

Ukraine, right wing nationalism and the crisis of democracy

Olle Törnquist

It's been a bad year. Not only did Russia invade Ukraine. Other disasters included the burning out of the Swedish pole star of social democratic thought. Olof Palme's for decades neglected North-South partnership and non-alignment was scrapped entirely in favour of NATO-membership. The following election campaign was dominated by issues of immigration and crime. And there was no clear alternative for those negatively affected by social and civic inequalities. Social democratic leader Magdalena Andersson rejoiced at the increase of two percentage points in the vote for her party, but that was at the expense of possible allies. Many did not vote or switched to the radical rightist Swedish Democrats, including in the socially and criminally "vulnerable areas". The party failed to counter the radical right, which is now dominating the new conservative government's agenda. Rightists around the world are jubilant. The social democratic principles of sustainable development based on social justice achieved by democratic means are as important as ever, but the retreats are devastating. What should leftists and liberal progressives do?

Swedish social democratic party leaders apparently want to follow their Danish colleagues who won their national election two months later by accepting the right-wing arguments on immigration, refugees and police batons while adding better 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 suggest more progressive economic policies and welfare reforms to counter the far-right thesis of social security through ethnic nationalism. But there are few ideas on how to influence the international power relations that reduce the national room for action to implement the reforms. So the rightists may sustain their support by asserting that it is necessary to protect "real Swedes" 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, feel particularly threatened and must 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 against Ukraine, as well as US interventions, and of supporting the struggle for rights and democracy in, for example, Turkey and Kurdistan. Strangely enough, this was not considered in the security policy analysis that legitimised Sweden's NATO application or even dealt with thoroughly in the dialogue within the Social Democratic Party. Hence it is high time to address the roots of the problems. These are neither about NATO-provocations, or Putin's attempts to restore the Russian empire, or "white workers" in US and European rust belts – rather they are global.

It is often said that everything is different after February 24, 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, motives 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, immigrants, or poor drug addicts – within and beyond national borders. Most importantly, the right-wing nationalism is largely in turn a reaction to the downsides of neoliberal globalisation, combined with the shortcomings of the third wave of rights and democracy that also reached Russia. The fundamental issue is thus why things went so badly and why it is so difficult to counter the causes.

The third wave of democracy began among social liberals and broadly defined social democrats in the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America in the mid-1970s. It spread to Asia and Africa and was reinforced with the fall of the wall in Berlin and the implosion of 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. Mainstream liberals and 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 failed) and above all by right-wing nationalism and "strong leaders". In socio-economically imploding Russia, for example, Yeltsin's elitist democratisation was combined with Western-backed neo-liberalism and oligarchs who could seize public property for their own gain. Dissatisfaction with this allowed Putin to criticise the spread of liberalism and NATO. He could offer stability, foster Russian nationalism and ideas of its superiority, win elections and the support of the Church, and strengthen his power through the security service and his own business partners. In the Global South, outrage over the shortcomings of liberalisation, including corruption, increased too. Consequently, for example, the Hindu fundamentalist Modi in India and "strong leaders" such as Duterte and Marcos in the Philippines were able to win elections and acquire absolute power, as did Bolsonaro in Brazil. In South Africa, the ANC'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 Burma, which could then crush the democracy movement. To name a few examples. In the US, Donald Trump also took over and his successors live on, as do Brexit and neo-nationalism in Europe. All the while China's party-led state-capitalism has been consolidated, Hong Kong's pro-democrats have been imprisoned, and Taiwan's democracy remains threatened.

With the radical social democratic theorist Wolfgang Streeck (*Critical Encounters*, Verso, 2020), it can be said that because global neoliberalism has undermined the possibilities of promoting welfare with the help of democratic decisions, more national autonomy is needed. Unionists and other activists add the importance of international organisation but usually agree that it is fundamental to promote the national room for action by regulating the transnational companies and finance capital. The linchpin, however, in the North as well as the South, is the lack of powerful pro-democracy movements that can press for such demands and get their governments to implement them.

Meanwhile the established democracy support takes on a routinised life of its own while pro-democracy forces are typically left behind and poorly coordinated. Exceptions such as in Chile, Colombia, Brazil, and Indian Kerala are few and short of support. The attempts to spread freedom and democracy by military means as in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya have failed. By now many people and leaders are critical of sanctions policies for Ukraine that hits them harder than Russia. The global inflation is rooted in a shortage of goods due to nationalism during the pandemic and conflicts such as in Ukraine, but until these problems are resolved, austerity policies return to the fore, electricity prices increase, and fossil fuels gain prominence again, creating debt crises, hitting the weak worst, and deepening the climate emergency.

Consequently, we should do everything to combine the defence against Russia's aggression with countering its root causes: that the liberal democratic wave failed to link market-driven globalisation with sustainable development and welfare. Instead, Sweden, for one, has cut 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.

In addition, Asian allies against Russia and China were invited to the NATO meeting in Madrid, indicating that a new worldwide cold war is emerging. We are experiencing rearmament, nuclear threats, proxy wars and support for authoritarian allies at the expense of human rights, democracy, welfare, and the climate, in a way that is very similar to the undermining of the anti-fascist and anti-colonial wave of democracy after the Second World War. Is it really a new and more unpredictable cold war we want?

The crux, in other words, is that the liberal third wave of democracy has step by step nourished an authoritarian reaction due to its connection to global neoliberalism, continued elitism and corruption. Now the principles of liberal democracy can therefore only be defended and deepened as part of a social democratically oriented countermovement for sustainable development, in the spirit of Keynes and with elements of productive welfare reforms and democratic partnership. This requires that the defence against Putin's imperialism is supplemented with the specification of the weaknesses that caused the third wave of democracy to fail in Russia as in most other cases in the context of neo-liberalism. It would be a new historic task for self-critical liberals in the spirit of John Stuart Mill's social visions, environmental and left-wing activists and social democrats who do not back down to rightist national moods to win elections.

As far as my own studies go what needs to be done can be summarised as follows, but others need to contribute more knowledge and experience. In NATO-countries politicians must be hard pressed to show that the security cooperation within the alliance and the important reception of refugees from Ukraine can really be combined with more, not less, international support for the actors around the world who promote sustainable welfare-based development with the help of human rights and democracy. In addition, NATO cooperation needs to be supplemented with investments in negotiations and compromises for peace and common security without nuclear weapons, against a new cold war. Non-aligned countries in the South may play an important role. At the same time, global autocratisation means that much more of democracy support than now must become independent of intergovernmental conflicts and be directed towards promoting pro-

democracy forces in trade unions and other interest organisations as well as among journalists, academics, cultural workers, and civic groups. Still, the world is not driven forward by democracy support alone. My own studies and those of many others show that to gain broad acceptance and strength, pro-democracy work must be linked to cooperation with likeminded partners towards regulation of finance capital and transnational production and trade, as well as to development programmes based on environmental sustainability, more and better jobs, free education, social security, gender equality and protection against crime. Unfortunately, different civic- and interest-based organisations with separate priorities find it difficult to come together on this, especially when few people have permanent employment and unions are weak, notably in the Global South. Therefore, international cooperation needs to prioritise unions and other organisations that, in addition to their core activities, build broad alliances for political and social reforms along with partnership governance. This has been proven possible. But such transformative reforms as for social security, and with democratic partnership, do not grow on trees but calls for an investment in studies and exchange of experience.

It is high time for internationally oriented democrats in Scandinavia *and* elsewhere, irrespective of party affiliation, to renew the agenda.

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