

Dialogue

State Surveillance of Violent Extremism and Threats of White Supremacist Violence in Sweden

Amir Rostami

University of Gävle, Sweden
Institute for Futures Studies, Sweden
amir.rostami@iffs.se

Tina Askanius

Malmö University, Sweden
Institute for Futures Studies, Sweden
tina.askanius@iffs.se

Introduction

Sweden is a robust democratic state with a well-functioning legal system, stable political institutions, vibrant associational life, and high electoral turnout (Rothstein, Charron, and Lapuente 2013; Rothstein 2018). However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, domestic national security challenges have gained more political importance. Law and order have become one of the main concerns for Swedish voters (Novus 2021; Andersson et al. 2021). An increasing number of social issues have become linked and subordinated to crime and security policy (Tham 2018; Andersson and Nilsson 2017). These policy areas have witnessed a paradigm shift toward a broader spectrum of threats and risks than had previously been the case, resulting in an expansion of internal controls and levels of surveillance of all citizens for both criminal and non-criminal behaviors (Flyghed 2005). Further, Sweden has a relatively strong far-right movement, factions of which have an explicitly anti-democratic and violent agenda. Most recently, in the years following the European border crisis of 2015–2016 during which the country took in more refugees per capita than any other European country, we have seen a new surge in anti-immigration mobilizations and far-right violence. In fact, in international comparisons of far-right violence and militancy, Sweden represents an outlier position with a markedly stronger and more resilient extreme-right movement compared to its Nordic neighbors. Explicitly, Sweden can be described as the Nordic hub for the extreme far-right movements in the region (Ravndal 2018; Ekuriren 2019). In recent years, several monitoring groups and state actors, including the Swedish Security Service, have identified far-right terrorism as a growing and deepening threat against Swedish democracy (Ranstorp and Ahlin 2020; Expo 2019, 2020). Further, recent research indicates that Sweden also stands out when it comes to a specific form of violent extremism on the rise, that of violent misogyny (Fernquist et al. 2020; Askanius et al. forthcoming), which, at its core, is intricately linked to white supremacist ideology.

For a long time, the general international image of Sweden has been positive, as it is a country without serious internal conflicts (Swedish Institute 2019). However, an increase in the number of people with violent extremist views, statistics positioning the country among the European countries with the highest per capita number of foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq—second only to Belgium and Austria—and an alarming increase in firearms and explosives violence that puts Sweden among the EU countries with the highest level of gun homicides (approximately four deaths per million inhabitants per year compared to the average of approximately 1.6 deaths per million inhabitants for the comparable twenty-two European

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countries) are challenging this positive image (Brå 2021; Sturup et al. 2018; Sturup, Gerell, and Rostami 2018; Rostami 2017; Rostami et al. 2020).

In this paper, we explore how the Swedish national security concerns about terrorism and violent extremism have evolved over time. Through a critical review of the annual threat-assessments published by the Swedish Security Service SÄPO, we discuss the Swedish crime and security policy of domestic security threats with special attention to state surveillance practices and policies around far-right extremism and white supremacist groups specifically.

The Historical Trajectory of Threats to National Security

Terrorism, ideologically and religiously motivated extremism, and other forms of violent threats have a long history in Sweden. For example, the world's first documented letter bomb, constructed by Martin Ekenberg, exploded in the hands of Karl Fredrik Lundin, the director of the Swedish centrifugal company in 1904 in Stockholm (Ranstorp, forthcoming). Sweden was also among the first countries in Europe to have an organized Nazi movement with violent tendencies. As early as two years after the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) was formed in Munich Germany, the first National Socialistic party, the National Socialist Freedom League (SNFL) was formed in Sweden in 1924. Alvar Zetterquist (1957), one of the leading jurists of his time and the head of the Department of Crime Investigations at the Swedish Police in Stockholm between 1930 and 1955, describes in his memoir how Nazism emerged in the 1920s and evolved into a threat to Sweden's national security during 1930s. He documents how the first National Socialist organizations had their own intelligence and security branches and planned to assassinate Per Albin Hansson, the prime minister of Sweden between 1932 and 1946. Furthermore, Zetterquist reports how Swedish Nazi-organizations plotted to use explosive violence against political opponents. These organizations were eventually prevented from achieving their violent aims and were "bankrupted" due to mobilization by the security services (Zetterquist 1957: 351).

During the 1970s, far-left groups dominated the political violence scene in Sweden. On April 24, 1975, six members of SPK, the "socialist patient collective" (socialistiska patientkollektivet), attacked the West German embassy in Stockholm and took the ambassador and eleven embassy employees hostage as an act of solidarity with the Red Army Faction. The Palestinian cause was one of the main drivers of political extremism in Sweden during the 1970s and 1980s. There were extensive contacts between far-left extremism and Palestinian liberation movements such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFPL) (Ranstorp, forthcoming). Even the Danish Blekingegade-banden, a group of politically motivated criminal activists inspired by communist ideology, committed a number of robberies during the 1970s and 1980s and supported the Palestinian cause by transferring the money to the PFPL. This group was also active in Sweden during its heyday (Knudsen 2009; Kuhn 2014). Furthermore, the anti-apartheid movement had its share of activity in Sweden. About 347 attacks were carried out against the petrochemical company Shell between 1986 and 1991 in Sweden (Forsberg 2006).

During the 1990s, and especially after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Islamic extremism became the core focus of counterterrorism in Sweden. However, far-right and far-left extremism remain as some of the main security concerns. In its open annual reports, the Swedish Security Service (SÄPO) makes a sharp distinction between counterterrorism and countersubversion. The former focuses on preventing terrorist attacks in Sweden and the latter on "politically motivated groups and individuals, such as political and religious extremists, that engage in crimes that are severe or carried out systematically in order to change society" (Säkerhetspolisen 2021).

A review of the Swedish Security Service's open annual reports from 2001 and onward, in which the agency identifies and presents the security threats against Sweden, indicates that, besides serious intelligence threats to Sweden from countries such as Russia, China, and Iran, terrorism threats have historically been associated with international violent Islamic extremism, Al-Qaeda in particular, while the violent far-left and far-right have been considered domestic countersubversion movements. In his memoir, Tore Forsberg (2006: 467),

an officer of the Swedish Security Service, stated that, during the 1990s when he was an active security officer at the agency, the countersubversion department was the largest division in SÄPO due to the security threats posed by far-right extremism.

Since 2001, the main security focus has been on international Islamic terrorism and the rise of domestic violent Islamic extremism and, later, the steady flow of foreign fighters to Daesh, despite there being no evidence or official statement by Swedish authorities indicating that violent far-right and far-left extremism is in decline. The predominant focus on violent Islamic extremism has persisted even though Sweden, alongside Germany, the UK, and Spain, stands out as having far more far-right terrorism violence per capita than any other Western European country (Ravndal 2017). This indicates that Swedish security and surveillance practices follow a familiar pattern across post-9/11 Western democracies in which the overwhelming tendency has been to single out the “outside” threat posed by Islamic terrorism at the expense of so-called home-grown violence (see Crosby 2021, in this volume, for an analysis of a similar pattern in the Canadian trajectory of state monitoring practices and threat frames).

This has very recently started to change, however. In their threat-assessments, the Swedish Security Service suggests that the greatest threat of terrorist attacks come from violent Islamic extremism (Säkerhetspolisen 2018) and the extreme far-right (Säkerhetspolisen 2020). It is now estimated that the threat from far-right extremism has increased, *inter alia*, as a result of several far-right attacks in other countries as well as a steady rise in activities and hate crimes by far-right groups within Sweden. Indeed, both far-right and violent Islamic extremists have carried out ideologically motivated bombings and homicides in Sweden in recent years (NCT 2018). The most recent wave of violent acts for which far-right extremists have been convicted include incitement of racial hatred, arson, bomb attacks against refugee shelters, illegal possession of arms, preparation for crime, attacks and harassment targeting researchers and journalists, and murder.

These reports are further corroborated by a host of evidence presented by a wide range of authorities and organizations including the Swedish Defense Research Agency (Kaati et al. 2019), the Swedish Defense University (Ranstorp and Ahlin 2020), the Swedish Center for Preventing Violent Extremism (CVE 2020), the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF 2016), and the foundation Expo (Expo 2019, 2020), all of which currently raise warnings about the rise in far-right activity and violence across the country. Some of these reports are documenting the ways in which the movement is increasingly mobilizing online (see, e.g., Kaati 2017) and, in the process, expanding the repertoire for organizing action, building networks and alliances, and spreading propaganda (Askanius 2021a, 2021b). In addition, the rise of the extreme-right movement in Sweden is increasingly identified in international scholarship as part of a larger global threat and as a key actor in the transnationalization of far-right extremism (see, e.g., Soufan Center 2019).

One could argue that the state security system has not directed adequate attention to white supremacy as a security threat and, in doing so, security forces are failing to address a rising security threat and to anticipate future attacks. However, there is limited research on this in the Swedish context. In other contexts, it has been argued that a bias is built into the state-surveillance-security system because of political interests invested in presenting the threat as coming from the “outside” and that conservative forces are turning a blind eye to the “home-grown” anti-democratic elements at the violent extremist end of the far-right spectrum (see the critique raised in Crosby 2021, in this volume, of the close ties and political affinities between right-wing actors and military and security services/institutions).

Countering Security Threats: Securitization and Surveillance in Sweden

In summary, although Sweden has been a stronghold of far-right extremism since the 1920s—in particular, since the heydays of the 1990s and onward—the focus on counterterrorism measures, state crime-control, and surveillance has been directed primarily toward combating foreign intelligence and counter-intelligence operations and violent Islamic terrorism. These developments should be understood in the context of a broader process of securitization and increased surveillance in the country. In general, the Swedish crime

policy since the 1990s can be characterized as a punitive era, driven toward more control and surveillance, particularly increased opportunities for covert coercive measures (such as lawful interception, wiretapping of communications, room tapping, secret camera surveillance, and secret data surveillance), increasing the severity of punishment, and special laws on punishment for terrorist crimes (Andersson and Nilsson 2017). And Sweden has on several occasions been singled out and criticized by the European Court of Human rights (ECHR) for the mass surveillance programs that lack proper oversight and checks and balances (most recently the legislative framework FRA implemented in 2008).

Across the world, far-right extremism is increasingly recognized as a threat to democratic societies. The insurgency against the Capitol in Washington, DC by far-right militias and white nationalists in the US earlier this year, and President Biden's subsequent commitment to take seriously the threat of white supremacist violence after he was sworn into office, has generated widespread attention to the issue that extends well beyond the US. Further, the ongoing pandemic and the adjacent rise of far-right conspiracy theories around the virus and vaccines are spurring new waves of far-right actions and violence. Beyond the developments described above in the country itself, these events might help explain why far-right extremism is currently on the radar of Swedish Police and Security Services and the extent to which it seems to be taken seriously at this political juncture in Sweden. It remains to be seen, however, whether the decision to highlight far-right extremism as a primary national security threat and to direct resources toward the critical scrutiny and surveillance of these actors will persist beyond the present moment.

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