

UKRAINE, RIGHT-WINGERS AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

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At the Swedish Parliament | Photo Credit: AFP

It's been a bad year. Not only did [Russia invade Ukraine](#), but there were also other disasters that included the burning out of the Swedish pole star of social democratic thought. Olof Palme's since long neglected North-South partnership and non-alignment was scrapped in favour of [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#) (NATO)-membership. The election campaign was dominated by issues of immigration and crime, with no clear alternative for the victims of social and civic inequalities. The Social Democratic Party gained votes at the expense of possible allies but lost out to the radical rightist Swedish Democrats, who are now dominating the new conservative government's agenda. Rightists around the world are jubilant. What should leftists and liberal progressives do?

Leading Swedish social democrats want to follow their Danish colleagues who won national elections two months later by accepting the right-wing arguments on refugees and police batons while adding welfare for the "real Danes". But what is left of social democracy if its core principle of democracy based on equality of all people — and international solidarity to sustain it — is undermined?

Leftist social democrats want to counter the rightist thesis of social security through ethnic nationalism with radical economic and social policies. But as German leftist theorist Wolfgang Streeck argues, democratic decisions towards such policies have been undermined by global neoliberalism. And there are few ideas on how to influence international power relations to gain more national autonomy by strengthening progressives around the world. So, the rightists may sustain their support by asserting that it remains necessary to protect the "original citizens" behind nativist borders.

Acting by way of NATO to help Ukraine and save liberal democracy is also problematic. Russian imperialism must be contained and the countries nearby, including Sweden, which feel particularly threatened, need to coordinate their defence. Perhaps it is effective to do so within NATO. But in the long term, the situation worsens if the adaptation to the priorities of the military alliance reduces the possibilities of countering the fundamental causes of aggressions such as Ukraine, the U.S.'s interventions, and supporting the struggle for rights and democracy as in Turkey and Kurdistan. This was not considered in the security policy analysis that legitimised

Sweden's NATO application or even dealt with thoroughly within the Social Democratic Party. Hence, it is time the basic problems are addressed, beyond NATO's provocations and Putin's tsarist dreams.

It is often said that everything is different after February 24 (the Ukraine invasion), but this is not true. From a historical point of view, the Russian onslaught is not a new evil that can be dealt with separately. It is certainly exceptional to start a large-scale brutal war in Europe, but the reasons and methods are largely the same as for the conservative national aggression worldwide in favour of nativist and identity politics, against democratic freedoms and rights, the rule of law, dissidents, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, women, and immigrants, within and beyond national borders. Most importantly, the right-wing nationalism is in turn largely a reaction to the downsides of the third wave of rights and democracy in the context of neoliberal globalisation. So, the fundamental questions relate to these downsides and how to counter them.

The third wave of democracy began among liberals and broadly defined social democrats in the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America in the mid-1970s. It spread to Africa and Asia and was reinforced with the fall of the wall in Berlin and the Soviet Union. Soon, however, the advance of neoliberalism, combined with the enduring imperial western interests, and the continued dominance and corruption of elites in the Global South, undermined the capacity of liberal democracy to offer ordinary people influence as well as justice and prosperity. Liberals and mainstream social democrats lost much of their credibility. And the more radical democratic left in trade unions, social movements and civil society groups was usually weak, fragmented and without political representation.

Many people have instead been attracted by left-wing populism (which has often failed) and, above all, by "strong" right-wing nationalist leaders. In socio-economically imploding Russia, for example, Boris Yeltsin's elitist democratisation was combined with western-backed neo-liberalism and oligarchs who seized public property for their own gain. Dissatisfaction with this allowed Vladimir Putin to criticise the spread of liberalism and NATO. He could offer stability, foster Russian nationalism, win elections and the support of the Church, and strengthen his power through the security service and business partners. In the Global South, outrage over the shortcomings of liberalisation, including corruption, increased too.

Consequently, for example, the leader in India and "strong leaders" such as Rodrigo Duterte and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines were able to win elections and acquire absolute power, as did Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. In South Africa, the African National Congress's project was destroyed, and the pro-democrats of the Arab Spring were left to their fate, Syria became an inferno and the refugee flows increased, generating rightist reactions as far north as Scandinavia. In a similar way, the West bet on compromises with the military in Myanmar, which could then crush the democracy movement. In the U.S., Donald Trump also took over and his successors live on, as do Brexit and neo-nationalism in Europe.

Meanwhile, the attempts to spread democracy by military means, as in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, have failed. The mainstream democracy support takes on a routinised life of its own. Sweden, for one, has even reduced aid to the pro-democracy forces that must be strengthened to solve the problems of plunder and unequal development, and has made special concessions to the Turkish autocracy to get into NATO. The hopeful cases such as Chile, Colombia, Brazil, and India's Kerala are few and short of support. Many people and leaders are critical of the sanctions policies for Ukraine that hits them harder than Russia. Moreover, the invitation of Asian allies against Russia and China to the NATO meeting in Madrid epitomises the rise of a new worldwide Cold War along with rearmament, nuclear threats, proxy wars and support for authoritarian allies at the expense of human rights, democracy, welfare, and the climate.

Therefore, while non-aligned countries in the South may hopefully be able to initiate peace negotiations, we should all do everything to combine the defence against Russia's aggression by countering its root causes: that the third democratic wave has, step by step, nourished an authoritarian reaction because it failed to link neoliberal globalisation with sustainable development and welfare. Consequently, the principles of liberal democracy can only be defended and deepened as part of a broad, social, democratically-oriented countermovement that combines support for pro-democrats with reforms for sustainable development that are based on productive and participatory welfare reforms. There are positive examples, but expansion calls for studies of what is possible and an exchange of experience. This would be a new historic task for concerned scholars, self-critical liberals, environmental and left-wing activists, and social democrats who do not back down to rightist national moods to win elections.

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