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Mehra, Tanya, Thomas Renard and Merlina Herbach, ed(s). *Female Jihadis Facing Justice: Comparing Approaches in Europe*. The Hague: ICCT Press 2024.

Schmid, Alex (ed.) *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness*, The Hague: ICCT, 2021.

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## **Sweden: Of Politicians and Militants**

**Morgan Finnsjö**

### **Russian Influence on Sweden's Far Right: a Matter of Life and Death**

In the winter of 2016, Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city, suffered a series of terror attacks. On three occasions across three months, anonymous perpetrators used improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to target asylum seekers and leftists. Luckily, the crudely timed devices failed to kill anyone, though one man who accidentally discovered one of the bombs was caught in a blast and left permanently maimed. It would turn out that behind the bombings were three active members of the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement, and that two of them had been given paramilitary training by their Russian allies in a camp outside St. Petersburg mere months before carrying out the terror attacks in Sweden. These revelations would lead directly to the subsequent designation of the Russian Imperial Movement as a terror group by the US State Department.

The case of the Nazi bombers of Gothenburg, which will be detailed below as one of the two case studies of this chapter, is one of recent history's clearest examples of the lethal dimension of Russian influence on right-wing extremists in the West.

Less violent, but perhaps no less troubling, is the case of the Sweden Democrats, a party of the radical right which has become a central force in Swedish politics – and which has brought with it into the halls of power individuals whose alignment with the Kremlin's agenda is so blatant that, when brought to light, it has repeatedly caused national scandal. These scandals are the subject of the second of this chapter's case studies, both of which will be preceded by an overview of relevant context.

## Historical Context: Sweden and Russia

In Swedish public discourse and policymaking, Russia has long been considered a primary geopolitical adversary. This view has been the dominant tendency of the Swedish political establishment since the 16th century up to the present day.<sup>1</sup> Positioning itself as Western-oriented but neutral during the Cold War, Sweden in this period nevertheless covertly developed close ties with NATO, in what has been described by historians as a “hidden alliance”.<sup>2</sup> A brief period of optimism about Russia in the 1990s, in light of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decline of Russian military and economic power, which fuelled hopes of a democratisation of Sweden’s eastern neighbour, gradually gave way to a renewed caution during the rule of Putin.<sup>3</sup>

In 2014, after the invasion of Crimea by Russia, Swedish-Russian relations deteriorated. The Swedish Security Service for the first time since the Cold War publicly pointed to Russia as a national security threat and stated its assessment that the Kremlin was “preparing for war, or threatening to use armed force, against Sweden”.<sup>4</sup> In 2015, Russian diplomats were accused of espionage and asked to leave the country. By 2016, the Security Service said that Russia was engaged in psychological warfare against Sweden, targeting both policymakers and the public through complex and malign influence operations.<sup>5</sup>

The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 strongly galvanised Swedish politics and public opinion against Russia. In May 2022, the Government of Sweden published an analysis developed by a committee composed of members from all parties in the parliament in which Russia’s aggression against Ukraine was labelled as a flagrant crime against international law and against the European security order.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the analysis stated that Swedish security had been significantly impaired as a result. The paper also underscored that politically, “Russia is developing in an increasingly totalitarian direction”.<sup>7</sup> A few days later, the Government of Sweden formally took the decision to end the country’s long-standing policy of “freedom from alliances” (alliansfrihet) by applying for Swedish membership in NATO.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Swedish Far Right and Russia**

### ***The Extreme Right***

Right-wing extremism in Sweden, which has been designated by various bureaucratic appellations and monitored by Swedish police and security agencies since the 1940s, has a history that in its modern form, dates back to 1924 when the first Swedish Nazi party was established.<sup>9</sup>

In the last decades, and up until recently, this milieu was dominated by the rise of the neo-Nazi Swedish Resistance Movement, known since around 2015 as the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). Founded in 1997, the NRM is known for its cult-like organisation, strict bureaucratic hierarchy, embrace and glorification of violence, fanatic adherence to antisemitism and Nazi ideology, and openly stated revolutionary goals. In 2015, stressing the unity of its branches in all the Nordic countries, it took the name Nordic Resistance Movement. It rejects any allegiance to Swedish society or institutions, which it decries as corrupted by and merely a branch of Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG), a neo-Nazi term synonymous with “global Jewish conspiracy”. The NRM claims to be fighting to liberate the Nordic race from a plot of subjugation and ultimately extermination by Jews and their agents.<sup>10</sup>

Since 2018, after the group failed spectacularly to achieve its objectives in the general election, internal disagreements led to a split that saw many of its most hardened members quitting the group. The NRM has lost its hegemonic position, and once more opened up the Swedish white supremacist milieu for a diversity of groups vying for prestige, such as a wave of Active Clubs.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the NRM, which since 2015 has been distinctly pro-Russian in its orientation, is spending part of its energy maintaining a careful balance of unity within its ranks, in the light of the strongly polarising effect within Swedish white supremacy that Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Radical Right***

In the middle of the previous decade, political scientists noted an “end to Swedish exceptionalism” with regards to the radical right.<sup>13</sup> The exceptionalism in question referred to the longstanding failure of Swedish radical right-wing political parties to achieve relative electoral success, which had distinguished Sweden from most European countries. The situation changed with the rise of the

Sweden Democrats party (SD), founded in 1988 by veterans of the Swedish neo-Nazi and neo-fascist milieux. The SD developed a political brand of nationalism, populism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism that saw them elected to parliament in 2010.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, the SD increased its vote share in each general election, gradually overcame the *cordon sanitaire* erected around it by the traditional political parties, and in the elections of 2022 became the single most popular party of the Swedish right, taking about a fifth of the vote.<sup>15</sup> After formalising a political alliance with the centre-right, the SD has since functioned as a collaborative partner of the ruling coalition of Prime Minister Kristersson and has been allowed to place their staff in the Government Offices, where the SD works closely with the ruling parties,<sup>16</sup> even as it continues to interact with the country's right-wing extremist milieu. Examples of such interactions include inviting a notorious radical from an antisemitic, Islamophobic, and pro-Kremlin group to the parliamentary offices of an SD MP and letting a white supremacist write a Kremlin propaganda piece for a media outlet operated by an SD politician.<sup>17</sup>

### *Arktos, Dugin, Neofascism, and the AFS*

Alongside neo-Nazism, Sweden has a long tradition of neo-fascism, particularly of the Identitarian tendency.<sup>18</sup> A key actor to emerge out of this milieu was the Swedish publishing house Arktos, founded around 2009, which in the 2010s translated – into English and several other European languages – and published a considerable number of far-right and fascist works, including those of Russian far-right imperialist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, who in 2012 visited Stockholm to speak at one of many international conferences hosted by Arktos.<sup>19</sup> It is arguable that the Swedish far-right played a significant role in bringing Dugin and his ideas to the attention of a new generation of Western audiences.

The influence of the Swedish neo-fascists also helped stimulate the split between the SD and its youth wing, the latter being expelled en masse in 2015, because of their contacts with individuals associated with Identitarianism.<sup>20</sup> The leaders of the youth wing would go on with their goals, in 2018 establishing the white nationalist political party Alternative for Sweden (AFS), which became more unabashedly pro-Russian in its orientation than the SD.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Conspiracism, “Anti-Globalism,” and Anti-Government Extremism***

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, Sweden’s conspiracy theorist milieu built bridges and sometimes made common cause with traditional right-wing extremist actors.<sup>22</sup> As a result, parts of the milieu have radicalised and gravitated to a network of conspiracist-friendly far-right alternative media outlets and conferences. This fringe of the political and media landscape in Sweden is today where pro-Kremlin sentiment is most openly expressed and where Russian government narratives are most frequently reproduced and amplified. However, to a less conspicuous extent, this embrace of pro-Kremlin narratives is also observed in more well-established far-right spaces, such as the outlets and channels associated with the Sweden Democrats, the Nordic Resistance Movement, and the wider white supremacist milieu.<sup>23</sup>

### ***The Evolution of Far-Right Attitudes towards Russia***

For much of their history, the Swedish far-right shared the rest of the country’s traditional perspective on Russia as a national adversary. A notable phenomenon of the Swedish right-wing extremist movement was a tendency to lionise, often in ritualistic forms, the historical figure King Charles XII of Sweden, a late-17<sup>th</sup> century monarch who, as the bellicose ruler of the erstwhile Swedish Empire, invaded Russia.<sup>24</sup> However, the extreme right’s hostility to Russia was at least as much predicated on the violent anti-communist element of their ideology, Russia being the heart of the Soviet Union, as on any adherence to traditional Swedish geopolitical habits.

The situation changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The gradual crystallisation of the illiberal agenda of Vladimir Putin, and the conceptualisation of Russia as an opponent of “globalist values”, all served to enhance the appeal of Russia within the Swedish far right, itself opposed to liberal democracy and reactionary in its values.<sup>25</sup> In this situation, we may observe that, in the words of Anton Shekhovtsov, “there is nothing unnatural in the contemporary relations between Putin’s Russia and the Western far right, because the former is allegedly a fascist or, at least, a radical right regime.”<sup>26</sup> This ideological affinity, as we shall see, has transcended even the traditional hostility of Swedish chauvinists towards Russia.

Across the Swedish far-right spectrum, Russia has come to be held up discursively as a great geopolitical, ideological, and social counterweight to what is construed as a decadent, corrupt, malevolent, and dangerous globalist establishment predominant in the West. One sign of the growing appreciation of Russia's geopolitical role was when the influential Swedish Nazi leader Stefan Jacobsson joined the board of Alliance for Peace and Freedom, a pan-European party of right-wing extremist groups which upon forming in early 2015 declared their intention to seek "deeper relations with Russia".<sup>27</sup>

While Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was controversial enough for the Swedish far right to polarise into two camps – one smaller, more pro-Ukrainian and one larger more pro-Russian, with many on the fence – the overall image of Russia as an alternative to, and indeed a guarantee against, the final triumph of globalism has largely persisted.<sup>28</sup>

## **Case Selection**

For this chapter's case studies, the SD party and the NRM have been selected. Each group occupies an opposite pole of the Swedish far-right spectrum: the SD represents the radical right, with a major presence in the Swedish Parliament and the support of a fifth of the electorate. The NRM, meanwhile, is the paradigmatic example of a Swedish violent right-wing extremist and white supremacist group: very limited in size but strikingly influential in the transnational white supremacist milieu. While the two groups are political rivals and differ from each other in many crucial respects, they are both sprung from the same political origins, and for all their divergence they still share certain ideological traits and strategic concerns. It is, in this context, unsurprising to find that each group also exhibits a persistent attraction to the far-right notion of Russia as the anti-West.

## **Case Study 1: The Nordic Resistance Movement and Russian Influence**

In late October 2021, the Russian government propaganda channel broadcast a programme discussing the fact that the US State Department had designated the fascist Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) a terror group.<sup>29</sup> In the programme, RIM members are interviewed about their ties to the Swedish Nazis, cited by the US as the reason for the terror designation. The Russian fascists deny any

responsibility for the bombings carried out by the NRM members they trained. Anatoly Udodov, who is introduced as “a quiet pensioner” and expatriate, explains to the viewers that he has been RIM’s official representative in Sweden for the past thirty years. Udodov concedes that he did meet the Swedish Nazis in Russia, though he claims he merely gave them sightseeing advice. He says he did meet one of the convicted attackers, Viktor Melin, in jail on several occasions, something that “the Swedish intelligence service really did not appreciate”. The purpose of Udodov’s visits to the terrorist, he says, was merely to say hello and have a cup of coffee. He adds with a smile that Melin was recently released from jail and that he “writes in flawless Russian”.

Udodov goes on to recount what he told the Swedish security service when they asked him why he, a Russian, associated himself with the NRM: “I told them that [the NRM] is the only political organisation in Sweden that has a positive attitude towards Russia and Russians, and because they are against Sweden joining NATO.”

The show presenter, Aleksey Larkin, speaking to the camera, explains to the viewers that the NRM “is, to speak plainly, fascist.” But, he adds, “on the other hand, there is in Sweden today quite simply no other opposition to the liberal establishment. And so, it happens sometimes that at NRM rallies and events, skinhead nazis and ordinary civil servants stand side by side to criticize the politics of the European Union.”

To say that Udodov’s and Larkin’s characterisation of the NRM’s role in Swedish politics is inaccurate is putting it mildly. But it offers a telling glimpse of the Russian regime’s perspective on the instrumental value of Western right-wing extremists. In few cases, if any, this attitude has had more dire consequences than in that of the NRM-RIM partnership, which is the subject of the present case study.

### ***NRM, RIM, the Terror Attacks in Gothenburg, and their Aftermath***

On the evening of 11 November 2016, a bomb exploded near a leftist bookstore in central Gothenburg, causing serious destruction. On the afternoon of 5 January 2017, another bomb exploded close to a hotel in the outskirts of Gothenburg being used by the Board of Migration to house asylum seekers, severely injuring a cleaner and maiming him permanently. On the early afternoon of the 25<sup>th</sup> of the



same month, a bomb was discovered at another asylum housing area in the vicinity of Gothenburg; the device was live but had failed to explode and was subsequently disabled by police. Government explosives experts later determined that all three of the explosive devices could have killed people in the vicinity, including children, and largely failed to do so by sheer chance.<sup>30</sup>

In late January 2017, police began to detain suspects in connection with the bombings; ultimately, three men belonging to the NRM were charged and prosecuted: Jimmy Jonasson, Viktor Melin, and Anton Thulin. All three had been involved with the NRM for years, and Melin was a leading member.<sup>31</sup> The prosecutor produced evidence provided by the Swedish Security Service showing that Melin and Thulin had received combat training in Russia in the fall of 2016, at a camp in the vicinity of St. Petersburg. The camp was operated by Partisan, a fascist paramilitary outfit with close ties to the Russian far-right group RIM – which has since been classed a Specially Designated Global Terrorist organisation by the US<sup>32</sup> – and connections to the Russian army. Partisan provided combat training for the RIM’s armed wing, the Imperial Legion, and for its allies.<sup>33</sup>

The RIM, founded in 2002, has had representatives in Sweden since at least the early 2010s, and has had friendly ties to the NRM since at least 2012. In 2015, the RIM’s leader, Stanislav Vorobyev, its Swedish representative, Anatoly Udodov, and the director of the Partisan paramilitary training program, Denis Gariev, made a clandestine visit to a top-level NRM gathering in Sweden. Gariev’s presence at the meeting remained a closely guarded secret until 2017.<sup>34</sup> At the meeting, the RIM leadership expressed its friendship with the NRM and donated a sum of money, thought to be some 30,000 SEK. While the RIM is seemingly autonomous from the Russian government, “it cannot”, in the opinion of the Swedish Government’s Center for Preventing Violent Extremism, “be ruled out that the donation to the NRM originates from Russian regime-adjacent sources”.<sup>35</sup>

It is likely that Melin and Thulin were offered an invitation to the Partisan training program at the 2015 NRM-RIM summit. They ended up training at the camp the following year. According to the Swedish Security Service, Melin and Thulin trained with Partisan for eleven days, some twelve hours a day, practicing paramilitary tactics, the use of AK-47 rifles, and more. In the Gothenburg bombing trial, the prosecutor argued that Melin’s and Thulin’s training in Russia proved that the men had both the inclination and the training to carry out violent

acts. Similarly, the Swedish government's assessment is that the NRM's ties to the RIM may have strengthened the former's overall capacity to carry out acts of political violence.<sup>36</sup>

It should be noted that while the prosecutor emphasised Jonasson's, Melin's, and Thulin's membership in the NRM and the combat training which the latter two had received because of their membership in the group, he did not allege that the men, in planning and carrying out the attacks, had been acting on the orders of the NRM's leadership. To the contrary, evidence was produced in the form of text messages sent between them suggesting that they were dissatisfied with the moderation of the organisation and felt that they should take matters into their own hands and "go a step further than what the Nordic Resistance Movement officially espouses".<sup>37</sup> It appears, therefore, that the trio, having been radicalised and trained by the NRM – and by the RIM – at some point went rogue, or at least, acted of their own volition and without orders, in carrying out the Gothenburg terror attacks. They did so, however, without leaving the organisation, in which all three remained active up until their arrests.

Though the trio was charged with serious felonies, these did not include formal terror charges – a controversial decision, which the prosecutor justified by arguing that it would have been too difficult to obtain a conviction, given the narrow design of the anti-terror laws that Sweden was implementing at that time. Under the current, updated laws it would have been easier to charge the men with terrorism.<sup>38</sup> At the time, however, the prosecutor did argue in the indictment that the attacks may well be considered acts of terror in all but the strictly legal sense. The US State Department, for its part, has explicitly called the bombings "a series of terrorist attacks",<sup>39</sup> and Swedish officials have at various times discussed these events in the context of terrorism.<sup>40</sup>

In early July 2017, Jonasson, Melin, and Thulin were all convicted in the District Court of Gothenburg for their involvement in the attacks and sentenced to prison. The verdict was appealed, and in late September 2017, the Court of Appeal for Western Sweden gave the final ruling. The appellate court found insufficient evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that any of the men were behind the second of the three bombs; thus, no one was convicted of that crime. The other charges stuck, however, and all three men were sent to prison.<sup>41</sup> Thulin, who was given a relatively light sentence of one year and ten months, quickly rejoined the white supremacist milieu upon being released. In 2019, he was arrested in Poland,

where he was undergoing illegal weapons training. The Polish security service, having deemed him “highly dangerous to public security”, subsequently ordered his expulsion.<sup>42</sup> In April 2020, the US Department of State designated the Russian Imperial Movement as Specially Designated Global Terrorists – the first white supremacist group to be added to the list. In explaining the designation, the State Department specifically referenced the training they provided to the Swedish NRM members who would then go on to commit the attacks in Gothenburg.<sup>43</sup> In 2022, Anton Thulin, who has remained actively involved with Swedish organised white supremacy, was personally designated a terrorist by the US State Department because of his “continued pursuit of terrorist training”.<sup>44</sup>

From 2015 onwards, the NRM began to assume a more pro-Russian stance on the war and in geopolitics. The RIM-NRM meeting in 2015, noted above, was significant in this respect. Not only may it have led to an invitation being extended to NRM members to train with Partisan in St. Petersburg, but in general, it appears to have marked a pivot point where the NRM entered into closer relations with the RIM than before. Earlier, the NRM had tended to take a more ambiguous position on the war in Ukraine, in a context where the wider Swedish white supremacist milieu had overall exhibited greater sympathy with Ukrainian nationalists. But from 2015 onwards, in allying with the Russian Imperial Movement, the NRM became typical of a wider shift towards more pro-Russian sentiment among Swedish white supremacists, moving away from supporting the Ukrainian right-wing extremists in the spring of 2014.<sup>45</sup>

Notably, in the subsequent years, when members of the Nordic Resistance Movement received at least one recruitment request from Ukrainian nationalist fighters, the NRM members who received the request consulted their superiors, who told them not to accept.<sup>46</sup> This circumstance should be seen in light of the NRM’s friendly ties with the RIM during this period.

Another, less consequential but striking sign of NRM-RIM friendship – and of acceptance of pro-Russian positions by the NRM as a result of it – is a conversation broadcast by the NRM as a podcast episode on 11 December 2015, between members of the NRM and a representative of the RIM referred to as Nikolay Eremeev, said to be part of the RIM’s foreign affairs division.<sup>47</sup> When the RIM member is asked about the future of Finland, Eremeev suggests the country might once again become a part of a restored Russian Empire once globalism has been defeated. Remarkably, the NRM members, whose

organisation has always openly stated its own intention to turn Finland into part of a pan-Nordic Nazi state, do not speak up to reject the scenario offered by Eremeev, in stark contrast to their typical dogmatic attitude.<sup>48</sup>

### ***Kremlin-Originating Narratives on Nordfront***

After the RIM's 2020 terrorist designation, the NRM became more cautious in matters related to Russia. The beginning of a Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine pushed the NRM into an even more ambivalent position vis-à-vis the conflict. Such a situation is exemplified by the organisation's members and sympathisers arguing the matter against one another in social media spaces.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, while NRM leaders have made several doctrinal statements to the effect that "both sides are bad" in the Russia-Ukraine war, and that "white peoples should not be fighting each other", the NRM's channels, notably its main propaganda website Nordfront, continue to frequently publish pro-Russian narratives, sometimes directly echoing Kremlin talking points and uncritically reporting the statements of Russia's foreign ministry and Kremlin spokespeople.<sup>50</sup>

A user poll published on 5 June 2023 on Nordfront, with 1,770 votes cast, asking Nordfront's readers "Which side are you on in the war between Ukraine and Russia?" resulted in roughly 38 percent answering Russia and 28 percent Ukraine, with the rest expressing either neutrality or opposition to both.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Analysis***

Although the RIM's relation to the Russian government is ambiguous and has been described as one of "adversarial symbiosis", for the purposes of this analysis, especially considering their strategic toleration by the Kremlin, they will be considered a vector of Russian influence. This means that their activity can be either observed or expected to advance the interests of the Kremlin, irrespective of their own intentions.<sup>52</sup>

Russian influence over the NRM in the past several years has two sources. The first is active diplomacy by the Russian Imperial Movement, which has long maintained a presence in Sweden and, since at least 2012, has been courting the NRM in different ways. The second is Russia's projection of soft power through

various forms of propaganda, to which the NRM has been susceptible for the same reasons as the SD party: a deeply rooted ideological predisposition within the broader far right, in spite of internal differences on other issues, to detest liberal democracy and approve of anyone positioning themselves to oppose it – which in recent years has meant the Kremlin.

The direct influence of the RIM, in particular, has had catastrophic consequences. By providing material support in the form of paramilitary training for NRM members, they enhanced the capacity, which in turn sharpened the intention of those members to commit acts of terror on Swedish soil, as ultimately happened. It is particularly concerning that one of those individuals, Anton Thulin, continues to be actively involved in organised white supremacy in Sweden and is considered a terrorist threat by the US. Overall, further violence emanating from the RIM's involvement with the NRM cannot be ruled out.

The influence of Russian propaganda on the NRM is ongoing and manifest in how their propaganda machinery continues to echo Kremlin talking points. This, in turn, together with the rest of Sweden's far-right alternative media sphere in Sweden – a clearing house for racist, conspiracist, and pro-Russian discourse propaganda – continues to influence the growing sector of the Swedish population that is reached by far-right media and inclined to read, watch, and listen to its output.

## **Case Study 2: SD and Russian Influence**

### ***The SD and Russia: Introduction***

The rise of the Sweden Democrats has created an unprecedented situation in Swedish politics. As a result of the formal alliance between the SD and the Kristersson Cabinet, a radical nationalist party formed in the late 1980s by neo-Nazis, and which has been reluctant and inconsistent in distancing itself from its extremist and racist elements, and whose representatives, alone amongst the parties of the Swedish Parliament, rail against the European Union while praising autocratic leaders like Viktor Orbán, now has a decisive influence on Swedish domestic and foreign policy.<sup>53</sup>

In January 2022, questions were raised – not for the first time – about the SD's views and its reliability in matters of foreign policy when commentators brought

attention to a position on strategic and defence policy adopted by the party in 2018. The position stated that the “Sweden Democrats want Sweden to respect the balance between the great powers”. The phrase “the great powers” has been widely understood to refer to the United States and Russia, and the position of “balance” in the Swedish context suggests one of treating Russia’s geopolitical interests as legitimate. After the position drew scrutiny and widespread criticism, the SD suddenly removed it from their official documents.<sup>54</sup> The episode is illustrative of the SD’s persistent ambiguity with regard to Russia. On the one hand, the party’s own instinct is to adopt positions that offer no opposition to the Kremlin’s imperialism and on the other hand, the party pays lip service to the consensus of Swedish public opinion and the political establishment by backtracking from such positions once they draw too much attention and flak.

The SD has joined other Swedish parties in condemning the Russian invasion of Crimea and of the aggression of 2022 and has backed sanctions against Russia. In 2018 they described Russia as a security threat which is going “in a very negative direction.”<sup>55</sup> In April 2023, an SD politician and former member of parliament travelled to Ukraine as a private citizen to volunteer in its defence.

Alongside these occasional gestures of opposition to the Kremlin, however, and crucially for the research question in this volume, the SD also has a track record of incidents suggesting that they are willing to make use of, and themselves be useful to, Russian influence. Salient incidents will be discussed in chronological order below, followed by an analysis.

The incidents can be thought of as taking various forms, ranging from the party tolerating the presence of, or resisting calls to discipline, party representatives who express extreme pro-Kremlin views and narratives, or who interact closely with others who do; to party representatives meeting with Russian regime-connected businessmen to discuss funding for party projects; or employing individuals with known connections to the Kremlin’s agents; systematically collaborating with the Russian propaganda machine, et cetera.

Together, these incidents paint an overall picture of a party vulnerable to infiltration, exploitation, and influence by actors who are either known or unknown agents of Russian influence, and demonstrably unwilling to do anything about it.

### *The Carl Meurling Affair between 2011 and 2015*

In the fall of 2016, contacts were revealed between top SD officials and the Russia-connected businessman Carl Meurling. Meurling had sought to influence the SD's Russia policy, while offering major funding for one of the SD's media projects.<sup>56</sup> Meurling was the CEO of RISE Capital, a Swedish-registered company founded in 2013 that, by 2016, had billions of crowns worth of infrastructure development contracts in Russia. At the time, RISE Capital listed as its financial partners four Russian banks – VTB, Vnesheconombank, Sberbank, and Gazprombank, all of which were under either EU or US sanctions after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014—and among its other “key partners”, under the heading “active cooperation”, the Russian federal Defence and Transport ministries.<sup>57</sup> The company's chairman was Gerard Lopez, a self-described friend of Vladimir Putin. Lopez at the time was the subject of controversy in the UK because of his major donations to the Conservative Party during the Brexit campaign.<sup>58</sup> RISE Capital's main owner was Igor Snegurov, who was alleged to have won the company's contracts in Russia as a result of his personal ties to directors of Gazprom.<sup>59</sup>

In April 2011, Meurling had dinner at the home of Erik Almquist, at the time a member of parliament for the SD and a top party official. The following month, Almquist wrote an email to the party's top leadership saying that Meurling had expressed an interest in providing several million crowns in financing to a new SD-affiliated media outlet.<sup>60</sup> Later the same month, Meurling sent an email to an SD MP, Margareta Sandstedt, then the mother-in-law to the party leader Jimmie Åkesson. Sandstedt represented the party in the Swedish Parliament's European affairs committee. The committee was at that time discussing the issue of the Russian-Georgian conflict. Meurling's email referenced his acquaintance with Almquist and his control over 400 million crowns in Russian investments. In the email, Meurling stated that the Russian-Georgian war was started by Georgia, and strongly urged Sandstedt to argue in the parliament's EU committee against European and Swedish interference with the unfolding conflict. He encouraged her to argue against Sweden criticising Russia in connection with Georgia, going so far as to provide her with a detailed list of talking points, arguments, and rhetorical techniques to use.<sup>61</sup>

Although apparently Meurling never ended up investing in the SD's media outlet, he sent other emails in this period to top SD officials, communicating with Almquist as well as Kent Ekeröth, one of the party's most extreme

representatives, who has founded and operated a series of racist and extreme right-wing alternative media outlets adjacent to the party over the years.<sup>62</sup> He also kept in touch with Gustav Kasselstrand, at that time the chairman of the party's youth wing, who would later be expelled and go on to found the pro-Russian white nationalist party, Alternative for Sweden (AFS). Meurling's contacts with and apparent support for Kasselstrand continued until at least 2015 when the latter aggressively took control over the SD's important Stockholm branch before being expelled from the party amid accusations of extremism. Kasselstrand would go on to do consulting work for a large Russian agricultural company before founding AFS.<sup>63</sup>

### ***Erik Almqvist's Covert Propaganda Role between 2012 and 2015***

In 2012, footage emerged of Almqvist and Ekeröth in a drunken altercation with people in the street in 2010. Moreover, the footage directly contradicted Almqvist's flat denials to the media concerning these events. The "iron pipe scandal" – so-called because the footage showed the SD politicians picking up metal pipes as makeshift weapons – caused Almqvist's supposed resignation from the party.<sup>64</sup> However, the party immediately hired him as a media consultant, ostensibly to help develop the commercial viability of the party's media activities.<sup>65</sup> In 2015, it was revealed, however, that the party had secretly made Almqvist the covert editor-in-chief of one of the party's media outlets, Samtiden, where he wrote pro-Kremlin editorials under a pseudonym. After the situation was exposed by investigative journalists, Almqvist moved on to eventually work with the white supremacist and pro-Russian media apparatus AlternaMedia, run by the right-wing extremists Vavra Suk and Sanna Hill, who have served as election observers during the rigged 2018 presidential election in Russia, at the invitation of a committee of the Duma. Suk is on record as saying in 2020 that Putin sets a good and democratic example for Europe to follow.<sup>66</sup> During that time, Almqvist has several times travelled to Putin's Russia and to occupied Crimea to act as so-called international expert and election observer, telling Russian media that elections have been free and fair.<sup>67</sup>

In spite of his now open extremism and pro-Russian stances, Almqvist's media outlet within the AlternaMedia apparatus, Exakt24, was invited along with an exclusive few other outlets to cover the SD's official election watch party in 2022. That election night, Exakt24's studio broadcast was hosted by Almqvist together



with the influential and extreme Sweden Democrat activist and former MP Kent Ekeröth, who after the election would return to active politics as a regional councillor for the SD.<sup>68</sup>

***David Bergquist, between 2012 and 2018: “Putin, I beseech you”***

David Bergquist is a far-right activist who has publicly expressed right-wing extremist views since at least 2010 – such as putting “the Holocaust” in quotation marks and suggesting that the Swedish people are themselves today undergoing a Holocaust, referring to a neo-Nazi political party as merely “social conservatives”, and stating that “the Second World War was about defeating a bolshevik invasion of Europe”. He held a leading position on the local and regional levels in the Sweden Democrats from 2011, serving as chairman of a local party branch in the affluent suburbs of Sweden’s capital and of a regional party division in eastern Stockholm County.<sup>69</sup> Notably, while holding this position, Bergquist, over a period of years from at least 2012, repeatedly posted pro-Putin statements on social media. In 2013, he wrote in a post on Facebook: “Putin, I know you are a very good person. I beseech you: Come here and depose our traitor of a prime minister and restore order in your poor western brother-country.”<sup>70</sup> In spite of this, and despite promoting pro-Nazi propaganda, Holocaust denial and antisemitic conspiracy theories, the party took no action against Bergquist.<sup>71</sup> In January 2017, Bergquist stated on Facebook “It is in Putin’s interest that SD gains influence [through the 2018 general elections], especially in defence policy in that we want precisely what he wants: That Sweden should have a functioning and strong defence and that we should be free of alliances and stay out of NATO”.<sup>72</sup>

Bergquist was expelled from the party shortly after his 2018 re-election to his municipal assembly, for reasons unrelated to his extremist statements or posts about Russia.<sup>73</sup> He went on to join a far-right activist network, whose strong pro-Russian and conspiracist leanings are expressed in a steady stream of media output, typical of the new convergence between the far-right and radicalised conspiracism mentioned in the introduction of this chapter.<sup>74</sup>

### *The Sweden Democrats in the European Parliament*

A 2022 investigation by the EU-friendly think tank Stockholm Free World Forum into the voting record of Swedish EU parliamentarians found that the Sweden Democrat MEPs, Peter Lundgren, and Kristina Winberg, had an overall Kremlin-friendly voting record in the period 2014–2019. This markedly distinguished them not only from other Swedish MEPs, but also from all other Nordic MEPs, including Eurosceptics.<sup>75</sup> For example, on 16 September 2014, the European Parliament voted with a majority of 535 to 127 to ratify the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine. In the minority voting against ratification were the SD.<sup>76</sup> On 23 October 2014, the EU Parliament condemned Russia’s closing down of the international human rights organisation Memorial; the SD voted against the resolution.

In 2015, following public criticism of their pro-Russian voting record, the SD’s then-acting chairman and leader of the party’s parliamentary group, Mattias Karlsson, claimed the party’s MEPs were only following the lead of the British UKIP and French Front National parties, and admitted that this had led to some “problematic” votes with regards to Russia and Ukraine, insofar as they did not track with the SD’s official party line (which was formally critical of Russia).<sup>77</sup> Karlsson’s remarks were echoed by a later leak of internal SD communications showing leading officials admitting in frustration that the party had more or less mindlessly voted with UKIP in the European Parliament because the party had failed to develop an independent political agenda in that forum.<sup>78</sup>

However, mere incompetence or negligence cannot account for the SD’s egregious record in Strasbourg, where they exhibited a clear ideological affinity for the pro-Russian camp. In June of 2015, the European Parliament passed a resolution with 494 to 135 votes expressing that “[t]he EU must critically reassess its relations with Russia, which are profoundly damaged by Russia’s deliberate violation of democratic principles, fundamental values and international law with its violent action and destabilisation of its neighbours”.<sup>79</sup> MEPs also called for greater transparency with regard to Russian support for European parties. The SD’s two representatives joined a group of far-right MEPs, including Marine Le Pen, in rising to their feet in the chamber to protest what was being said.<sup>80</sup> In the vote itself, the SD abstained as part of a minority of 69 MEPs.<sup>81</sup>

Since 2019, the SD has become less consistently Kremlin-friendly in its voting and has been forced by the pressure of public opinion to moderate its stance still further after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>82</sup> Notably, however, when, on 15 February 2022, with the threat of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia at its peak, the European Parliament voted to approve emergency financial aid to Ukraine, the three SD MEPs all abstained.<sup>83</sup>

### ***The Egor Putilov Affair, 2016***

In 2016, several Swedish newspapers began to unravel a convoluted series of revelations about an aide working for the SD in their parliamentary offices, who had been hired that year by the extreme SD MP Kent Ekeröth.<sup>84</sup> The aide, a Russian-born immigrant, was revealed to be engaged in highly disingenuous media practices using a bewildering number of pseudonyms, and having profited from suspicious business dealings with a Kremlin-connected Russian businessman. As more details emerged about the man's track record, suspicions of Russian influence immediately arose.

The aide was named Alexander Fridback but had been covertly writing as a controversial anti-immigration blogger and freelance journalist under the pseudonym Egor Putilov.<sup>85</sup> Putilov's blog posts and articles were frequently shared and referred to by leading SD as well as by far-right alternative media outlets. Fridback's identity as Putilov, along with other aliases, was exposed after he succeeded in getting a fake op-ed he had written published in a major tabloid. The piece was written under yet another fabricated identity ("Tobias Lagerfeldt"), and apparently posing as progressive refugee rights' activist, Putilov's false persona argued that undocumented immigrants be given the right to vote – a highly controversial position in the Swedish public discourse.<sup>86</sup> Under his Putilov pseudonym, he then commented on "Lagerfeldt's" article, pretending not to be the author, in order to inflame the debate.<sup>87</sup>

Following the exposure of Fridback's multiple identities, as well as his record of deceptive practices, he was labelled a *disinformer* by Swedish newspapers.<sup>88</sup> Journalists subsequently began to scrutinise Fridback's record and piece together a timeline of his activities in Sweden, which began in 2003 when he first applied for asylum under the name Yuri Popov, but was denied.<sup>89</sup> In 2007, now under the name Alexander Yarovenko and with a different identity and story, he successfully obtained a residency permit and immigrated to Sweden. In the years

since 2003, he has used seven different names or pseudonyms; for the sake of clarity, the man will be referred to by the name he has since most commonly assumed, which is Egor Putilov. In 2010, Putilov became a Swedish citizen. In 2011, he changed his name to Fridback and successfully applied to have his place of birth reregistered in Swedish records from Yaroslavl in Russia to a town named Luxemburg in Dagestan, so that his place of birth appeared as simply “Luxemburg”, identical to the Swedish spelling of the Western European country of Luxembourg.<sup>90</sup> Between 2012 and 2015, Putilov worked as an agent for the Board of Migration, where he was reported by his colleagues for suspicious behaviour. After leaving the agency, Putilov’s personnel file went missing from agency records.<sup>91</sup> During this period, Putilov had also unsuccessfully sought employment with the Civil Contingencies Agency – a public security agency charged among other things with countering malign informational influence – expressing a desire to work with countering Russian disinformation. In 2018, new evidence came to light that Putilov had faked his 2007 identity and given false information to the Swedish immigration authorities, on the basis of which he had been granted residency.<sup>92</sup>

Notably, in 2014, two years prior to starting to work as an aide for the SD in parliament, Putilov purchased a property from a Russian citizen whose name Sweden’s public broadcaster, who broke the story, did not publish, but who was referred to as “an influential businessman, and now [in 2016] a convict, from Saint Petersburg”, who was “described by Russian media as a criminal, and connected to the Russian authorities”.<sup>93</sup> Fridback bought the property from the businessman for six million crowns, which was half the amount that the businessman had paid for it when he bought it a few years earlier. Subsequently, two months after purchasing the property, Fridback sold it again for double what he had paid, making several million crowns of profit. National security experts solicited for comment by Swedish Radio said that Putilov constituted a potential national security risk. In late September, the day after these revelations were published, Putilov resigned from the SD’s parliamentary offices.<sup>94</sup> Later, in 2019, when he was working privately for the SD politician Kent Ekeröth, and tried to obtain press credentials as a reporter in parliament, it was revealed Putilov has “had contacts with Russian intelligence services”, according to the Security Service, which has not disclosed any further details on this point.<sup>95</sup>

### ***Kent Ekeroth, RT, Egor Putilov, and Dick Abrahamsson between 2010 and 2023***

Kent Ekeroth served in parliament from 2010 to 2018, when he dropped out of national politics due to repeated scandals related to his private life, including several incidents of physical violence in public.<sup>96</sup> Returning to politics in 2022, he currently serves as a regional councillor for the SD in Dalarna County. Ekeroth is notable for his extreme positions, racist statements, conspiracy theories, and considerable influence in far-right circles as the founder, financier, and operator of a series of key far-right and xenophobic alternative media outlets: Politiskt Inkorrekt, Avpixlat, and Samnytt.<sup>97</sup> He has also played a key role in the SD's international networks, where he has interacted with other Eurosceptic and pro-Russian oriented parties, serving in such roles as treasurer of the pan-European political party European Alliance for Freedom.<sup>98</sup>

On at least eight occasions in the period between 2010 and 2015, Ekeroth appeared as a guest on various shows on the Russian propaganda network RT to promote his views.<sup>99</sup> These appearances were likely part of a deliberate SD communications strategy. In 2011, in the aftermath of Anders Breivik's terror attacks in Norway,<sup>100</sup> the top party official Erik Almqvist wrote in an email to several party heads that "since [the RT] have an international audience and usually report in a way that is politically favourable to us, I definitely think we should say yes [to make appearances on RT]".<sup>101</sup> SD officials have also become part of Russian propaganda more indirectly. In 2017, top party representatives travelled to Syria for a meeting and photo-op with the Russia-allied Assad regime. In addition to being photographed by the Syrian state-controlled media agency Sana, which reported that the SD representatives were critical of the Western sanctions on the country, the politicians also gave an interview to the right-wing populist and Russia-friendly outlet *Nyheter Idag*, controlled by the former SD politician Chang Frick. The Russian propaganda outlet Sputnik then published a piece on the Syria visit headlined "Swedish MPs' Visit to Syria Raises Questions About Sanctions, Stockholm's Policy", extensively quoting their interview with Frick.<sup>102</sup>

Ekeroth was Putilov's employer and in 2016, he also brought the latter on at least one official, government-paid trip to Greece. There the two of them produced anti-migrant propaganda for use on Ekeroth's far-right media outlet Avpixlat.<sup>103</sup> In September, at the same time as the Putilov affair was being unravelled by journalists, another parliamentary aide for the SD, Ekeroth's political secretary

Dick Abrahamsson, also came under scrutiny. Abrahamsson had in the preceding years been affiliated with a right-wing extremist, conspiracist, and antisemitic party, The Free.<sup>104</sup> In 2016 it was revealed that Abrahamsson had, some half a year before being hired by Ekeröth, filmed an extremist propaganda video for Stefan Jacobsson, a pro-Russian white supremacist and former leader of the neo-Nazi “Party of the Swedes”.<sup>105</sup> In addition, he had posted strongly pro-Putin and pro-Kremlin statements and conspiracy theories, such as the claim that RT is “the only [network] that reports reality”, and that it was Ukraine who in 2014 shot down the plane MH17 – a commercial passenger plane that in reality was shot down above eastern Ukraine by Russian-controlled forces, a crime which Russia has tried vigorously to deny,<sup>106</sup> – and that “Putin is a statesman to bow to”.<sup>107</sup> These revelations led to Abrahamsson’s removal from his position but did not stop Ekeröth from continuing to employ him or Putilov. The latter became a staff writer<sup>108</sup> and eventually editor-in-chief<sup>109</sup> for Ekeröth’s website, Samnytt. In the meantime, Putilov’s press accreditation to parliament, where he had previously worked as an SD aide, was denied in 2019 on the grounds of him having had contact with Russian intelligence, according to the Security Service.<sup>110</sup>

After leaving his position as Ekeröth’s political secretary, Dick Abrahamsson has posted open antisemitism and Holocaust denial on social media, including on the Russian platform Vkontakte. Sometime around 2021, he began operating his own recording studio for filming interviews and other video media. Kent Ekeröth has repeatedly made use of Abrahamsson’s studio to film his own interviews for Samnytt, including with leaders of the SD party, such as the then-party secretary, Richard Jomshof, during the 2022 election campaign, and the party’s economic-political spokesperson in 2023.<sup>111</sup>

### ***The Pavel Gamov Affair, 2017***

In September 2017, the SD MP Pavel Gamov, a member of the parliament’s European affairs committee, travelled to Russia to act as an election observer for a regional election without the knowledge or approval of the Swedish OSCE delegation.<sup>112</sup> Before going on the trip, Gamov informed the party, which claims that it counselled him against it. During his stay in Russia, Gamov gave several interviews to Russian media, in which he said he was impressed by the Russian vote counting machines. Gamov later stated that his flight and hotel expenses were covered by an obscure, newly established NGO named European Council

on Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR), based in Poland, which has stated that it was privately financed. When asked by Swedish journalists, the chairman of ECDHR, the Polish far-right politician Janusz Niedźwiecki, denied having paid for Gamov's trip, and insisted that his organisation, like Gamov, had been "guests" in Russia, invited by the Russian Peace Foundation, led by Leonid Slutsky, a close associate of Vladimir Putin who came under US sanctions in 2014.<sup>113</sup> Niedźwiecki would later be arrested in Poland and charged with espionage and collaboration with Russian secret services, facing up to fifteen years in prison if convicted.<sup>114</sup> In November of 2017, the SD expelled Gamov from the party, citing "bad conduct towards women and foreign hosts" during his trip to Russia.<sup>115</sup> Gamov would later become a prominent member of the white nationalist and pro-Russian AFS party.<sup>116</sup>

### ***The Stefan Borg Affair, 2018***

In 2018, it was revealed that the SD's arguably most powerful local politician, Stefan Borg, who at the time was set to gain the chairmanship of the executive agency of Hörby Municipality, had in the preceding two years extensively and in his own name written, shared and promoted right-wing extremist material on social media, including antisemitism, Great Replacement propaganda, and pro-Russian narratives. Among other things Borg wrote that "Russia is a stabilizing and peace-creating power" in the Middle East.<sup>117</sup> It was also revealed that Borg had been a member of what one expert on Russian disinformation called "one of the more pronounced pro-Russian propaganda groups on the Swedish side of Facebook",<sup>118</sup> where, among other things, Borg dismissed the security agencies' notion of Russia as a security threat to Sweden as a conspiracy theory, mused about moving to Russia, suggested that Russian election observers should be invited to observe Swedish elections, and frequently referred to RT.<sup>119</sup> After his online activity was revealed, Stefan Borg walked back many of the things he had written, and a couple of weeks later resigned from his new position.<sup>120</sup> He continues to serve as an SD politician in Hörby as of November 2023.

### ***The Roger Richthoff Affair, 2022***

On 20 March 2022, the MP Roger Richthoff, the SD's senior representative in the Swedish Parliament's defence committee, and who until November of 2021 was the SD's defence-political spokesman, approvingly shared an antisemitic, pro-

Russian conspiracy theory video on Facebook alleging that “Russia is liberating the Ukrainian people after eight years of genocide and ethnic cleansing”, and that “on the other side is the American deep state and NATO which have used Ukraine for the manufacture and export of biological weapons”.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, in the video, such biological weapons were said to be a part of a wider plan and intended to make a “Holocaust” on Christians, whereas Jews would be immune to them. The video also claimed Jews are financing “the Nazis in Ukraine” who are committing war crimes against “Christian Russians”.<sup>122</sup> In the month prior to sharing this video, Richthoff had also given interviews to right-wing extremist and pro-Russian alternative media outlets, discussing defence policy in his capacity as defence committee member. Richthoff resigned from the SD and the defence committee in the wake of widespread outrage after his sharing of the pro-Russian video was revealed, though he kept his seat in parliament.<sup>123</sup> He later joined the white nationalist and pro-Russian Alternative for Sweden party, founded by former SD members, subsequently becoming a party board member.<sup>124</sup>

### *Analysis*

After having made the above observations, the following points may be adduced. The fact that the SD has for many years been moving in a political space which we may refer to by shorthand as ambiguously pro-Russian has also made it vulnerable to infiltration, exploitation, and influence by actors who are either known or unknown agents of Russian influence. It cannot be ruled out that the SD has repeatedly been instrumentalised for the Kremlin’s objectives; indeed, there is suggestive evidence to this effect. Particular individuals like Kent Ekeröth exhibit a pattern of behaviour – such as knowingly working with an individual, Egor Putilov, whose employment by the SD was widely considered to pose a national security threat – that suggests they are willing to make use of, and themselves be useful to, Russian influence.

There is a dialectic at work in the SD’s appreciation of Russia insofar as it exhibits one: on the one hand this appreciation arises organically and spontaneously on the part of the SD; on the other hand, this only occurs because Russian soft power as projected through mass media has constructed an ideological notion of Russia that appeals to western reactionaries.<sup>125</sup> It is important to understand this appreciation in negative as well as in positive terms: the SD and its supporters admire Russia just as much for what it is *not*, and for what it *opposes* – namely,



the politically correct, corrupted by Cultural Marxism, globalist, liberal-progressive, decadent, globalist West – as for what Russia is posited to be in and of itself.

In order to coherently understand why the SD exhibits this mode of relation to Russia, the party must be comprehended in terms of its basic and straightforward ideology: a mixture of far-right radical nationalism – the legacy of its neo-Nazi roots – and reactionary populism, fuelled by an outspoken disgust with liberal-democratic institutions and progressive values, especially insofar as they run counter to the SD's central objective: to ethnically homogenise Sweden. The fact that the party has gradually entered the halls of power and formally joined the so-called establishment has done nothing to diminish the central importance of ideology in understanding and predicting the party's behaviour and that of its officials.

Radical and ideologically puritan members of the SD, more in touch with the party's reactionary ideological essence, some of whom have great influence, tend to be more pro-Russian, while key leaders, party mandarins, and the rank and file are often more ambivalent in their attitude towards Russia. The sum of these two different attitudes has been to keep the party drifting back and forth within the pro-Russian part of the political spectrum. The presence of a competing third force – the party's desire to avoid provoking too much public outrage and the normative pressures of the rest of Sweden's political establishment – has not been enough to pull the Sweden Democrats into the mainstream of Swedish political attitudes towards Russia. However, this force has slowly grown stronger over the years, and following the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it may become powerful enough – at least for a time – to curb the tendency to overt pro-Russian phenomena in the party.

The activities of individuals who may be termed adjacent to the party – such as the former top SD official Erik Almqvist, now a leading purveyor of far-right propaganda through an alternative media apparatus – illustrate how a formal, but far from serious, separation from the party allows for openly engaging in direct or indirect pro-Russian propaganda activity without any repercussions for the SD as such. Far from condemning the pro-Putin alternative media sphere largely populated by persons adjacent to the SD, party leader Jimmie Åkesson has publicly spoken in praise of its importance. Several SD politicians, including top

officials, have given interviews to Almqvist's pro-Russian and extreme-right outlet Exakt24 and have shared its content on social media.

An illustrative example of the mutual affinity between far-right alternative media and the Sweden Democrats is the former SD politician Frick, who is currently an influential right-wing activist, former stringer for RT's subsidiary Ruptly, and alternative media operator. Frick recently drew scrutiny when it was revealed he had played a decisive role in inviting the Danish right-wing extremist hate preacher Rasmus Paludan to Sweden in order to stage a burning of the Qur'an in front of the Turkish Embassy, which triggered a major diplomatic crisis between Sweden and Türkiye, and prompted remarks from the Foreign Secretary of Finland suggesting a Russian connection to the event.<sup>126</sup> Despite Frick's being paid and regularly appearing as a show host in the Sweden Democrats' party-run YouTube channel's programming, SD party officials claimed, when questioned about the matter, that since Frick was not a full-time employee of their channel, they had little to do with him and did not consider themselves accountable for his actions.<sup>127</sup> In such ways, the SD's long-running pattern of obfuscation, denials, and use of covert or overt proxies for their own messaging allows the party to speak and act on both sides of virtually any issue, including that of Russia.

Overall, the picture that emerges is one of indirect but clear Russian influence over the Sweden Democrats, largely through soft power, which the party is ideologically predisposed to respond favourably to. Its gestures of opposition to Russia appear disingenuous and calculated to control the damage caused by repeated revelations of pro-Kremlin sympathies and linkages. Whatever putative concerns the SD might have about the threat of Russian imperialism to Swedish security, the party's intuitive appreciation for Putinism as an ideological ally is the primary factor in its behaviour.

## **Analysis of Current and Potential Countermeasures**

### ***Existing Policies and Countermeasures***

Currently, the Swedish authorities are poorly equipped to deal with the problems highlighted in this volume. There are no government bodies directly dedicated to addressing the threat of foreign malign influence targeting domestic extremism, and those agencies whose competences are concerned with this issue appear to lack practical tools as well as a theory or doctrine of countermeasures, other than

occasionally funding research that points to the issue. The specific issue of Russian influence on the Swedish far right is also largely absent from the political agenda, other than as a recurring criticism of the Sweden Democrats on the level of foreign policy. The most relevant government institutions are briefly discussed below.

Three agencies in particular are charged with preventing and countering extremism in Sweden: the Police Authority, the National Council for Crime Prevention through its bureau, the Centre for Preventing Violent Extremism, and the Security Service, all of which are organised under the Ministry of Justice.<sup>128</sup>

The Centre for Preventing Violent Extremism has published an analysis of the interactions between the NRM and the Russian Imperial Movement, providing the public and other agencies with information about this phenomenon after the fact.<sup>129</sup>

The Security Service is tasked with countering antagonistic threats to national security and, to some extent, actively monitoring domestic extremism as well as threats emanating from abroad. Much of the Security Service's work, however, is shrouded in an exceptional degree of secrecy, and could neither be described nor assessed in any meaningful way except by government insiders, making its failure to prevent the terror attacks in Gothenburg in 2016/2017 difficult to evaluate as part of a broader analysis.

In recent years, the Security Service has begun to more aggressively take steps to have non-citizens involved in extremism on Swedish soil expelled from the country. A relevant example was the expulsion of Sergei and Igor Kushev, twin brothers and Russian citizens who, in 2021, were forced to leave Sweden after a 2019 decision of the Board of Migration not to grant them residency.<sup>130</sup> In addition, they were given a 10-year re-entry ban barring them from movement into the Schengen Zone. The brothers had, since at least 2018, been participating in the activities of the Swedish branch of the Nordic Resistance Movement, including hand-to-hand combat training, propaganda distribution, indoctrination sessions, meetings, and at least one public rally that turned violent. They were also part of an NRM group that in 2018 travelled to the annual weeklong public forum for politics and civil society in Almedalen, Gotland, in proximity to Sweden's top politicians and officials, in order to intimidate them and the general public with their presence. After the Board of Migration's decision in 2019, however, the Kushev brothers were placed in a detention facility from where they

made several unsuccessful appeals, until their expulsion in 2021. Much of the administrative process is classified, but public documents make clear that the Security Service's assessment that the two men were "a risk to public order and security" played a role in the Board of Migration's decision. Similar administrative measures have been taken to expel at least one other foreign right-wing extremist in recent years.

Insofar as foreign influence is a national security threat, it falls as well within the purview of the Security Service, but in recent decades two new agencies have been established that are supposed to counter the malign effects of foreign influence in particular: the Civil Contingencies Agency and, as of 2022, the Psychological Defence Agency, both of which are organised under the Ministry of Defence.<sup>131</sup>

The Psychological Defence Agency upon its creation took over the duties of the Civil Contingencies Agency as regards informational influence, but the latter says it still plays "an important role in psychological defense".<sup>132</sup> The PDA has attempted to build public resilience against disinformation through efforts such as publishing a manual for communicators in public administration about how to identify and correctly deal with antagonistic influence operations.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, it funds independent research related to its area of responsibility through the Psychological Defence Research Institute at Lund University. It is unclear, however, to what extent this is effective with regards to the problem under discussion in this chapter.

The Psychological Defence Agency says that its Operations Department works to analyse informational influence activities, propose countermeasures, and develop methods with which to equip other agencies;<sup>134</sup> and that its Capability Development Department works to strengthen overall psychological defence at the level of population. However, the agency, having only existed since the beginning of 2022, has not yet proven what this means in practice, nor the efficacy of its work. To the contrary, in August of 2023, in the midst of what the Swedish government described as a "targeted influence campaign" against Swedish authorities, in which Russia and Iran among others were involved, the Psychological Defence Agency was provided with new instructions and a bigger budget, in an implicit acknowledgement that existing policies were inadequate to meet current challenges.<sup>135</sup> The agency produces counter-messaging communications in order to neutralise harmful disinformation, but it is

questionable whether such communications – apparently confined mainly to its official website – are being deployed effectively.

Crucially, however, agencies operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defence are prohibited from turning their attention to domestic entities by steering documents, as well as by strong constitutional norms and longstanding traditions. They are tasked only with guarding against threats and malign influence emanating from abroad; as soon as such threats “make it across the Swedish border”, as it were, in the form of successfully influencing a domestic entity, they are no longer the purview of the defence agencies. From the perspective of the Psychological Defence Agency, Swedish right-wing extremists are necessarily seen as potential victims of foreign influence, rather than as potential antagonists. Moreover, domestic extremists, though seen as a particular vulnerability to malign foreign influence, are not the object of the PDA’s general resilience-building efforts; rather, the general public is. However, there are apparently no internal security agencies that are constitutionally empowered or technically equipped to deal with the problem of foreign influence on domestic extremists either.

In theory, there is one government body that might acquire a mandate to specifically address the issue of Russian influence on domestic extremists: the National Security Council (NSC), a novel administrative institution that was only recently established and is still in evolution.<sup>136</sup> Created in order to centralise strategic control over and coordinate the work of the several agencies involved in various aspects of national security, the NSC currently consists of the prime minister, the ministers of justice, defence, civil defence, finance, and the leaders of the parties of the ruling coalition.<sup>137</sup> The NSC answers to the prime minister but is effectively directed by a national security advisor, appointed by the government and assisted by special staff.<sup>138</sup> It remains to be seen what role, if any, the NSC will take in dealing with the question under discussion in this chapter.

### ***General Assessment and Policy Recommendations***

It is difficult to conclude that existing policies and countermeasures are effective in neutralising the risks posed by Russian influence on the Swedish far right. Overall, the Swedish authorities appear impotent in this regard. On the other hand, much of the attention and the monitoring of the problem that is lacking in the public sector can be found in Swedish civil society, which is a strength that

might productively be drawn upon, especially if funded and empowered by the government. The following recommendations are offered for consideration:

- The Swedish government should order the Security Service to publish an analysis of the threat of Russian influence on Swedish right-wing extremism, informing the public as to its view of the threat, especially in the wider Western context, as well as an evaluation of the agency's own efforts to combat it thus far, and a discussion of how the agency seeks to address or not to address the problem going forward.
- The NSC should develop a specific competency and coordinating function to counteract the influence of foreign powers on domestic extremists and the consequences thereof. This function should in a structured and systematic manner advise and instruct relevant agencies how to counter the threat, so that it does not slip through the cracks of the patchwork of portfolios and areas of responsibility of the Swedish security agencies.
- The Swedish government should task either an agency or public body, or should encourage and finance civil society entities, to engage in public counter-messaging to neutralise malign disinformation campaigns. Such efforts should target and combat not only a few specific, large-scale bursts of disinformation as they have until now, but also those disinformational narratives that emanate from the intersection of domestic extremism and hostile foreign powers' influence activities – in other words, to take an example, such narratives as the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, racist and Islamophobic discourses, et cetera, which may well originate with domestic extremists but which are strategically amplified by hostile foreign powers such as Russia. This counter-messaging should be more proactive, aggressive, and pervasive than current efforts.
- Swedish members of parliament should be required to notify the speaker of parliament as well as the chairman of whatever committee they are a member of before meeting with any agents or representatives of adversarial foreign powers, establishing a record of such meetings.
- The Swedish parliament should institute a new body or a function, composed of a joint session of the defence, justice, cultural, and constitutional committees. This body should be empowered to hold annual hearings in parliament, with the purpose of investigating and identifying, through the production of public reports, any inappropriate dealings, or relations of malign influence between Swedish entities and adversarial foreign powers. This body

## FINNSIÖ

should be given subpoena powers sufficient to compel testimony and evidence from any citizen, including any member of parliament. Furthermore, this body should also have the ability to initiate a special session, beyond its annual or regular sessions, if warranted by exceptional circumstances.

- <sup>1</sup> D. Harrison, *Fienden: Sveriges relation till Ryssland från vikingatiden till idag* [The Enemy: Sweden's relationship to Russia from the Viking Age to the present], Stockholm: Ordfront, 2023.
- <sup>2</sup> M. Holmström, *Den dolda alliansen: Sveriges hemliga NATO-förbindelser* [The hidden alliance: Sweden's secret NATO ties], Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 2023.
- <sup>3</sup> D. Harrison, op. cit., p. 335
- <sup>4</sup> M. Holmström, "Säpo varnar för ryska krigsplaner" [The Swedish Security Service warns of Russian war plans], *Svenska Dagbladet*, 7 April 2014.
- <sup>5</sup> P. Haddad, "Säpo: Ryssland bedriver psykologiskt krig mot Sverige" [The Swedish Security Service: Russia is waging psychological war against Sweden], *SVT Nyheter*, 17 March 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> Government of Sweden, *Ett försämrat säkerhetspolitiskt läge – konsekvenser för Sverige. Ds 2022:7* [A worsened security-political situation – consequences for Sweden. Ds 2022:7], 13 May 2022.
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