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## **Analysis of support levels for far-right political parties in Sweden and France**

This paper summarises my research examining the increase in support gained by right-wing political parties in Sweden and France over recent years. In my research, support levels among populations are measured. Factors contributing to the increase in far-right support are suggested. Internal factors such as the rhetorical strategies of political parties, the economic situation, and external factors that are interpreted as a threat to national identity and/or economic stability of the country, are considered. The research seeks to understand the high levels of support for right and far-right political parties in Sweden and France – countries in which such support previously was not as openly and vocally expressed. This paper discusses the high levels of support for the far-right in Sweden and France over the last decade, and the way specific political crises are presented in the rhetoric of far-right parties and groups. It considers whether there is a pattern of factors (both internal and external) that encourage people to support far-right political parties and groups.

The hypothesis guiding the research is as follows: *Far-right political parties get higher levels of popular support when the country is involved in a political crisis that can be interpreted as a threat to economic stability and/or preservation of national identity of the core population. A particular unfavourable political/economic situation serves as a trigger for an increase in populist far-right rhetoric, populism, and higher levels of support of the latter.* It is argued that, in the case of France and Sweden, such a trigger has been the recent chain of migration crisis events. In the analysis of the rise of the far-right in these two countries, the following issues are considered: the history of nationalist parties, far-right rhetoric – in particular the appeal of ‘heritage’ populism, the levels of support for far-right nationalist parties as the scale of immigration has increased, the image of a “typical” far-right nationalist party supporter.

Using a blended methodology, the research hypothesis was investigated. Historical research allowed an analysis of the dynamics of political organisation in Sweden and France and facilitated the identification of when and how far-right political parties appeared in the political arena. A review and analysis of the literature was completed in order to situate the study within the existing theoretical and empirical scholarship on the topic. As a result of this literature review, it was possible to identify the populist rhetoric used by far-right parties in Sweden and France to inflame concerns about immigration. Statistics were used to measure and monitor the support garnered by far-right populist parties. Particular attention was paid to periods of immigration.

The research hypothesis was shown to be correct, though some clarifications are required. The original hypothesis contended that migration served as a “trigger” not to the increase in support of far-right political parties directly, but in giving such parties the opportunity and momentum to exploit the issue of immigration. The use of various rhetorical techniques allowed far-right parties to expand the number of political and social issues deemed to be connected to increases in immigration, and enhanced the traction of nativist rhetoric regarding the well-being of the people and future generations. As it is quite difficult to connect an increase of support for the far-right with immigration, it is more feasible and realistic to analyse immigration as a trigger for far-right populist rhetoric. The issue of immigration has been exploited by the Sweden Democrats in Sweden and Front National in France.

Another key element of the hypothesis that has been proved in the course of research is the link between the migration crisis and its interpretation as a threat to the economic stability of the core population by the far-right. The far-right refers to unemployment, a decrease in GDP, crime and violence rates, depletion of resources and scarcity caused by outsiders.

The speeches of representatives of far-right parties in both Sweden and France share a common set of appeals that are incorporated into their rhetoric with slight modifications based on the specifics of the particular country. The strongest and most obvious characteristic that unites the two types of rhetoric of the countries is ‘heritage’ populism and all the features that it entails. Analysis of the key public speeches and rhetoric of the Sweden Democrats showed a tendency to focus on certain values/aspects of society:

1. Claims regarding the degradation of the celebrated Swedish welfare state;
2. Claims regarding the gradual take-over of Swedish ideals and imposition of Muslim values; claims regarding a threat posed to Christianity as a result of Muslim beliefs prevailing in Swedish society;
3. Claims regarding increases in violence and crime in the country (as a result of immigrants);
4. Critique of supranational powers such as the European Union.

In regards to France, the following claims have been made by a number of party members, especially Marine Le Pen herself:

1. Claims regarding the degradation of peace and order in French society;
2. Claims regarding the gradual take-over of the country by Muslims and imposition of Muslim values over the existing French values; claims regarding the threat posed to Christianity as a result of Muslim beliefs prevailing in French society;

3. Claims regarding increases in terror attacks and a higher risks of terrorists using migrant routes to enter the country with a hidden agenda of turmoil;

4. Criticism of supranational powers, such as the European Union.

All four of the claims are constantly repeated by the parties in order to enhance their messaging regarding immigration. Apart from the above claims, members of both parties, Sweden Democrats and Front National, use a range of techniques. They create a bright visual contrast between two worlds clashing: a peaceful and stable Swedish/French way of life where equality prevails is contrasted with the violent, patriarchal world of immigrants, overridden by terror. Another stark and effective technique consists of the so-called in/out dichotomy, where “in” refers to “original” members of the society, and “out” – to non-members. Espejo and Ostiguy’s “up/down” dichotomy is also relevant.<sup>1</sup> Sweden Democrats party members constantly refer to Social Democratic party members as elite (“up”) who inflicted this horror on the nation, mentioning the fact that they themselves live in “homogenous” areas of the country, meaning – only populated by Swedes, while the working class (“down”) has to live in areas in which the number of immigrants is growing. In the case of Front National, this up/down dichotomy is used more in reference to the supranational European Union governance, in which the French (“down”) freedoms of legislative, territorial, administrative policies are manipulated and overtaken by those in the segment of the “up” – meaning the aloof governance of the European Union.

In both countries, all four claims can be categorised under the general “umbrella” of ‘heritage’ populism of the new nationalism. When rejecting the imposition of power by the European Union and their “meddling” in internal affairs, the far-right defends the “domestic heritage” of internal organisation and decision-making freedoms. Claims asserting an increase in levels of violence and crime, as well as terror attacks, highlight the heritage of peace and stability passed down by generations of blood ancestors as a result of hard toil and efforts to gain and maintain. Claims regarding the neglect of Christian morals and traditions as a result of the imposition of Islam, which is deemed “inferior” and not worthy, is nothing but referral to the preservation of religious heritage of the French and the Swedes. Finally, the most dramatic claims – the claim asserting the degradation of the celebrated Swedish welfare state and the claim asserting the degradation of peace and order in French society – are stark reminders that ‘heritage’ populism seeks to forge a sensation of losing something inherited and owned by right from ancestors and which has been defended and preserved by the hard toil of previous generations. The right-wing claim that the French/Swedish way of life is threatened by outsiders who have come to destroy this perfect equilibrium.

While the two countries have distinct experiences and in no way can be drawn together as a single case example, analysing both of them within the same framework of events and developments might help identify factors that are crucial in the dynamics of nationalism and support for right-wing political parties in Europe in general, the latter being such a widespread phenomenon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>1</sup> P. Espejo, P. Ostiguy, *The Oxford handbook of populism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

Latent nationalism has existed in both countries for a relatively long period of time. In Sweden, however, the outlet of nationalist expression was an underground music culture. Even though nationalist parties did not formally enter the Parliament before 2010, their ideas flourished to a certain degree underground. In fact, Sweden became a centre of skinhead subculture and militant neo-Nazism in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the extensive nationalist skinhead music industry.<sup>2</sup> Though in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the latter had to go further underground due to a prohibition on their gatherings, when in 2010 Sweden Democrats gained representation in Parliament with their 5.7% of votes, this notorious culture was able to breathe more freely. Sweden Democrats started out as not only an anti-immigration party. Unlike other similar parties in Europe, they openly self-identified as nationalists, born in part from the skinhead movement of Nordic neo-Nazism. Hence, the official and more structured representation of nationalism was postulated in 2010 with Sweden Democrats entering Riksdag as the far-right party and securing their position with a sufficient number of votes from the people.

The situation was different in France, where history of official nationalist ideas in politics reached as far as Charles de Gaulle and presented itself in not one, but three groups of nationalists: “Orleanist” Right (non-Gaullist moderate right), “Bonapartist” Right (Gaullists), and of course of the “ultra” Right, or Far Right.<sup>3</sup> Though the majority adopted a conservative stance on matters and official party politics, the “Ultra” or the Far-Right still adheres to its ideas and is represented by Front National. Hence for both countries a certain level of latent nationalism has existed whether it was as an underground expression (in the case of Sweden), or more vocal and public (in the case of France). One of the major differences is that in Sweden the far-right was never represented in the political arena up until 2010, but was limited to hidden subcultures, while France had a long history of right-wing parties in public office with different levels of success throughout the years.

A similarity is also traced between the dynamics of self-presenting and image construction that both parties are seen to maintain today. Sweden Democrats started out proclaiming themselves as ultra-nationalists without any disguise. The same holds true in the case of Front National under the leadership of their initial founder Jean-Marie Le Pen. The comments of the latter are at times still harsh and extremely nationalistic. What happened next for both parties was a switch to a different image – one that would be more agreeable to a general audience and subtle in terms of public acceptance. Sweden Democrats broke their ties with Alternative for Sweden whose rhetoric was much harsher and whose members, such as Gustaf Kasserstrand, were associated with the notorious Identitarian movement. Moreover, they had to let some party members go for anti-Semitic statements. One cannot be certain in this case, but perhaps it was due to this that Sweden Democrats managed to survive in the Parliament and get the votes of the Swedes. The “break from the past” in the case of Front National was even more personal for the party leader, as Marine Le Pen

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<sup>2</sup> B. Teitelbaum, *Lions of the North: Sounds of the new Nordic radical nationalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

<sup>3</sup> A. Knapp, V. Wright, *The government and politics of France*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, New York 2006.

had to take over from her own father. This move demonstrated that the ideals and policies that the party is intending to present were more important than her own family relations. The so-called “de-demonization” campaign by Le Pen was a thought-through and elaborate move to appeal to the demographics that previously did not support Le Pen and her Front National, but could potentially be more accepting of the party and give them their vote.<sup>4</sup> Hence, both parties made certain adjustments and compromises to the demands of the “normalcy” in society, made their rhetoric a bit subtler to get the popular vote and “fit in” better amidst growing criticism of their harsh and radical rhetoric.

One major conclusion that one can make from the above information is that together with the four claims and strategies used to support them, the economic situation is exploited by the far-right parties in Sweden and France to their advantage. While statistics cited by representatives of the far-right may, in some sense, be true, members of the parties do not elaborate on the details and other factors accompanying those numbers. In other instances – statements of far-right party members are not always true but phrased in a way that sounds credible and realistic. Such eloquence in referring and highlighting the economic situation, unemployment, levels of crime and violence is calibrated to exacerbate negative feelings of the public, fuelling nationalist sentiments among the people and developing the momentum for a switch from latent nationalism to virulent nationalism in both countries: Sweden and France.

## Bibliography

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<sup>4</sup> S. Crepon, A. Deze, N. Mayer, *Marine Le Pen's challenge*, “Cairo Review of Global Affairs”, 22, 2016, p. 74.