

## **The democratic response to Swedish right-wing extremism**

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, much attention has been paid to the growth of extreme right activity in Scandinavia. In the autumn of 2000, the Norwegian Progress Party was the country's biggest party in a number of opinion polls. The party has slumped since then, especially after a scandal in February 2001 where the deputy leader Terje Søviksnes was accused of rape. However, it remains a major threat against the established party system in the parliamentary election, scheduled for September. Opinion polls conducted in February and March 2001 indicated that the party was still supported by 17 per cent of the voters with a party preference.<sup>1</sup> The Danish People's Party may not so far have enjoyed quite the same levels of support as the peaks reached by its Norwegian sister party. Recent opinion polls suggest that the party is supported by roughly one in ten Danish voters. Still, it played a major part in the successful No campaign in the Danish referendum on the EMU in September 2000, something which looks like having increased the party's legitimacy. The Danish Progress Party, since late 1999 led by the readmitted (but increasingly eccentric) Mogens Glistrup, is a minnow in comparison. Nevertheless, recent opinion polls suggest that the party may still be able to clear the two per cent threshold for parliamentary representation in the next election, which will take place in March 2002 at the latest.<sup>2</sup>

In Finland the 'True Finns' party, a successor of the defunct Rural Party, currently holds one parliamentary seat. Whether the ominously named 'National Front', which secured two seats on Turku city council in the local elections in the autumn of 2000, will enter the national stage remains to be seen. It is reportedly debatable whether its leader, the private detective Olavi Mäenpää, possesses the oratory and charismatic qualities that have brought national success to extreme right politicians elsewhere in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Besides the varying impact on the party systems, the extreme right is making its presence felt in other ways. Racist violence makes the headlines throughout the Scandinavian region. A recent example was the murder, allegedly committed by neo-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gallup.no/>; <http://www.opinion.no/barometer/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gallup.dk/>

<sup>3</sup> *Helsingin Sanomat*, monthly supplement, March 2001. See also Pekonen et al. 1999:50f.

nazis, of a 15 year old youth with a Ghanaian father and Norwegian mother, in Oslo. Neo-nazi groups are active and visible in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Violent skinhead groups exist also in Finland, but outright neo-nazi groups are, so far, insignificant.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, although it might be an exaggeration to state that the extreme right is continuously increasing in support and activity in the Scandinavian region, it is a factor that cannot be neglected. Extreme right parties are potentially important factors in the Norwegian and Danish party systems, and should not be ruled out for the future in Finland and Sweden. Racist violence occurs to varying extents in the whole Scandinavian region, and the absence of neo-nazi groups so far in Finland may well prove not to be permanent.

This paper is part of a wider project, which will cover responses to the extreme right in Scandinavia. Here, however, the focus will be on Sweden. With a reputation as something of a haven of democracy, consensus and stability, the surfacing of extreme right groups and parties has been a rude awakening for many Swedes, and surprised some international observers. Neo-nazi and fascist groups have existed without interruptions since the end of WWII, but for many years they were nothing more than a lunatic fringe. In 1985, a photograph of a middle aged lady handbagging an activist in the neo-nazi *Nordiska Rikspartiet* was widely circulated in the press.<sup>5</sup> This did not exactly give the impression of the extreme right as a potential threat, and the reaction of the general public contained significant amounts of ridicule. Nevertheless, the second half of the 1980s saw a significant increase in the activities of extreme right groups. By the early 1990s, members of nazi groups had been convicted of murder, arson and bomb attacks.<sup>6</sup>

Extreme right activity continued to increase in the 1990s, with highly publicised incidents such as racist riots in Trollhättan in 1993 and the murder of the syndicalist trade unionist Björn Söderberg in the autumn of 1999.<sup>7</sup> Such incidents shocked

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<sup>4</sup> *Politik i Norden* (published by the Nordic Council of Ministers), issue 1, April 2000.

<sup>5</sup> The photo appears on the front cover of *Pred* 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Larsson and Lodenius 1991:43ff.

<sup>7</sup> The troubles in Trollhättan are discussed further below. Following the murder of Söderberg, two men with neo-nazi links were sentenced to 11 years imprisonment (*Searchlight*, September 2000).

Sweden, which had for many years enjoyed a reputation as a country with little racism and a low level of ethnic conflict.<sup>8</sup> In late 2000, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) estimated that Sweden had the second highest level of racial and extreme right violence in the EU, behind Germany. In the 1999 Annual Report, the EUMC stated that in 1999 there were 2,363 reported crimes with racial or xenophobic motives. These incidents included cases of illegal threats, assaults and molestation, and signified a continuous increase since 1997. Nearly 1,000 crimes were committed by neo-nazi organisations, including four reported cases of murder, and four attempted murders.<sup>9</sup> While estimations and international comparisons of racist and neo-nazi crime are extremely difficult to make, due to the multitude of problems connected with the reporting and classification of racist and extreme right crime, the report reinforced the impression that Sweden is struggling to come to terms with its transition into a multiethnic society. Available evidence suggests that modern extreme right groups in Sweden have caused more harm and loss of life than their predecessors in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>10</sup>

On the party political level, the development over the past decade has been somewhat contradictory. The abortive appearance of New Democracy, represented in parliament between 1991 and 1994, showed that the Swedish party system is not immune to challenges from the populist right. Some observers drew a sigh of relief when the party disappeared after three years in parliament. Indeed, the well-known psephologist Sören Holmberg has argued that the New Democracy interlude has made Sweden immune to populist right parties.<sup>11</sup> This, however, is an assertion that can be challenged. The fall of New Democracy was primarily caused by internal factors, triggered by party leader Ian Wachtmeister's decision to step down half a year before the 1994 election. There is very little to suggest that Swedish voters could not be open to new challenges from the same corner, possibly from a party presenting an

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Wilkinson (1983:147f) pointed out a number of racist incidents in Sweden in the early 1980s, but also said that there were European countries with far worse tensions, and that the Swedish government had gone further than many other countries in efforts to combat prejudice and conflict.

<sup>9</sup> EUMC Annual Report 1999, pp. 28ff. (<http://www.eumc.at>).

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that Swedish nazi groups of the 1930s and 1940s were harmless. The most serious case was the arson attack in 1940 on the communist newspaper *Norrskensflamman*, in which three adults and two children were killed (Johansson 1973:274). Still, the number of lives lost due to extreme right attacks in the 1980s and 1990s almost certainly exceed the corresponding figures from the 1930s and 1940s.

<sup>11</sup> *Arbetet Ny Tid*, 17 September 2000.

ideological package more based on welfare chauvinism and Euro-scepticism, instead of the neo-liberal and strongly pro-EU policies pursued by Wachtmeister. Other extreme right parties, such as the 'Sweden Democrats', have gained local council seats, but so far shown no signs of a national breakthrough. New Democracy continued to exist on paper after losing its parliamentary status, but has failed to make any subsequent political impact, and was threatened by receivership in the autumn of 2000.<sup>12</sup>

Comparative surveys do not suggest that the Swedish public hold extreme right views to a higher extent than elsewhere in Europe. According to data from 1991, analysed by Lauri Karvonen, 6.5 per cent of Swedes mentioned 'other races' among groups that they would not like to have as neighbours, and 8.9 per cent mentioned 'foreign workers'. 40.6 per cent were 'very proud' of their nationality. In all these cases, the proportions represented increases compared to 1981, but they were not particularly high in a European comparison. This is especially true of the unwillingness to live next to 'other races', where for example Norway and -- especially -- Finland displayed significantly higher proportions.<sup>13</sup> A Eurobarometer conducted in 1997 showed that two per cent of Swedes considered themselves to be 'very racist' and 16 per cent 'quite racist'; in both cases below the EU average. Conversely, 42 per cent considered themselves 'not at all racist', which was the sixth highest (Portugal had the highest proportion with 58 per cent), and nine percentage points above the average. On the other hand, 60 per cent of Swedes agreed with the statement that the own country has reached its limits, and that continued growth of minority groups would lead to problems. This was marginally below the average, but could in its own right be regarded as a high figure.<sup>14</sup>

Other research does not suggest a continuous increase of racist and xenophobic attitudes in Sweden. In 1987, Charles Westin presented data that suggested that public opinion in Sweden had become more tolerant of immigrants and immigration compared to the 1960s.<sup>15</sup> Surveys conducted by the SOM institute at Göteborg University suggest that there was a surge in anti-immigration sentiment in the early

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<sup>12</sup> *Aftonbladet*, 30 September 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Karvonen 1997.

<sup>14</sup> [http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg10/epo/eb/racism/racism\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg10/epo/eb/racism/racism_en.pdf)

1990s, but also that such attitudes have since declined. In 1999, 46 per cent of Swedes thought it was a good proposal to accept fewer refugees into the country, compared to a peak level of 65 per cent in 1992. Forty per cent thought that there were too many foreigners in Sweden and 17 per cent responded that they would not like a person from another part of the world to be married into the family. Also the latter figures represent declines since the first part of the 1990s.<sup>16</sup>

Seen in this light, the geographer Alan Pred could be said to be exaggerating in his recent book with the cunning title 'Even in Sweden', in which he presents many examples of racism and ethnic prejudice in the Swedish society. His impressionistic and provocative study can be criticised for a lack of empirical stringency, but he does present plenty of disturbing evidence.<sup>17</sup> It would seem wrong to exaggerate the Swedish situation. At the moment, there is not much to suggest that racist and xenophobic attitudes are rising, or that they are widely held in a European comparison. The failure to fill the gap in the party system, left vacant by New Democracy, is another factor that acts as a warning against rash conclusions. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the extreme right in Sweden is a factor that cannot be neglected. Racist and xenophobic attitudes are held by a sufficient number of people to provide a fertile ground for a populist right party. The activities by neo-nazi groups, and the many cases of racist violence, are warning signals to the democratic establishment.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the **democratic response** to the extreme right challenge. The working definition of democratic response will be *'intentional measures taken by government, parliament, the established political parties and other democratic institutions at the national and subnational levels, designed to restrict the activities of, and support for, extremist groups and parties'*. This is an intentionally narrow definition. Responses from civil society are not included. Thus, the focus is set on how the established political system responds to an extremist challenge.

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<sup>15</sup> Westin 1987.

<sup>16</sup> Demker 2000:59ff.

<sup>17</sup> Pred 2000.

A democratic response to an extremist challenge can be separated into **form** and **direction**. The **form** can, in turn, be separated into **accommodation** and **marginalisation**. The democratic establishment can try to **accommodate** the extremist appeal, by integrating some extreme demands into the official policy. On the other hand, it can try to **marginalise** extremist groups with legal restrictions. The **direction** of the response can be **general**, i.e. towards the public, or **specific**, i.e. towards the extremist groups as such.

This can be combined into a total of four possible responses:

**General accommodation** is measures designed to acquiesce public opinion, to prevent the public from start supporting the extreme right. It could, for example, take the shape of introducing stricter asylum laws, in an attempt to stem the growth of anti-immigration sentiment.

**General marginalisation** is measures designed to keep popular racism and xenophobia in place. For example, laws against discrimination and racist remarks.

**Specific accommodation** is a less common combination of form and direction. An example would be to involve an extremist party in government, in order to force the party to take political responsibility. It could be argued that this was the strategy used by the Austrian ÖVP, when they in 2000 decided to form a government coalition with the FPÖ. Another possible example is the attempt of the democratic parties in the German Weimar republic to accommodate the NSDAP into government. It should be mentioned, however, that the inclusion of an alleged extreme right party into government could also have other motives. For example, that the other parties quite simply do not regard the 'extreme right' party in question as extreme, or as otherwise unacceptable. If this is the case, then it can hardly be a case of accommodation; rather a case of acceptance.

**Specific marginalisation**, finally, is when governments issue bans or restrictions on extremist groups or parties. Examples are the decision in 1992 to subject the German

Republikaner party to surveillance by the Verfassungsschutz,<sup>18</sup> or the ban in 1998 on the Dutch Centrumpartij '86.<sup>19</sup> Other possible examples are the seizure of party newspapers, restrictions on symbols and uniforms or restricting the right for extreme groups and parties to hold public meetings.

The paper will look at the democratic response to two types of challenge from the extreme right in Sweden. First, the party political challenge, manifested by New Democracy. Second, the challenge from violent racist and neo-nazi groups. Most of the account will focus on the 1990s. The section on the response to New Democracy will, for obvious reasons, focus on the period when this party was a force to be reckoned with, i.e. until 1994, but some attention will also be paid to the subsequent period, when a possible democratic response could be regarded as a precaution against the emergence of new challenges from the populist right. The section on responses to violent racism and neo-nazism will cover a longer period, up to the year 2000.

## 2. The response to the emergence of New Democracy

For many years, the 64,000 dollar question about the Swedish party system was why there was no equivalent to the populist right Progress Parties in Denmark and Norway, or the Finnish Rural Party. One reason often given was that the opportunity structure was unfavourable. The Moderate (conservative) Party was more radical than its Scandinavian sister parties in its policies against taxation and public sector bureaucracy, so that they already occupied the political gap that new parties had seized elsewhere in Scandinavia. Consequently, the reasoning went, a populist right party could only appear in Sweden after a period with the Moderate Party in government, where it could not deliver its promises, which would lead to disillusionment among its more radical supporters.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the fact that the Moderate Party twice left non-socialist coalition governments, a year before the 1979 and 1982 elections, and never faced the voters as incumbents, meant that there was no opening for a populist right breakthrough.

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<sup>18</sup> More 1994.

<sup>19</sup> Mudde 2000:147.

<sup>20</sup> See Kitschelt 1995:127f.

The problem with this reasoning is that it is consistent with why no populist right party appeared in the 1980s, but it is not consistent with the circumstances in which New Democracy appeared. The 1991 election was the end of nine years of Social Democratic government. The final election period between 1988 and 1991 was very difficult for the government, politically as well as economically. The theory of the Moderate Party occupying the space that otherwise would have been available for a populist right party was firmly refuted by the fact that New Democracy appeared at a time when discontent with the Social Democrats was at an all time high level. If anything, this was a situation which ought to have paved the way for the Moderate system critique of the Swedish social democracy. True, the Moderate Party did have a successful election in 1991, but the result was 1.7 percentage points below the post-war party record of 23.6 per cent from 1982, and it did not prevent the populist right New Democracy from entering parliament.

The events that led to the formation of New Democracy have been documented elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> Already in late 1990, before the party had been formally founded, opinion polls suggested that it had enough popular support to pass the four per cent threshold for parliamentary representation. The immediate reaction among the democratic establishment was one of disbelief. Some opponents seemed to cling to the hope that New Democracy was a passing phase, which would not last until the September election. When one of the party's founders, the record company and fairground owner Bert Karlsson, performed disastrously in an interview in the current affairs TV programme *Magasinet* in February 1991, some hoped it was the end of the party. Such hopes were in vain. Opinion polls suggested that the party was more or less unaffected by the event. The other member of the leadership duo, Ian Wachtmeister, was a much more effective media performer, and in any case the party was able to play the underdog card when explaining Karlsson's fiasco.

The response from the established parties could be summarised as cautious. There seemed to be a widespread feeling that attacks could backfire on the attacker. The leader of the Liberal Party, Bengt Westerberg, was one of the exceptions. He repeatedly took on New Democracy during the 1991 campaign. On election night, he

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<sup>21</sup> E.g. Taggart 1996, Arter 1992, Widfeldt 2000.

demonstratively left the TV studio when Wachtmeister and Karlsson entered, after New Democracy had secured 26 seats in the Riksdag. Westerberg was praised from many quarters for being honest and brave in his uncompromising attitude. It certainly was not an opportunist strategy, given the opinion climate at the time. For all the praise and respect, Westerberg's party suffered a serious election defeat, with the second worst result in its history. Thus, it could be argued that, with Westerberg and the Liberals as the main exception, the initial response from the established party system was a non-reaction. Westerberg apart, the party leaders were reluctant to take on New Democracy.<sup>22</sup>

The parliamentary situation after the 1991 election meant that it was impossible to ignore New Democracy. Out of the total of 349 *Riksdag* seats, the socialist bloc consisting of the Social Democrats and the Left Party had 154 seats. The non-socialist bloc, consisting of the Moderates, the Liberals, Christian Democrats and the Centre Party, had 170 seats. Thus, the latter four parties, which formed a coalition government after the election, were five seats short of a majority. New Democracy held a pivotal position with their 25 seats. Although the parliamentary situation was complicated, there is nothing to suggest that any of the coalition partners seriously contemplated a **specific accommodation** strategy, with New Democracy included in the government. Nor is there much to suggest that this would have suited New Democracy's plans. The party relied on its image as an outsider, and did not wish to immediately compromise its credentials by joining a government, or even offering systematic parliamentary support. When the government was installed on 3 October, New Democracy abstained in the vote of investiture.<sup>23</sup> This was generally regarded as passive support for the government, since the Swedish constitution states that a government is tolerated by parliament as long as there is not a majority of the elected MPs voting against it.<sup>24</sup> The situation for the government was not enviable. To get its bills through parliament, it had to rely on support from New Democracy, or on cross-bloc agreements with the Social Democrats.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, Elmbrant (1993:276) argues that the Social Democrats and the Moderates responded to the New Democracy challenge by 'ducking and being silent' during the campaign.

<sup>23</sup> *Riksdagens årsbok* 1991/92:14f.

The latter solution was used during the unsuccessful attempts to defend the Swedish currency against speculation in the autumn of 1992. The *Krona* had been tied to the ECU since 1988, but in 1992 it became increasingly apparent that it was significantly overvalued. In order to defend the *Krona* against speculation, the Central Bank raised the marginal interest rate to incredible levels, at most to 500 per cent. At the same time, the government tried to work out austerity packages, in order to regain the confidence of the money market in the Swedish economy. Due to the complicated parliamentary situation, support from New Democracy or the Social Democrats was necessary to carry such packages through the *Riksdag*.

Throughout the crisis, it seemed apparent that major cross-bloc deals with the Social Democrats was always the government's preferred option. Indeed, broad consensus was considered a value in itself in the quest to rebuild the reputation of the Swedish economy. However, Jan Teorell's study of the events during the turbulent period between September and November suggests that the Moderate leader and Prime Minister Carl Bildt may have been open to discussions with New Democracy during the first phases of the crisis. Wachtmeister openly expressed interest in participating in the negotiations, and Bildt stated on TV that Wachtmeister had behaved in a 'responsible and impressive manner', while others did not have the same 'crisis awareness', something which infuriated the Social Democrats.<sup>25</sup> Whether this statement revealed genuine openness towards New Democracy, or was intended as a provocation to get the Social Democratic leadership moving, is not clear. According to Teorell, Bildt did suggest to the government that talks with New Democracy could be an 'alternative strategy', if the negotiations with the Social Democrats were to collapse.<sup>26</sup> Such ideas were, however, firmly resisted by Westerberg and any thoughts of involving New Democracy were soon abandoned.<sup>27</sup> During the subsequent phases of the crisis, New Democracy were clearly out of the picture, and Wachtmeister

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<sup>24</sup> New Democracy also abstained during a vote on a finance bill on 17 March 1993, where the government had declared that it would dissolve parliament if the bill was defeated. *Riksdagens årsbok* 1992/93:11; 41ff.

<sup>25</sup> Teorell 1998:57; Elmbrant 1993:303ff.

<sup>26</sup> Teorell 1998:56f.

<sup>27</sup> Teorell 1998 chapter 2; see especially pp. 56ff. See also Elmbrant 1993, chapters 33 and 34. Wachtmeister claims that it was the Liberals and Social Democrats that were the main obstacles to including New Democracy in the negotiations (Wachtmeister 1992:142).

belonged to the minority who started to question the prevailing consensus that the *Krona* must be defended at all costs.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, although Prime Minister Bildt may at some stage have toyed with the idea of including New Democracy in the package deals to defend the Swedish currency, the government went for cross-bloc deals with the Social Democrats. Two such deals, which together included unprecedented welfare cuts and significant tax increases, were reached in late September 1992. On 19 November, however, the government finally had to give up the defence of the overvalued *Krona*, which was allowed to float. Its value promptly sank like a stone.<sup>29</sup>

After the defence of the *Krona* had failed, there was no room left for further cross-bloc agreements. With their eyes set on the 1994 election, the Social Democrats went in for a fully-fledged opposition policy, and the government had to rely on New Democracy. This reliance turned out to be highly unreliable, however. The main strategy of the government parties was to negotiate with New Democracy in the parliamentary committees, rather than trying to reach wider agreements with the party leadership. The success of this strategy varied, largely depending on which New Democracy MPs they were dealing with. New Democracy's three years in parliament were riddled with internal conflicts, defections and poor party discipline, which made systematic co-operation difficult, especially towards the end of the 1991-1994 period.. There were cases where New Democracy took one side in a parliamentary committee, only to change its mind in the chamber.<sup>30</sup> In addition, there were cases when the party sided with the opposition to abolish laws, whose introduction New Democracy had supported shortly before.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Teorell 1998:67.

<sup>29</sup> Teorell 1998:68-72.

<sup>30</sup> This happened with the government proposal to introduce '*vårdnadsbidrag*', an allowance for parents with children. The New Democracy representative had opposed the proposal in the parliamentary committee on social affairs. In the chamber, other New Democracy representatives proposed that the bill should be resubmitted to the parliamentary committee. When the bill was finally brought to the chamber, the New Democracy group was split, but a sufficient number of the party's MPs voted with the government for the bill to be passed. *Riksdag utskottsbetänkanden* SoU 1993/94:25; SoU 1993/94:34; *Riksdag* minutes 1993/94:106 (18 May), 2 §; 1993/94:108 (20 May), 4 §.

<sup>31</sup> This happened when the *Riksdag* voted to abolish a reform of the health care system, the so-called 'house doctor reform', in 1994. The reform had been introduced, with support from New Democracy, a year earlier.

Thus, it is difficult to characterise the response to New Democracy's period in the *Riksdag*. There **is no evidence of specific accommodation**. No other party tried to make far-reaching deals with New Democracy. The fact that the party held the parliamentary balance meant that it was impossible to completely avoid contacts and agreements. But such agreements were made on an ad-hoc basis, and were not part of a specific accommodation strategy. Indeed, Wachtmeister himself often complained about the cold treatment received by himself and his party.<sup>32</sup>

This could, perhaps, be regarded as evidence of **specific marginalisation**. There is, however, much that speaks against such a conclusion. All available evidence suggests that New Democracy thrived on a position as outsiders, and were not interested in appearing as too closely connected to the establishment.<sup>33</sup> It is certainly true that some parties, especially the arch rival Liberals, did not wish to touch New Democracy with a barge pole. There is, however, no evidence that the government coalition consciously avoided co-operation with New Democracy, although it was mostly confined to an ad-hoc basis. The one occasion where deals with the Social Democrats were preferred in favour of seeking New Democracy support was the currency crisis in 1992, although this was a relatively unique situation. Nor did the Social Democrats seem to have any qualms about siding with New Democracy, if they could hurt the government that way. There is definitely no evidence of attempts of more severe marginalisation. No attempts were made by the other parties to restrict New Democracy's chances of re-election by amending the electoral laws; nor the rules for receiving the state subsidies, that Swedish parties with parliamentary representation, or at least 2.5 per cent of the votes in a parliamentary election, are entitled to.

**General marginalisation** was never a likely strategy against New Democracy. It could have involved restrictions against expressing support for the party, carrying its symbols, etc. There is no evidence of such measures taken against New Democracy. General marginalisation will be returned to in the next section, however, in connection with the discussion on the response to neo-nazism.

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<sup>32</sup> An example is Wachtmeister's book from 1992, *Krokodilerna* (the crocodiles). The title refers to mainstream politicians who, according to Wachtmeister, have big mouths but no ears.

<sup>33</sup> This was certainly the official version given by Wachtmeister (1992:139).

There is, perhaps, more to suggest that the democratic response to New Democracy was characterised by **general accommodation** of the party's views on immigration. New Democracy openly and strongly criticised the alleged generous refugee and immigration policies. The anti-immigration rhetoric was by far the most outspoken ever expressed by a Swedish parliamentary party. New Democracy argued that political refugees should be given loans instead of allowances, that immigrants should be expelled in cases of repeated crime and that immigrant children should not be entitled to education in their 'home language'. The party also argued that the definition of a political refugee should be made stricter.<sup>34</sup> In a private member's motion to the *Riksdag*, New Democracy MP John Bouvin linked the increasing unemployment to immigration, and proposed that immigration should be reduced to a minimum for 'one or more years'.<sup>35</sup>

New Democracy's proposals to change the Swedish refugee and immigration policies received no direct support from the established parties. Indeed, the party was heavily criticised, and repeatedly accused of racism. However, it seemed as if New Democracy had struck a chord with the Swedish public. New Democracy's time in parliament coincided with a period of high pressure on Sweden's capacity to accept refugees, mainly due to the war in the former Yugoslavia. In 1992, 84,000 persons applied for political asylum in Sweden, the highest figure so far recorded in a single year. It also coincided with a peak in anti-immigration attitudes among the Swedish public.<sup>36</sup> The party made successful summer tours with public meetings around the country in 1992 and 1993, where criticism against the existing refugee and immigration policies was a key feature. In August 1992, Ian Wachtmeister asked an audience in Göteborg: "What should we do about Somalia? Bring them here?", which was received with widespread amusement.<sup>37</sup> The public response seemed positive. New Democracy did well in opinion polls, with figures of over 10 per cent in mid 1992. Despite a decline in support in 1993, the party looked well capable of holding on to its parliamentary status until Wachtmeister announced in February 1994 that he was resigning from the party leadership. From then on its support collapsed.

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<sup>34</sup> See, e.g. *Riksdag* motion 1991/92:Sf630, signed by Ian Wachtmeister and three other New Democracy MPs.

<sup>35</sup> *Riksdag* motion 1991/92:Sf630. The motion was also signed by three other New Democracy MPs.

<sup>36</sup> Demker 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Direct observation by the author.

The high number of asylum seekers in the early 1990s came despite the fact that the Swedish asylum policy had been tightened in late 1989, when the Social Democratic government decided on a stricter definition of refugees, which basically was in accordance with the UN Convention on refugees. Refugees would no longer be accepted on humanitarian or 'refugee-like' grounds.<sup>38</sup> In June 1993, the non-socialist government decided to grant asylum to all pending applications from Bosnia-Herzegovina, unless there were strong reasons against it. At the same time, however, visa restrictions were imposed on Bosnian citizens, which significantly reduced the number of new applications from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Despite this, an all time high number of 79,000 asylums were granted in 1994, although the numbers went down significantly from 1995 onwards.<sup>39</sup> After the 1994 election, a one-party Social Democratic government took office. The minister responsible for immigration between 1994 and 1996, Mr. Leif Blomberg, was criticised for being a hardliner. In December 1996, parliament approved a government proposal, which included the removal of certain ground for asylum, including refusal to serve in military forces. The concept of 'de facto refugees' was also abolished. This was criticised as a tightening of the Swedish asylum policy, especially by the Left, Green and Liberal parties.<sup>40</sup> MPs from these parties even argued that the government was introducing policies, which resembled those previously proposed by New Democracy.<sup>41</sup>

If such criticism is true, then it could be taken as evidence of **general accommodation**. As has been shown above, significant parts of the Swedish public seemed to agree with New Democracy's criticism of the existing refugee and immigration policies. Thus, it might be possible to argue that the decision to impose visa restrictions on Bosnian citizens in 1993, and the changes in asylum policy in 1996, were designed to accommodate public discontent with the influx of refugees, and take away the potential for support for New Democracy. By 1996, of course, New

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<sup>38</sup> The decision was taken by the government, and not subject to a vote in parliament. It was, however, debated when the minister for immigration, Maj Lis Lööw, informed the *Riksdag* about the decision. *Riksdag minutes* 1989/90:46 (14 December), 9 §. See also Pred 2000:49f.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.immi.se/asyl/198097.htm>

<sup>40</sup> See *Riksdag private members motions* 1996/97:SF13, 1996/97:SF18 and 1996/97:SF19.

<sup>41</sup> *Riksdag minutes*, 1996/97:39 (5 December), statements by Hanna Zetterberg and Bengt Hurtig (Left), Ragnhild Pohanka (Green) and Lennart Rohdin (Liberal). See also *Riksdag private members motion* 1997/98:SF14 (Liberal).

Democracy was a completely spent force politically, but it could then be argued that the policies were decided to prevent renewed support for the party, or the growth of other parties with a similar agenda. Ian Wachtmeister did launch another party in the 1998 election, called 'The New Party', but it received less than 1 per cent of the vote.

Against this, it could of course be argued that the main reasons for the changes in government policy had very little to do with New Democracy, or any possible successor parties. The official line by both the non-socialist government between 1991 and 1994, and the Social Democratic government after 1994, was that Sweden had already accepted a large number of political refugees, and that the country could not handle a continued intake of the same scale. Nor can it be conclusively proven that the policies were primarily designed to accommodate anti-immigration attitudes among the public. Any evidence would have to be circumstantial. It is true that the refugee policy was tightened after a period when anti-immigration attitudes were at a peak, and after a time when New Democracy threatened to grow in strength. It is also possible to attribute statements to government representatives that support such a conclusion, such as that the previous, more generous, refugee policies lacked 'popular anchoring'.<sup>42</sup> Thus, although any conclusion must be speculative and preliminary, **general accommodation** is the most plausible general characterisation of the democratic response to the emergence of New Democracy.

### 3. The response to nazi and racist organisations

Nazism does not have a particularly strong tradition in Sweden. A number of extreme right groups and parties did exist during the inter-war period. At times, they were quite noisy, but their political impact should not be overstated. Electorally, they were minuscule. The most notable electoral achievement was probably in 1934, when the National Socialist Workers Party got two seats on Göteborg city council. Such successes were isolated and temporary, however. Potential fifth-column groups existed during the war, but it seems as if the German regime never had much trust in the Swedish 'Quislings'. Although Sweden had escaped occupation, nazism was as

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<sup>42</sup> Pred 2000:52.

discredited among Swedes as anywhere in Europe at the end of the war. The nazi and fascist groups that survived were completely insignificant.

By the turn of the millennium, however, neo-nazism had become a major blemish on Sweden's reputation. As discussed in the introduction above, racist crime and neo-nazism have reached levels which are among the highest in Europe. The strength and activity of neo-nazi groups began to grow around 1990, and for the past decade, they have been established as a permanent phenomenon in the Swedish society. The development has been subject to much political debate since the early 1990s. In parliament, the discussion has focused on different ways to stop the growth and activity of nazi and racist organisations, as combating racist violence, racist attitudes and discrimination.

Laws dealing with racism and extremism have existed for many years. A law against political uniforms was first introduced in 1933.<sup>43</sup> Since 1948, there has been a law against the persecution of popular groups (*'hets mot folkgrupp'*). The law was changed in 1970, 1982 and 1988, and refers to verbal threats, and expressions of contempt, in a disseminated statement, against popular groups or groups of persons, with reference to skin colour, national or ethnic origin, or faith.<sup>44</sup> This provision is also included in constitutional Freedom of the Press Act of 1949, which regulates printed matter,<sup>45</sup> and the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression of 1991, which regulates broadcasts, film and video.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, the constitutional Instrument of Government of 1974 makes it possible to enact laws that restrict freedom of association "in respect of organisations whose activities are of a military nature or the like, or which involve the persecution of a

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<sup>43</sup> Berg 1995; SOU 2000:88, pp. 190. The current law against political uniforms is from 1947; however, see further below.

<sup>44</sup> SOU 2000:88, pp. 187ff.

<sup>45</sup> Freedom of the Press Act, chapter 7, article 4, section 11. The wording has been changed on a number of occasions. The current wording is that "persecution of a popular group, whereby a person threatens or expresses contempt for a population group or other such group with allusion to its race, skin colour national or ethnic origin, or religious faith" shall be regarded as an offence against the freedom of the press, if the statement is punishable under law.

<sup>46</sup> Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression, chapter 5 article 1.

population group or a particular race, skin colour or ethnic origin".<sup>47</sup> So far, however, the possibility for such legislation has not been used.

During the latter half of the 1990s, the increased activity of neo-nazi groups meant that the existing legislation was subjected to unprecedented tests. In separate court verdicts in 1996 and 1997, it was ruled that the law against political uniforms cannot be applied, as it manifestly (i.e. obviously) conflicts with the Instrument of Government's protection of freedom of expression. The court cases in question involved individuals who had publicly worn armbands with Swastikas. The law against political uniforms still exists, but is to all intents and purposes impractical.<sup>48</sup>

In another verdict, however, the Swedish Supreme Court ruled in 1996 that public display of emblems or symbols, or the wearing of clothes, connected with extreme right ideologies or racial hatred, is to be regarded as a case of persecution of popular groups (*'hets mot folkgrupp'*; see above). Other court verdicts have established that the Roman/nazi salute and 'Sieg Heil' shouts should be treated in the same way. These changes have given the police increased powers to deal with neo-nazi gatherings. Several arrests, some of which have led to prison sentences, have been made for offences against the law against persecution of popular groups.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, some of the most important changes in the way in which Swedish authorities deal with militant extreme right groups have been initiated at the judicial rather than the political level. These changes have not involved the amendment of laws, or the introduction of new laws. Instead, they are cases of adjustments of the application of existing laws. It could be argued that the changes in question amount to increased precision of existing **specific marginalisation**.

This is not to say that the rise of neo-nazi groups has been ignored by the main political parties. The 1988 amendment of the law against persecution of popular groups was explicitly designed to constrain extreme right activity. The change meant that any dissemination of racist statements was made illegal; earlier only statements

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<sup>47</sup> Instrument of Government, Chapter 2, article 14; SOU 2000:88, pp. 186f.

<sup>48</sup> SOU 2000:88, pp. 198f.

<sup>49</sup> SOU 2000:88, pp. 191-197.

made in public had been illegal.<sup>50</sup> In 1994, parliament decided that more severe penalties should be considered if the motive of the crime was to infringe on a person, or group of persons due to their ethnic origin or faith. Again, this was explicitly designed to constrain the activities of extreme right groups.<sup>51</sup>

However, proposals to ban extreme right groups have so far been rejected by the *Riksdag* majority. Such proposals have recently been made in private members motions by the Green and Christian Democratic parties. Earlier, similar proposals had also been made by the Left Party -- and New Democracy.<sup>52</sup>

The problems with neo-nazi groups have to a great extent been experienced at the local level. In a report published in 1999, Anna-Maria Blomgren has studied the local response to the neo-nazi activity in the 'Trestad' area, which includes the cities of Trollhättan, Vänersborg and Uddevalla; all in western Sweden. Of the three studied cities, Trollhättan has experienced the most serious problems. After some incidents in 1992, troubles flared up the following year with several riots involving racists and immigrants. The incident that received the most attention was when a mosque was burnt down by nazis. There were also incidents of serious violence directly aimed at individuals. Blomgren argues that a racist underground culture has existed in Trollhättan since the early 1990s. During the decade, neo-nazi groups such as VAM ('White Aryan Resistance'), and NSF (National Socialist League) were represented in the city. There have also been links to the militant magazine Storm, and a number of 'White Power' rock bands have existed in Trollhättan. It could also be noted that the extreme right has also made an impact on the party political level. The Sweden Democrats (see section 1 above) gained two seats on Trollhättan city council in the 1998 election. The Sweden Democrats have no open links to nazi groups, but according to Blomgren, it appears as if informal such links have existed in Trollhättan.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Riksdag utskottsbetänkanden* KU 1987/88:36; *Riksdagens Årsbok* 1987/88, p. 208.

<sup>51</sup> *Riksdag utskottsbetänkanden* JuU 1993/94:13.

<sup>52</sup> E.g. *Riksdag* private members motion 2000/2001:K264 (Christian Democrats); 1996/97:K414 (Green Party); 1990/91:K247 (Left Party); 1992/93:Ju620 (New Democracy).

<sup>53</sup> Blomgren 1999:31-56; especially pp. 52ff.

Blomgren's study shows that the initial reaction by local politicians in Trollhättan was to treat the incidents as youth problems and to deny the possibility of links to the nazi ideology. Also after the burning of the mosque, the problems were considered to be at worst expressions of xenophobia, and the youths involved were thought to be 'mere' hooligans not afflicted by nazism. The response included symbolic gestures and manifestations, such as a 'night walk' against violence, where circa 300 people walked around the city. A book with information and arguments against prejudice was distributed to every household, and a local action plan against racist and xenophobic violence was planned.<sup>54</sup> After an initial flurry of activity, the issue left the political agenda, and became the concern of the police, social authorities and local youth centres. Gradually, as awareness grew that the problems had clear links to nazism, the response became more decisive. However, most of the relevant decisions were taken on the administrative rather than political level. These included bans on the wearing of nazi and racist symbols in schools, youth centres and other council owned properties (this was before it was established that nazi symbols were illegal; see above).

Council officials also tried to restrict the possibilities for extreme right organisations to hold public meetings in council owned properties. According to Swedish law, it is not possible to refuse someone to use council properties to hold public meetings merely on the grounds of a political ideology. It is, however, possible to make such a refusal if the organiser has given incorrect information about the purpose of the meeting, or if there is considered to be a risk for disorder.<sup>55</sup> Other ways of dealing with the problem have included the involvement of police, youth centres and schools in projects to reduce tensions between ethnic groups, provide alternative activities for youths who may be in danger of being recruited to extreme right groups, and to create an ideological climate that restricts the growth potential for racist and extreme right ideologies. The success of such projects has varied, and much research remains to be done on the response to nazi groups at the local level. A key finding in Blomgren's study is that the response in her studied cities suffered from a lack of communication between different levels, such as the police, local politicians, schools and youth

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<sup>54</sup> Blomgren 1999:85-89. The action plan was by all accounts never completed.

<sup>55</sup> Blomgren 1999:100ff.

centres. Once these communications had been improved, the response against the nazi groups became more effective.<sup>56</sup>

To summarise the discussion in this section, the democratic response to militant extreme right organisations has mainly included elements of **marginalisation**. Several decisions on the national political level have been designed to restrict the activities of nazi and racist groups. The extension of the law against persecution of popular groups, the inclusion of such a provision in the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression and the decision to subject offences with a racist motive to more severe penalties can all be interpreted in this way. All these decisions were explicitly designed to provide difficult for racist organisations; in other words **specific marginalisation**. At the same time, it should be noted that they also make it more difficulties for the general public to express support for such organisations, or their ideas. Hence, they could also be regarded as **general marginalisation**.

At the same time, it should be noted that the arguably most important recent changes in the policy against nazi organisations have not been caused by political decisions. Instead, it was a verdict by the Supreme Court that widened the applicability of the law against persecution of popular groups to include nazi symbols. It was, furthermore, lower court decisions that widened the applicability of the law even further, to also include nazi salutes and shouts. It is also worth remembering that the most severe form of specific marginalisation, an outright ban on nazi and/or racist organisations, has so far been rejected by the parliamentary majority.

The response in the local level cases researched by Blomgren is of particular interest. For one thing, it appears as if the most decisive decisions have been taken by administrative units rather than at the political level. It was just argued that a significant part of the response on the national level came from judicial rather than political institutions. Thus, it seems as if the response on the local and national levels had in common that elected politicians did not provide the most decisive response.

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<sup>56</sup> Blomgren 1999:104ff; 131-134.

Another interesting observation to come out of Blomgrens' research is that, unlike the central level, the local response involved elements of **accommodation**. The measures taken to prevent nazi groups involved providing alternatives for youths who might be in danger of being recruited to extreme right groups, by providing alternative free time activities, could be seen as cases of **general accommodation**. However, it was not a case of accommodating views or grievances that had extreme right links, such as the example discussed above of tightening the refugee policy in order to reduce popular discontent with immigration. Rather, it could be seen as addressing other sources of discontent and frustration, such as the lack of meaningful free time activities.

Elements of **specific accommodation** of nazi and racist organisations have been absent, however; both at the national and local levels. The democratic response to the growth of such groups have been dominated by marginalisation on the national level. On the local level, there have also been elements of general accommodation

#### 4. Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper suggests significant differences in the democratic response to the two types of extreme right challenge discussed. The response to the populist right New Democracy party is difficult to characterise. It is easier to say what it was not, than to assert what it was. It did not involve significant elements of marginalisation. The complicated majority situation in the *Riksdag* made it extremely difficult to completely ignore New Democracy, since the government needed its support. The fact that the level of conflict between the government and the Social Democratic opposition was high, particularly after the unsuccessful attempt to rescue the overvalued *Krona*, did of course not help. In a more clear cut majority situation, it would seem plausible that no government -- left, right or centre -- would have been particularly interested in anything but minimal co-operation with New Democracy. At the same time, it could be argued that Wachtmeister, Karlsson et co. were not quite repulsive enough to force permanent co-operation between the Social Democrats and the government. New Democracy may have been met with much resentment among the established parties, but the resentment was not strong enough to break up traditional bloc politics.

This is not to say that the New Democracy interlude came and went without a trace. Even though it is difficult to prove conclusively, there are signs that the democratic response at least to some extent included attempts to accommodate popular discontent with immigration, which clearly was a major contributory factor behind New Democracy's initial success. If the argument is accepted, that the Swedish refugee policy since the mid 1990s has included the introduction of many of the demands from New Democracy, which were condemned at the time, then there may be some credibility to such a conclusion.

If the response to New Democracy has been difficult to characterise, the response to nazi and racist organisations seems to be more straightforward. The evidence presented in this paper strongly suggests that it has been dominated by marginalisation; primarily specific but also general. Most of the measures taken have been designed to make life difficult for nazis and racists. Unsurprisingly, there is no evidence of attempts to specifically accommodate them. However, the local level studies show examples of attempts to accommodate potential recruits to these groups. It could, perhaps, also be argued that the changes in refugee policies discussed above not only a response to New Democracy, but also an attempt to reduce the potential for ethnic tension, which might otherwise threaten to play into the hands of nazi organisations.

The Swedish response to the extreme right challenge has both similarities and differences to the other Scandinavian countries. The response to populist right parties does not appear to have been consistent in the four countries, which will be studied in the comparative project. In Norway, the Progress Party has so far been subjected to specific marginalisation by the other parties. Despite often having had the potential to topple sitting governments, a potential it has been known to use, it has been unthinkable as a coalition partner. The Danish Progress and People's parties have also largely been kept at arm's length. However, Pia Kjaersgaard's leadership of the Progress Party, and the Danish People's Party after the split in 1995, has had a conscious strategy to end the party's long period of marginalisation. This had some

success already in the 1980s, although the job is not yet finished.<sup>57</sup> Whether the future prospects for this strategy were enhanced by the party's key role in the EMU referendum campaign in 2000 is too early to tell. It would certainly not appear to have moved Kjaersgaard and her party closer to the main political parties, which were all in favour of EMU membership. It could be, however, that the gains in popular legitimacy may facilitate a back door entrance to increased legitimacy also among the main parties.

In Finland, the Rural Party was included in government coalitions in the 1980s and 1990s, something which led Herbert Kitschelt to doubt that the party could not be considered as a member of the extreme right party family.<sup>58</sup> This can, however, be questioned on several grounds. It certainly was formed as an anti-establishment party along similar lines to the Danish and Norwegian Progress parties, albeit with a different agenda. The Rural Party could be viewed as the clearest case of specific accommodation in the Scandinavian countries. Indeed, it could have been argued to have been a successful strategy. It led to severe tensions inside the party, which of course is now out of existence.

The relationship between refugee and immigration policies, on the one hand, and the success of populist right parties, on the other, is also unclear. Despite the recent changes, Sweden has in the longer perspective had the most generous refugee policy in Scandinavia, followed by Denmark. These two countries have also had the highest number of non-European immigrants in the Scandinavian region. Norway and, particularly, Finland, have had much more restrictive policies and fewer long-distance immigrants. It could be argued that Norwegian governments have not responded to the growth of the Progress Party with stricter refugee and immigration policies, since these policies were comparatively strict in the first place.

The discussion in this paper is in many ways preliminary. There is more research left to be done, especially in Denmark, Norway and Finland, before a comparative analysis can be made of the democratic response to the extreme right challenge in Scandinavia. The evidence presented here suggests that the Swedish response has

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<sup>57</sup> Kitschelt 1995:157.

been mainly characterised by general accommodation of New Democracy and specific marginalisation of nazi and racist organisations. It is by no means certain, however, that this pattern is applicable to the other Scandinavian countries.

There is also much to suggest that even the evidence presented concerning Sweden will have to be complemented. The issue of extreme right activity is currently being debated, and new proposals may soon be presented. In early February 2001, the government presented to parliament a national action plan against racism, xenophobia, homophobia and discrimination.<sup>59</sup> The document includes a report on actions so far taken against these problems, as well as a number of new initiatives. It remains to be seen whether the research on responses to the extreme right will be able to keep up with reality.

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<sup>58</sup> Kitschelt 1995:49; 55.

<sup>59</sup> *Riksdag* documents; *regeringens skrivelse* 2001:59.

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A democratic response to an extremist challenge can be separated into form and direction. The form can, in turn, be separated into accommodation and marginalisation. The democratic establishment can try to accommodate the extremist appeal, by integrating some extreme demands into the official policy. On the other hand, it can try to marginalise extremist groups with legal restrictions. The direction of the response can be general, i.e. towards the public, or specific, i.e. towards the extremist groups as such. The paper will look at the democratic response to two types of challenge from the extreme right in Sweden. First, the party political challenge, manifested by New Democracy. Second, the challenge from violent racist and neo-nazi groups.