

THE POLE STAR OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY HAS BURNT OUT, WHAT SHOULD WE DO NOW?

Olle Törnquist

For ages, Sweden has been the pole star of social democratic thought, albeit a fading one. Now it has burnt out, short of international alternatives to the victorious radical right and to NATO. Self-critical liberals in the spirit of John Stuart Mill, greens and leftists need to get together, deciding on how to move ahead.

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In an iconic Swedish progressive song about the imperial “Titanic” hitting an iceberg, “it started with a judder on the lower deck.” In real world of the 1970s, however, it was market-oriented globalisation that brought down Willy Brandt’s and Olof Palme’s attempt to build a new Keynesian world order in collaboration with the Global South when national Keynesianism had become obsolete. The French President Francois Mitterrand had to give up his socialist reforms in 1983 and the Swedish Minister of Finance Kjell Olof Feldt deregulated the credit market in 1985. The “third way”, subsequently, of Britain’s Tony Blair, Germany’s Gerhard Schröder, USA’s Bill Clinton and Sweden’s Göran Persson, among others, was linked to the collapse of the Soviet Union and a new global wave of democracy, but it was countered by “strongmen”, appealing to ethnic nationalism and acting with the support of countless malcontents. Swedish social democratic leader and Prime Minister Stefan Löfven and Foreign Minister Margot Wallström tried to overcome the limitations of the “third-way” with social democratic internationalism, but stumbled on the lack of support on part of the West for the Arab Spring – which led to the refugee crisis, the sealing of Swedish borders too, and to the idea of nativist democracy and welfare gaining wider acceptance. The next retreat was the application for NATO membership, followed by an election campaign dominated by “hard” issues of immigration and crime and without any clear alternative for the victims of increasing social and civic inequalities. The new social democratic leader Magdalena Andersson rejoiced at the increase of two percentage points in the vote for her party, but these advances came at the expense of other parties in a possible government coalition. In addition, many abstained from voting, eight percent of those who previously voted social democratic switched to the radical rightist Swedish Democrats, and eleven percent abandoned the Social Democratic Party in the “particularly vulnerable areas”.¹ The party did not manage to counter the radical right, which won the day. Its victory among the youth in the secondary school elections is even more frightening.

The social democratic Swedish pole star is no more. Rightists around the world are jubilant. Condolences from international colleagues and friends fill my mailbox. The universal social democratic cornerstone of sustainable development based on social justice achieved by democratic means is more important than ever, but the retreats are devastating. What should we do now?

¹ In accordance with the election survey by the Swedish Public Service Television.

Insular reforms and NATO not enough

The quests by Swedish leftist social democrats for more progressive economic policy, regional justice and welfare reforms with a focus on better education, health care and jobs for all to curb inequality and the climate crisis are important alternatives to the far-right thesis of security through ethnic nationalism and police batons. But there are no ideas on how to influence international power relations and the crisis of democracy that **reduce** the national room for action to implement their good reforms. So the rightists can sustain their support by asserting that it is necessary to bet on protecting "real Swedes" behind nativist borders. To counter this argument, there must be an international alternative.

Acting by way of NATO, however, is not enough. Russian imperialism in Ukraine must be contained, but how can this be done best? 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 the Russian 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. The issues were also dealt with very sparingly in the dialogue within the Social Democratic Party. It cannot continue like this. An in-depth discussion about international cooperation is urgently needed.

The Russian attack is not a new evil but part of global right-wing nationalism against the downside of liberalism

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 neo-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.

Moreover, neo-nationalism is in turn a reaction to the downsides of neoliberal and ordoliberal (judicial) globalisation, combined with the shortcomings of the third wave of rights and democracy that also reached Russia. Today's Russian aggression is thus "only" the latest, but for us in Northern Europe, the clearest example of this setback. To counter it, it is not enough to describe how people and ideals are trampled, to fight against the perpetrators and to demand. We must also ask ourselves why things have gone so badly, and why it is so difficult to counter the deeper causes.

The third wave of democracy began among social liberals and broadly defined social democrats in Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula in the early 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 and the continued dominance and corruption of elites 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. There is no doubt about it. I am not the only concerned scholar who has studied it for a lifetime.

With the radical social democratic theorist Wolfgang Streeck,² 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. But that is not enough, even if one adds more international organisation. It is certainly crucial to promote the national room for action by regulating the transnational companies and finance capital, but the linchpin 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 as part of social democratic oriented development- and welfare policies.

Putin and other "strong men"

Thus it is that many people who want progressive national reforms have instead been attracted by left-wing populism (which has failed) and above all by right-wing nationalism and "strong leaders".

In economically weak Russia, 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, state control and his own business partners.

In the Global South, outrage over the shortcomings of liberalisation, including corruption, also increased. 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 at the same time the pro-democrats of the Arab Spring were left to their fate, Syria became an inferno and the refugee flows increased. 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 - now in Sweden as well. 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.

Democracy assistance with obstacles and short-term sanctions

At the same time, much of the established democracy-aid takes on a routinised life of its own with evaluations and technocratic reforms while pro-democracy forces are left behind. Moreover, coordination between human rights activists and popular interest organisations

² Streeck, W. *Critical Encounters*: Verso 2020

is usually poor and the exceptions such as in Chile, Colombia and Indian Kerala are few and in need of more support. Meanwhile the attempts to spread freedom and democracy by military means as in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya have failed.

In addition, many people in the South in particular, are now reacting against sanctions policies that hit them harder than Russia. Progressive politicians like Lula da Silva in Brazil fear less popular support and mumble when asked questions about Ukraine, or they are overtaken by authoritarian leaders. Inflation too in the Western world is rooted in a shortage of goods due to nationalism during the pandemic and conflicts such as in Ukraine. And without policies to solve these problems, austerity policies return to the fore, electricity prices increase and fossil fuels return to prominence, creating debt crises, hitting the weak worst and deepening the climate crisis.

Reduced aid to counteract the basic problems and the risk of a new cold war

Consequently, we should do everything to combine the immediate 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. But instead, Sweden 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.

In addition, Asian allies against Russia and China were also invited to the NATO meeting in Madrid, and other signals too indicate 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 cold war we want? And one that is now even more unpredictable and dangerous?

Defence of liberal democracy requires more social democratically oriented development

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. The principles of liberal democracy can now only be defended and deepened as part of a social democratically oriented counter-movement for sustainable development, in the spirit of Keynes and with elements of productive welfare reforms and democratic partnership. Much like evolved in Western Europe during three decades after the Second World War, but now also to resist a more unpredictable cold war, humanitarian suffering and a climate disaster.

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 – and that the right-wing nationalist reaction is countered with alliances for alternative reforms. It would be a new historic task for self-critical liberals in the spirit of John Stuart Mill, environmental and left-wing activists and social democrats who do not back down to neo-national moods to win elections but revive their ideological

core of sustainable international development based on social equality by democratic means.

As far as my own studies go, the main things that need to be done can be summarised in six points, but others need to contribute more knowledge and experience:

1. Responsible politicians in NATO-countries must show in practice that the security cooperation within 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. Nevertheless, it is not enough to support freedoms and rights, elections, and anti-corruption work. The world is not driven forward by democracy aid alone. My own studies and those of many others show that to gain broad acceptance and strength, democracy support must be linked to cooperation with likeminded partners towards regulation of finance capital and transnational production (including favourable trade- and investment agreements), in addition to development programmes based on environmental sustainability, more and better jobs, free education, social security, gender equality and protection against crime.
5. 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 support needs to prioritise trade unions and other organisations that, in addition to their core activities, build broad alliances for political and social reforms that include participatory democracy.
6. This has been proven. It is not impossible! But such transformative reforms as for social security, and with democratic partnership, do not grow on trees. Therefore, an investment in studies and exchange of experience is also required, so that researchers, experts, and pro-democrats can be helped to outline what is possible.

In the early 90s, when Olof Palme's internationalism was weakened by the advance of neoliberalism, social democrats and like-minded people in Sweden congregated to renew the agenda. Twenty years later, new attempts were made under Stefan Löfven. They vanished and now the Swedish pole star has burnt out. It is high time for internationally oriented democrats, irrespective of party affiliation, in Scandinavia and elsewhere, to take new steps together.

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