

TEASER

Kremlin Trojan Horses 3.0
Coming November 2018

Sweden

Fertile Soil for Influence OPS?

SEPTEMBER 2018 HENRIK SUNDBOM

Sweden faces a time of political turmoil. In recent years the migration crisis in Europe has come to dominate Swedish politics, with the debate growing more polarized and an increasing number of voters turning to antiestablishment parties.

Current opinion polls indicate the national election in September 2018 will be a tight race between the current government coalition—the Social Democrats and the Green Party with support from the Left Party—and the center-right Alliance for Sweden, consisting of the Moderate Party, the Liberals, the Centre Party, and the Christian Democrats, which formed governments from 2006 to 2014. The far-right Sweden Democrats has grown substantially, riding a wave of discontent with the country’s generous immigration policy and inability to handle migration-related problems; the party is now firmly established as Sweden’s second most popular.¹ Neither the current nor the former governing bloc are expected to secure a majority in the Riksdag, Sweden’s parliament.

Sweden’s leadership in pushing European values in former Soviet republics, combined with the end of its neutrality, has placed the country in a values-based conflict of interest with Russia. Swedish liberalism and a perceived rising problem with criminality have become frequent topics in Russian state propaganda. Geopolitically, Sweden is firmly oriented toward cooperation with its Nordic neighbors, the European Union (EU), the United States, and NATO. If the Sweden Democrats gain more political influence, they are certain to push for a more distanced relationship from NATO and the EU. This aligns with the will of the Kremlin, which prefers to negotiate with individual states rather than the EU and favors a neutral Sweden.

Major Players

Unlike in many other European countries, no openly pro-Kremlin parties sit in the Riksdag. However, several parties have agendas, which overlap with that of the Kremlin, making them vulnerable to influence operations and potential agents of influence themselves.

On the right flank of this equation is the populist Sweden Democrats. With roots in 1980s neo-Nazi movements, it is foremost an anti-immigration

The Eurasia Center’s mission is to enhance transatlantic cooperation in promoting stability, democratic values and prosperity in Eurasia, from Eastern Europe and Turkey in the West to the Caucasus, Russia and Central Asia in the East.

¹ David Ahlin, Björn Benzler, and Ipsos. “DN/IPSOS POLITISK BAROMETER, 19 Juni 2018.” DN/IPSOS POLITISK BAROMETER, June 19, 2018. Accessed August 31, 2018. https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2018-06/dn_ipsos_politisk_barometer_juni_2018_ver_1_hemsida.pdf.”

party, campaigning against Muslim influence and for Sweden to promote “traditional values” and to follow the United Kingdom’s footsteps out of the EU. This agenda corresponds well with the Kremlin’s strategic goals in Europe, and Moscow probably identifies the party as its strongest potential ally in Swedish politics, shown indirectly through frequent invitations to participate in propaganda channels like RT, election observation trips, etc. Officially, Sweden Democrats judges Russia harshly and Sweden’s relationship to NATO divides the party. However, outright sympathy to Vladimir Putin’s nationalism and social conservatism can be found in its lower ranks.

On the left, nostalgia for neutrality combined with large doses of anti-Americanism and Euroscepticism prompt politicians to embrace and spread Russian narratives, propose policies in line with Moscow’s foreign policy, and resort to “whataboutism.” The Left Party and elements of the Green Party engage in such activities, often in cooperation with the peace movement and smaller parties outside of the parliament, like the Feminist Party and the openly pro-Kremlin Communist Party.

No Russian media publish in Swedish (the Kremlin-controlled news agency Sputnik launched a Swedish website in 2015 but shut it down the following year²), and the reach of Russian media in the country is limited. However, a plethora of digital media platforms, related to the political groups mentioned above, share Russian narratives most notably on the extreme right. These online magazines have a symbiotic relation to Russian state media; they quote propaganda outlets such as Sputnik and RT and are in turn frequently quoted as sources or consulted as experts.

Building Networks of Influence

When voters elected two members of the Sweden Democrats to the European Parliament in 2014, they

joined the Eurosceptic party group Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy and the affiliated Alliance for Direct Democracy in Europe (ADDE), both led by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Other noteworthy members of Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy are Italy’s 5 Star Movement and Alternative for Germany, both notoriously pro-Kremlin. This year Sweden Democrats left ADDE to join the Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformist (ECR) party group, which contains the British Conservative Party.

In recent years, the Sweden Democrats board adopted a zero-tolerance policy on racism and excluded the party’s most radical elements, with an eye to increasing its mainstream appeal and electoral potential. In 2015, Sweden Democrats dismissed chairman and the deputy chairman of the party’s youth branch due to their connection with “identitarians,” a white-nationalist movement that draws inspiration from the Russian ideologue Alexander Dugin. The party subsequently cut all ties to its radical youth organization.

Riding this wave of dissatisfaction with a radical party turning “mainstream,” Gustav Kasselstrand, former chairman of the Sweden Democrats youth branch, announced that he would run for parliament with his newly founded party, Alternative for Sweden.

Alternative for Sweden has yet to present a detailed agenda, but seems poised to develop into the country’s most pro-Kremlin political group. Apart from seeking relations with the Kremlin, Kasselstrand has touted the success of Austria’s Freedom Party, Hungary’s Fidesz, Alternative for Germany, and the National Front in France.³ At this stage, though, Alternative for Sweden’s chances of reaching the threshold to get into the Riksdag appear small.

Even further to the right, the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) has little popular support

Russia’s attempts to influence Swedish politics will not stop in September, and an inability to deal with actual problems makes fertile soil for influence operations.

2 “Report: Russia spread fake news and disinformation in Sweden,” Radio Sweden, January 9, 2017, <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=6604516>.

3 Gustav Kasselstrand, “Why we are seeking the support of Trump voters,” Alternative for Sweden, March 21, 2018, <https://alternativforsverige.se/why-we-are-seeking-the-support-of-trump-voters/>.



The neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) has little popular support but nevertheless manages to stage large, attention-grabbing marches and demonstrations. *Photo credit:* Frankie Fouganthin/Wikimedia.

but nevertheless manages to stage large, attention-grabbing marches and demonstrations. In 2015, leaders of the Russian Imperial Movement visited Sweden, held meetings with NRM, and reportedly donated money to the Swedish outfit.⁴

On the other side of the ideological spectrum is the Left Party, formerly the Swedish Communist Party. It was a founding member of the Comintern and was closely affiliated with the Soviet Union until the 1960s. When the Cold War ended, the Left Party moved in a democratic direction and erased communism from its identity. Today, the Left Party has no relationship with Moscow but, like Sweden Democrats, it shares some priorities with Moscow.

The Green Party is a junior partner in the Social Democrat-led government, giving it influence that transcends its relatively low popular support (it gained

6.9 percent of the vote in the 2014 election).⁵ The Greens' foreign-policy spokesperson, Valter Mutz, has welcomed some of Sweden's most infamous pro-Russian propagandists to his office in the parliament. In 2015, the Green Party fired Mutz's foreign-policy adviser due to his frequent contact with the Russian Embassy, from which he was also accused of accepting gifts. The adviser, who has not been identified by name in the Swedish media, has strongly denied all the accusations.

Alternative Media Universe

Self-described "alternative" media are increasingly popular in Sweden, mainly among supporters of the Sweden Democrats, who generally distrust traditional news outlets. They stretch across a broad ideological spectrum from the far right, to the nationalism of the Sweden Democrats, to outright Nazism. It is unclear how they are funded, but the Stockholm daily *Dagens*

4 "Ryska fascister: Starkast band har vi med svenska nazister," *Aftonbladet*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/k2xOj/ryska-fascister-starkast-band-har-vi-med-svenska-nazister>.

5 "Val till riksdagen—Röster," Swedish Election Authority, accessed May 31, 2018, <https://data.val.se/val/val2014/slutresultat/R/rike/>.

Nyheter traced ads on six of the most influential of such platforms to Russian businessmen with backgrounds in cybercrime.⁶

For example, *Fria Tider* (*Free Times*) enjoys a symbiotic relation to Sputnik, frequently sourcing material from and providing material to the Russian propaganda outlet. *Fria Tider* is the first choice when Alternative for Sweden wants to reach its core sympathizers.

The Swedish far right has also spawned a handful of pro-Kremlin YouTube personalities, who have managed to attract substantial international audiences, including Angry Foreigner, Red Ice (aka Henrik Palmgren—now based in the United States), and The Golden One (Marcus Follin).

Online publications operate along similar lines to those that are found on the left and among conspiracy theorists. The most noteworthy are *Newsvoice* and the blog *Jinge.se*, two of Sweden's most frequent purveyors of Russian narratives. Both build bridges between the far right and the far left. Anders Rommelsjö, editor of *Jinge.se*, is deputy chairman of a small and, in Sweden, little-known organization called Swedish Doctors for Human Rights, members of which frequently appear in Russian state media as ostensible experts on chemical warfare, declaring Russia free from guilt and defaming the White Helmets in Syria.⁷

Cyber Attacks

In March 2016, nine major Swedish news sites were targeted in a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack. Traffic overloaded the networks for four days, creating disturbances and keeping readers from the news sites for hours. Many of the IP addresses used in the DDoS were Russian, but no actor was pointed out at the time. In August 2018, however, *Buzzfeed* published a story based on an internal cable from the US Department of State, obtained through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit by BuzzFeed News and Ryan Shapiro, a PhD candidate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

6 "Extremsajternas pengar kopplas till ryska och ukrainska af-färsmän," *Dagens Nyheter*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.dn.se/ekonomi/extremsajternas-pengar-kopplas-till-ryska-och-ukrainska-affarsman/>.

7 "Gasattacker förnekas med hjälp från svensk läkargrupp," *Dagens Nyheter*, April 21, 2017, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/gasattacker-fornekas-med-hjalp-fran-svensk-lakargrupp/>.

The cable states that,

"Russian actors are suspected of being behind recent efforts to infiltrate Sweden with distorted and false information about NATO in the Swedish press, at think tank events, and on social media, notably in the run-up to the 2016 Swedish ratification of the NATO Host Nation Support Agreement, confusing public perceptions about Sweden's partnership with the Alliance. Russia is also suspected of carrying out cyberattacks against Swedish media outlets in March 2016."

Kevin Collier, cybersecurity correspondent for BuzzFeed News, wrote that the cable "is notable for using plain language to attribute the cyberattack's likely perpetrator, something that the US government only does publicly with enormous care and as part of an intra-agency announcement, and never on an attack in which the US itself isn't the victim."

The events in March 2016 were on an extraordinary in scale, but hardly unique. In January 2017, a representative of Sweden's national authority for Signals Intelligence, the National Defence Radio Establishment, declared that the authority identifies about 10 000 cyber acts against Swedish goals that can be traced to foreign governments - each month.⁸

Conclusion

Sweden's upcoming elections will likely usher in a time of instability and political turmoil. Russian propaganda spotlights Swedish social issues: migration-related crime, poor integration, and Swedish Islamic fundamentalists fighting in Syria. These are not imaginary problems, although Russian outlets exaggerate them, and it is of utmost importance that Swedish politicians find credible solutions to regain people's trust. Russia's attempts to influence Swedish politics will not stop in September, and an inability to deal with actual problems makes fertile soil for influence operations. Russia's influence operations against Sweden tend to be low-intensity and long term. Even if no major events like hackings or cyberattacks take place before the elections, it is clear that Russia has an ambition to influence the political landscape in Sweden.

8 Jan Nylander, "Utländska IT-spioner bakom 100.000 nätattacker förra året," *SVT*, last updated January 9, 2017, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/utlandska-it-spioner-bakom-100-000-natat-tacker-forra-aret>.

Atlantic Council Board of Directors

INTERIM CHAIRMAN

*James L. Jones, Jr.

CHAIRMAN EMERITUS

Brent Scowcroft

CHAIRMAN, INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD

David McCormick

PRESIDENT AND CEO

*Frederick Kempe

EXECUTIVE VICE CHAIRS

*Adrienne Arsht

*Stephen J. Hadley

VICE CHAIRS

*Robert J. Abernethy

*Richard W. Edelman

*C. Boyden Gray

*George Lund

*Virginia A. Mulberger

*W. DeVier Pierson

*John J. Studzinski

TREASURER

*Brian C. McK. Henderson

SECRETARY

*Walter B. Slocombe

DIRECTORS

Stéphane Abrial

Odeh Aburdene

*Peter Ackerman

Timothy D. Adams

Bertrand-Marc Allen

*Michael Andersson

David D. Aufhauser

Matthew C. Bernstein

*Rafic A. Bizri

Dennis C. Blair

Thomas L. Blair

Philip M. Breedlove

Reuben E. Brigety II

Myron Brilliant

*Esther Brimmer

Reza Bundy

R. Nicholas Burns

Richard R. Burt

Michael Calvey

James E. Cartwright

John E. Chapoton

Ahmed Charai

Melanie Chen

Michael Chertoff

George Chopivsky

Wesley K. Clark

David W. Craig

Helima Croft

*Ralph D. Crosby, Jr.

Nelson W. Cunningham

Ivo H. Daalder

*Ankit N. Desai

*Paula J. Dobriansky

Christopher J. Dodd

Thomas J. Egan, Jr.

*Stuart E. Eizenstat

Thomas R. Eldridge

Julie Finley

*Alan H. Fleischmann

Jendayi E. Frazer

Ronald M. Freeman

Courtney Geduldig

*Robert S. Gelbard

Gianni Di Giovanni

Thomas H. Glocer

Murathan Günal

John B. Goodman

*Sherri W. Goodman

Amir A. Handjani

John D. Harris, II

Frank Haun

Michael V. Hayden

Annette Heuser

Amos Hochstein

Ed Holland

*Karl V. Hopkins

Robert D. Hormats

Mary L. Howell

Wolfgang F. Ischinger

Deborah Lee James

Reuben Jeffery, III

Joia M. Johnson

Stephen R. Kappes

*Maria Pica Karp

Andre Kelleners

Sean Kevelighan

*Zalmay M. Khalilzad

Robert M. Kimmitt

Henry A. Kissinger

C. Jeffrey Knittel

Franklin D. Kramer

Laura Lane

Richard L. Lawson

*Jan M. Lodal

Douglas Lute

*Jane Holl Lute

William J. Lynn

Wendy W. Makins

Zaza Mamulaishvili

Mian M. Mansha

Gerardo Mato

William E. Mayer

Timothy McBride

John M. McHugh

Eric D.K. Melby

Franklin C. Miller

Judith A. Miller

*Alexander V. Mirtchev

Susan Molinari

Michael J. Morell

Richard Morningstar

Edward J. Newberry

Thomas R. Nides

Franco Nuschese

Joseph S. Nye

Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg

Ahmet M. Oren

Sally A. Painter

*Ana I. Palacio

Carlos Pascual

Alan Pellegrini

David H. Petraeus

Thomas R. Pickering

Daniel B. Poneman

Dina H. Powell

Arnold L. Punaro

Robert Rangel

Thomas J. Ridge

Michael J. Rogers

Charles O. Rossotti

Robert O. Rowland

Harry Sachinis

Rajiv Shah

Stephen Shapiro

Wendy Sherman

Kris Singh

James G. Stavridis

Richard J.A. Steele

Paula Stern

Robert J. Stevens

Robert L. Stout, Jr.

*Ellen O. Tauscher

Nathan D. Tibbits

Frances M. Townsend

Clyde C. Tuggle

Melanne Verveer

Charles F. Wald

Michael F. Walsh

Maciej Witucki

Neal S. Wolin

Guang Yang

Mary C. Yates

Dov S. Zakheim

HONORARY DIRECTORS

David C. Acheson

James A. Baker, III

Harold Brown

Frank C. Carlucci, III

Ashton B. Carter

Robert M. Gates

Michael G. Mullen

Leon E. Panetta

William J. Perry

Colin L. Powell

Condoleezza Rice

George P. Shultz

Horst Teltschik

John W. Warner

William H. Webster

*Executive Committee Members

List as of September 3, 2018



The Atlantic Council is a nonpartisan organization that promotes constructive US leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the central role of the Atlantic community in meeting today's global challenges.

© 2018 The Atlantic Council of the United States. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Atlantic Council, except in the case of brief quotations in news articles, critical articles, or reviews. Please direct inquiries to:

Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,
Washington, DC 20005

(202) 463-7226, www.AtlanticCouncil.org