in 1931, when five protesting workers were shot dead by the military during a lengthy and bitter labour dispute. After all, this dramatic event led to the Social Democrats winning the elections the following year. Thus, a historic compromise and social consensus gradually emerged – not only between the unions and the employers, but overall between labour and capital, and politics and the markets. And this ultimately made the building of the Swedish welfare state possible.

THE SPECIAL SWEDISH WAY: FOLKHEM, NEUTRALITY AND SOFT POWER IMAGE

The *folkhem* (the welfare state) was a vision of modern Swedish society. The term *folkhem* was first used in the Swedish debate by the conservative political scientist Rudolf Kjellén. In his view, it stood for a nationalist view of Sweden based on a conservative view of classes and groups expected to align themselves hierarchically in an undemocratic and authoritarian society.

Per-Albin Hansson, the father of the modern Swedish welfare state, transformed a conservatively established concept by retaining its framework and parts of its paternalistic approach, thereby signalling security in troubled times, while inserting social democratic elements in his image of the *folkhem*. He complemented it with the concept of equal citizenship and a quest for equality, thus opposing the hierarchies that characterised the class society.

The social democratic party now started to talk about people and thereby about the nation – the nation of citizens, which should not only focus on individual classes, but create more equality and democracy. In the right-wing *folkhem*, citizens were supposed to serve their nation. In the social democratic interpretation, on the other hand, society was there to serve its citizens. The *folkhem* acquired a hegemonic status in the Swedish political debate. Thus, in the years between the wars, the labour movement took on a considerable role in society and dominated the national discourse, which enabled it to dispel nationalist and extremist elements.

A central pillar of the Swedish and Nordic welfare states is the organisation of the labour market, which is built on a strong social partnership. It was supported by macroeconomic management that put employment, growth and career transition first. The so-called Rehn-Meidner model was based on a principle of equal pay for equal work, which promoted and accelerated structural change in the region. It also created the conditions for the organisation of different interests: strong trade unions and employers' organisations took responsibility for wage negotiations and some other labour arrangements such as pensions, security and training, while the state remained in

the background. At the same time, this model is strongly supported by social partnership institutions. Therefore, through this organisation of different interests, the labour market is based on self-regulation in which the state does not play a direct role.

Another element of the Swedish welfare state is the concept of 'state individualism'. The overarching goal of welfare states is the individual empowerment of its citizens to take their destiny into their own hands, free from social and economic obstacles. Therefore, the role of the family as a central economic and social institution has been restricted and important welfare elements such as childcare, school and higher education have been made available to all. This can also be seen as an emancipatory project with the aim of strengthening the powers of social self-regulation with the help of influential social partners and a dynamic civil society – instead of promoting an interventionist state or market-based solutions as in other countries.

For these historical reasons, Swedish nationalism could have developed in a less unusual way. Nonetheless, the idea of a Swedish Sonderweg has always been cultivated by the country's politicians and parties. During the 20th century, this was largely expressed through the social democratic narrative of the so-called *folkhem* or welfare state – as well as the view that the country was pursuing a third path between communism and unregulated capitalism. Just 100 years ago, Sweden was one of the poorest, most unequal and most undemocratic countries in Europe. During the 20th century, all this changed. Overall, it can be said that Swedish citizens and politicians (though less so those born after 1989) still view their nation – both on a national and individual level – in terms of independence and 'control of one's own destiny', which might also influence their views on sovereignty on a national and European level.

Moreover, Sweden's post-war view of its own country and its role in the world was also largely shaped by Sweden declaring its neutrality and not participating in either of the World Wars. Despite protests from right-wing interest groups, this policy was explicitly endorsed by both the Social Democrats and the armed forces. This neutral line took Sweden through the Second World War and was then integrated into social democratic politics, where it was given a special social democratic veneer after the war: Now it was combined with a strong internationalist orientation, which since the 1960s was promoted in particular by Olof Palme.

After the Second World War, Sweden decided to remain a neutral country outside NATO. Swedish attempts to form a Nordic defence alliance during this period failed, as both, Denmark and Norway, joined NATO. Olof Palme's foreign policy tradition was based on Sweden remaining independent of the great powers. Accordingly, the country also massively supported the liberation movements in the global South. The basis for this was the active commitment against colonialism and for the national liberation of some countries in the global South – and thus also the principled, general defence of national independence. Internationally, this political line was expressed in particular by Sweden and Olof Palme actively sup-

porting the Vietnamese liberation movement. In addition, the country was the largest Western supporter of the ANC in South Africa.

This may provide an explanation or background to national sovereignty being viewed somewhat more positively in Sweden than in other European countries, and why fewer people there have a negative attitude towards it – even if, as the study shows, the differences are not particularly strong. Moreover, this historical context may explain the fact that the number of people with a positive attitude towards national sovereignty increases with age, as those born after 1989 are not as aware of the historical development. The fact that sovereignty is interpreted as ‘modern’ could be in line with the fact that political sovereignty of the *folkhem* is associated with the development of the ‘most modern country in the world’ and the possibility of controlling one’s own destiny.

A CAUTIOUS EU-MEMBERSHIP

After the Second World War, the Nordic countries, including Sweden, were sceptical about European integration. Instead, together with Great Britain, they joined the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). While Great Britain named its national independence and autonomy as reasons for not joining the European Community (EC), the Social Democratic government in Sweden feared that membership could threaten the Swedish welfare and labour market model. Accordingly, there – in contrast to the founding members of the EU – European integration was never seen as a project for peace and prosperity in Sweden. Without similar existential crisis experiences as other countries had them, Sweden moved closer to the EC through a free trade agreement; and in the 1980s further steps towards economic integration were taken with the EEA agreement, which paved the way for Swedish membership a decade later. However, it was the severe economic crisis of the 1990s and thus economic reasons that led the Social Democratic government to accept EU membership.

Not surprisingly, Sweden has traditionally been divided on the issue of EU membership; and in a referendum the country decided not to join the monetary union. There were and still are concerns in the country about national independence and whether the Swedish welfare and social partnership model can survive joining the EU. Currently, the issue of membership is no longer controversial and there is no significant support for a ‘Swexit’. The right-wing populist and nationalist Sweden Democrats, who entered the Swedish parliament in 2010 and are currently the country’s third largest party, are virtually the only ones who clearly oppose Swedish EU membership, even if they do not actively pursue the issue. However, the EU orientation of the Social Democrats and the Moderate Party, the two largest parties, has diminished in recent years. Nevertheless, their voters are more positive towards the EU than those of other parties. This is evident from the fact that Sweden is still relatively positive towards European sovereignty, which is somewhat surprising for a country that has been EU-sceptical for so long.

In this context it is worth noting that criticism against the EU has grown primarily within the trade union movement. The

Swedish Trade Union Federation (LO), in which the workers are organised, has been divided both on EU membership and on the question of whether Sweden should join the monetary union. First and foremost, it is the influence of the EU on the Swedish labour market that has led to this criticism. When the country joined the Union, the prevailing view was that this would have no consequences for labour market relations. However, the internal market, for example the Laval regime, has shown that this has not been the case. The current proposals for a directive on the minimum wage also attack the heart of the Swedish welfare and labour market model – namely self-regulation. As a result, the trade union movement has become increasingly frustrated with the EU Commission’s unwillingness to compromise and has sharpened its tone accordingly. In a May 2021 interview, Torbjörn Johansson, LO’s Secretary for Treaty Negotiations, said: ‘It is therefore time for us in the Swedish labour movement to consider whether joining the EU was a good decision. Our position so far has been based on the fact that our Swedish labour market model is safe. However, this is being turned upside down.’

NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY WITHOUT CONTRADICTION

The Swedish public’s views on European sovereignty is still difficult to interpret. The concept of sovereignty is perceived somewhat more positively in Sweden than in other countries surveyed.

In principle, however, the answers are based on the idea that national and European sovereignty are not necessarily in conflict with each other, but complement each other. This could also be due to the fact that the EU is not seen as a federal project by Swedish politicians and perhaps also by the population, but rather as a framework of cross-state cooperation. This also applies to the desire to control external borders and fight terrorism. The relationship with Europe is still difficult to interpret. It may seem surprising that so many people see European sovereignty in a positive light. But does this also mean that they believe it should be expanded at the expense of the nation state or that both types of sovereignty can be combined in accordance with the EU principle of subsidiarity?

The fact that people with higher incomes view the EU more positively is well known from other studies and has long been an established pattern in public opinion in the country. But the fact that older people, not younger people, are more positive about the EU is not consistent with the image that older people are generally more ‘nationalist’ and younger people more ‘cosmopolitan’ in orientation. This Swedish divergence may be related to the timing of the country’s full EU membership, which took place during the severe economic crisis of the 1990s. This crisis was a severe experience during which the first of a series of neoliberal reforms were implemented and government spending was significantly reduced, ultimately ending the *folkhem* project. The national welfare state was replaced by the concept of globalisation, in the course of which the thinking of both political tendencies became dominated by a new, more cosmopolitan idea. This period was marked by increasing and deepening international coopera-

tion. Today we live in a globalised economy with corresponding markets. The deepened cooperation with the EU must be seen against this background: as a project that Sweden joined in the 1990s.

However, the era of globalisation is now in crisis with rising inequalities, irresponsible political institutions and elites have brought right-wing populist protest movements back into the political debate. In Sweden, the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats entering the Swedish Parliament only in 2010 have become a central political force in the country. They have changed and influenced the political debate. They have channelling domestic dissatisfaction with the state of affairs, with immigration, integration challenges, and crime. As a result, a more restrictive view of immigration and immigrants has prevailed. Furthermore, they are reconjuring a vision of a conservative *folkhem* for a homogenous, nativist Sweden.

The pattern presented here indicates that Swedes emphasize Europe as essential to a lesser extent than in other countries when it comes to issues such as common security, defence policy, defence of common values (such as democracy) and control of strategic infrastructure. Although they have a significant impact compared to other countries, it is difficult not to interpret these responses in the light of the historical context described here. It is perhaps not particularly surprising that in Sweden, a country with more than 200 years of peace behind it, has often gone its own way internationally, support for common foreign policy and developed defense cooperation are not equal priorities, which is not a member of NATO and has made non-alignment an important principle, although cooperation with the West and NATO has deepened in recent decades.

THE SOCIAL RIGHT-WING BACKLASH

However, the age of globalization is itself in crisis today: rising inequality and alienated political institutions and elites have seen right-wing populist protest movements return to the political debate. In Sweden, this role is played by the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats, who only entered parliament in 2010 and have become a central political force in the country. They have influenced and changed the political debate. They have also given voice to domestic discontent over immigration, integration and crime. This has allowed more restrictive views on immigration and immigrants to prevail. Moreover, the party once again conjures up the vision of a conservative *folkhem* for a homogeneous, nativist Sweden.

Even if these developments may not have led to any major changes in the view of national or European sovereignty, it may very well, however, eventually affect the political parties' views of the outside world, and the citizens' views of the trade-offs between the national and the European, between national sovereignty and European sovereignty with the former gaining importance over the latter.

So what is the Swedish perception of strategic autonomy on the national level and in the European context, how must one interpret Swedish citizens wanting to see the future devel-

opment of the EU and how do Swedish political parties argue? One answer is that the concept of strategic autonomy does not play a prominent role in the Swedish debate. Currently, the EU is neither at the top of the political agenda nor is there a public debate on further European integration steps. The political debate in Sweden is dominated exclusively by national issues. Better said – how to deal with issues related to social welfare, migration and increasing serious crime in Sweden. This political self-centeredness is certainly a consequence of the strength of the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats, which, as the third strongest political party in the polls, now has a major influence on the political debate in Sweden. As a result, there has been a shift in the political agenda, from international issues to national issues and from culturally radical to culturally conservative perspectives.

ROLE OF THE EU IN EMERGENCY DEFENCE

Perhaps the fact that so many Swedes believe that European sovereignty is a fact should be seen as a defence of a status quo in EU cooperation. Sweden was a driving force for eastward enlargement in the early 2000s. One argument at the time was to unite Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. But in Sweden they saw the possibility of blocking the development towards an increasingly federal EU by admitting new members. Here, Sweden has always been one of the member states trying to oppose various projects to strengthen supranational power at the expense of its own national sovereignty – as recently with the EU's major COVID reconstruction programme.

One explanation for the Swedish approval of the concept of European sovereignty could also lie in change of the people's view of Sweden's membership. When Sweden joined the EU, the focus was on the great opportunities for the country that could result from participating in the project of European unification. After a decade of crises, the focus may be more on how the EU and national states should deal with the threats of our time. These are threats of terrorism, external border control, climate change, health threats, nationalist governments within the EU and challenges such as China and Russia. The survey shows that these are highlighted by Sweden as an important task both nationally and for the EU. Thus, the Swedish public and political parties seem to see the EU's role in countering dangers and threats.

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