
THE TEST FOR SWEDEN'S NEW GOVERNMENT

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Sweden's new government assumed office on January 21, ending four months of uncertainty.

September's election resulted in neither the traditional left or right alliance able to command a majority government.

All the establishment parties seemed agreed on is creating a 'cordon sanitaire' around the radical-right populist party, the Sweden Democrats, who had become the third-largest party in parliament.

In the end the incumbent Social Democrat-Green coalition formed a weakened minority government reliant on support in parliament from the centre-right Centre and Liberal parties.

While the formation of a new government ends the paralysis, it doesn't resolve the challenge from radical-right populists in Sweden.

A key question remains: will treating populists like pariahs undercut the appeal of their, often anti-rights, politics?

Or does it feed a narrative of 'corrupt elites' excluding 'the authentic people'?

The new government's policy program will test that question.

Despite a clear fall in inward migration and asylum claims, the Sweden Democrats' tried to make the election mainly about migration and clearly found some support.

The new government will maintain migration restrictions at EU minimum levels, in place since 2016, but hopes to shift eventually to a more 'humane' approach.

But polling suggests that traditional centre-left voters were more focused on health care and education than immigration. A key challenge for the new government is whether it can tackle those issues, and how it does so.

A rights-based framework can help.

The government has yet to set out plans to grapple with the tough social issues in urban areas that give grist to the populists' mill.

Tackling long waits for healthcare, increasing affordable housing, and addressing crime through

improved policing levels (currently lower than similar European states) can help secure the rights to health, adequate housing and security for long-term residents and facilitate the integration of newly-arrived citizens and residents alike.

If the government and their centre-right partners want to blunt the appeal of populists, they need to help everyone in society secure their basic rights, rather than talking tough temporarily on migration while keeping Sweden Democrats at arm's length.

Otherwise populists will continue to make exaggerated claims linking violent crime to migration, and take advantage of legitimate social grievances about a declining welfare state with a changing population.

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