

Applebaum: Sweden's election undercuts myth of racial apocalypse

In the strange world of the online alt-right, Sweden has long played a special role.

This isn't because of its economic strength (small but robust), or because of its population (just less than 10 million). This is because — how shall I put this delicately? — Swedes are blond.

Never mind that many aren't: In the dismal fever swamps of the Internet, Swedes now symbolize Blondness and Whiteness for a whole host of people — American, European, Russian — who use that symbolism to tell a particular story: Blondness Under Siege. Whiteness Under Siege. Alt-right headlines such as “How Sweden is Committing Suicide Through Political Correctness” draw long chains of vicious and vulgar commentary.

In particular, the bloggers and trolls object to Sweden's 2015 decision — in reaction to the worst refugee crisis in post-World War II history — to let in 160,000 people. Numbers have dropped sharply since then, but to the alt-right, that decision was not a tale of generosity, but the ultimate story of Whiteness Under Siege.

President Donald Trump himself picked up this line of argument from a convoluted — and, as it emerged, manipulated — segment on Fox News, right at the beginning of his administration. Inspired by some dramatic misreporting, in February 2017, he ranted to a Florida rally, “You look at what's happening last night, in Sweden! Sweden! Who would believe this, Sweden?”

In fact, nothing had happened in Sweden. But the online far-right's constant, insistent, and even hysterical focus on immigration — including exaggerated reports of rape — had a genuine impact: It successfully helped refocus Swedish politics, as well as the outside world's perceptions of Swedish politics, around this single issue.

From British tabloids to The New York Times (“How the far right conquered

Sweden”), the only story anyone tells is the rise of the far-right, explicitly anti-immigration Sweden Democrats, projected by some to emerge as the largest party in parliamentary elections on Sunday. “It’s going to be huge,” Alex Jones of Infowars ranted last week. As exit polls were published on Sunday night, Breitbart News trumpeted, prematurely, that the party had “surged” while the “establishment” faltered.

But when the real results came in on Monday morning, the story became more complicated, less dramatic, and more difficult to summarize.

The Sweden Democrats did do better than before, but not as well as expected. They were the third-largest party, not the largest. More to the point, the vast majority of Swedes, even during a year completely dominated by the immigration debate, voted against them.

A far-left, pro-immigration party also made gains; both the main center-left and the center-right parties lost seats. As in Germany and in the Netherlands, the real story is not so much “far-right gains” as political fragmentation. Drawn-out negotiations may now be needed to form a Swedish government — negotiations that will be of no interest to most outsiders, especially not those primarily worried about Whiteness Under Siege.

As it turned out, not all Swedes voted on the refugee issue; they also cared about their economy and their school system and, after a summer of record high temperatures and terrible wildfires, the environment and climate change.

As it turned out, there were more forces at work in Swedish politics than the narrative of racial apocalypse allowed.

There’s a lesson here for the rest of the media, both Swedish and foreign, which did the alt-right a favor by endlessly sharing their focus on refugees. The real story was far more complex — just as it’s always been.

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