Nuclear Nostalgia

How the Sweden Democrats Construct the Past and Future of Nuclear Power

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Abstract:

This thesis studies the relationship between the far right and nuclear power in the context of Sweden, where anti-immigration party the Sweden Democrats advocate for a massive expansion. In its nuclear rhetoric, the party relates the technology with the nation's past to promote its revival. Nationalism gains legitimacy through nostalgic framings of national history. The period of the 1950s Swedish welfare state, metaphorically termed *folkhemmet*, serves as the golden age in the historical narration of the Sweden Democrats. Through interviews with representatives from the party, the thesis approaches the links between nationalism and this particular energy source by exploring the role of nostalgia in its nuclear politics. A theoretical framework on the politics of nostalgia and the relationship between technology, culture and national identities is adopted. The thesis argues that the Sweden Democrats employ nostalgic myths about history to promote nuclear power and retain an image of Swedish exceptionalism. Hence, an expansion of Sweden's nuclear capacity becomes a means for the party to fulfill an imagined destiny of the nation and return to the nation's past.

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1. Introduction

The Swedish general election in September 2022 led to the installation of a minority right-wing government, consisting of the Conservative Party (M), the Christian Democrats (KD) and the Liberal Party (L), in cooperation with far right anti-immigration party the Sweden Democrats (SD), whose rising support made them the second largest party in parliament after the Social Democrats (Aylott and Bolin 2023; Election Authority 2023). Dubbed an "energy election" (Gadd et al. 2022), the 2022 national campaign centered around issues "close to home", with themes such as high prices on electricity and fuels, and law-and-order dominating nearly every party debate (Bolin et al. 2022). Prior to the general election, the allied parties on the right, M, KD, L, and SD, put up a united front when they launched the joint campaign "Ny energi för Sverige" ("New energy for Sweden"), where representatives from each party toured the country to visit Sweden's nuclear power plants (Rikner 2022). The message conveyed was clear: the right-bloc will pave the way for a reinvigoration of Swedish nuclear capacity.

One and a half year later, the promises had materialized into concrete policy proposals for a massive nuclear expansion, including allowing a larger number of reactors and changing the national energy target of 100 % renewables to a target of 100 % fossil free energy, the latter a category in which nuclear could be included (Swedish Government 2023a; Swedish Government 2023b; Swedish Government 2023c; Swedish Government 2023d). The new direction in energy politics occurred in tandem with budget cuts for environmental protection, reduced taxes on fuels, scrapped subsidies for electric cars and a recent governmental report opting for a revision of the so-called "phase goals" to reach net-zero emissions (Moderaterna et al. 2022; Swedish Government 2022; Hassler 2023). Sweden has previously been hailed as a frontrunner in climate mitigation, assuming leadership in climate governance and introducing a carbon tax in 1991 (Sarasini 2009; Hildingsson and Knaggård 2022). With the government's budget estimated to increase carbon emissions, Sweden now became associated with the growing climate backlash under way in affluent countries (Marsh et al. 2023). For the new government, however, the principal focus of climate mitigation was electrification foremost through nuclear power, a paradigm shift championed by the SD.

Indeed, the Sweden Democrats have become vocal proponents of nuclear power in Swedish parliamentary politics and stands out from the governmental parties in their general opposition to wind power (Sverigedemokraterna 2022a; Moderaterna 2022; Kristdemokraterna 2022; Liberalerna 2022). Their election campaign focused heavily on crime, frequently related to immigration, and increased costs-of-living (Sverigedemokraterna 2022b). They sought to utilize the energy crisis and escalating gang conflicts to push their agendas for restrictive immigration policies, lowering the reduction mandate on fuels, and promoting Swedish nuclear technology as a clean and plannable energy source. On their official web page, they state that "Swedish industriousness and nuclear power built Sweden" (Sverigedemokraterna 2022a), a slogan alluding to the electricity production brought by the national civil nuclear power program, built from the mid 20th century (Anshelm 2010). In this nostalgic narration, Swedish nuclear technology is credited for the nation's acclaimed past and industrial development.

Common to their counterparts in the party family of the populist far right, myths about history are employed by the SD to create an image of a golden age of the nation, constructed against present decay and decline. The nostalgic rhetoric in its programs is directed towards strengthening the nation and restoring an imagined ethnically homogenous community (Elgenius och Rydgren 2017). For this end, the SD co-opt the concept of *folkhemmet*, translated as "the people's home", a metaphoric term for the Swedish welfare state, now rebranded as an ethnonationalist project (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019, 598). The time period of the 1950s is portrayed by the party as the pinnacle of the Swedish welfare state and associated with ideas around Sweden's democratic superiority, extraordinary socioeconomic progress, and social cohesion (Elgenius and Rydgren 2017, 355). This idealized Sweden is, in the imaginary of the SD, today being lost and the party explicitly wants to reconstruct a Sweden that "again feels like home" (Sverigedemokraterna 2023a).

In February 2023, the SD's Tobias Andersson, chairman of the committee of Industry and Trade, posted "Nuclear is the future" on his official account on X (formerly known as Twitter) in praise of a new nuclear alliance within the EU. By referring to Sweden's previous achievements in the field of nuclear technology and the potential prospects brought by an expansion, the party links the past with the future. Following this, the

thesis explores how politics of nostalgia is employed by the party to legitimize a nuclear expansion, and it follows the hypothesis that nuclear operates as an engine in the nationalist project of the Swedish far right. By using the Sweden Democrats as a case study, the thesis revolves around the broader question of what makes the far right in certain contexts fiercely promote nuclear power in the wake of the climate crisis.

1.2. Aim and research questions

The thesis emphasizes the connections between national identities and technological projects and argues that nuclear power has become an integral element for the SD's to achieve its nationalist goals. By examining how nationalism relates to nuclear power, the aim of the study is to contribute to the literature on the political ecologies of the far-right and its role in the continuous climate backlash visible across Europe and the U.S. More specifically, the thesis seeks to begin the filling of a noteworthy research gap, considering the relationship between the far right and nuclear power. Many countries in Europe – Finland and France being only two important cases – have far-right parties actively championing nuclear power; but I am aware of no research that probes into their reasons for doing so. This thesis approaches the nexus of nuclear and nationalism by studying the case of Sweden. Two research questions are articulated to explore this connection:

- *How is a nostalgic image of Sweden prevalent in the Sweden Democrats politics of nuclear power?*

- *If so, how, and why?*

1.3 Structure of the thesis

Following the introduction is a brief account of the background for this study – the processes leading up to the formalization of power of the far right in Sweden, and its role in the rolling back of progressive climate policies in the aftermath of the Tidö Agreement. The theoretical framework and concepts used in the study is thereafter outlined, together with a review of some existing literature on why far-right parties may favor the energy source. In the following methodology section, the philosophical tradition the thesis is situated in is presented. A description of the methods for sampling and analysis is given, as well as reflections on ethics, positionality of the researcher and

limitations. Next in the analysis section, the findings in the data are presented as themes and later discussed in relation to the theory, before I summarize the main arguments in a concluding section.

2. Background

2.1. The Sweden Democrats' rise to power

The 2022 general election marked a milestone in Swedish parliamentary politics, when the Social Democratic-Green government was replaced by a minority conservative government, backed, for the first time, by the far-right party the Sweden Democrats. The formation of a new right was made possible by the mainstream right parties abandoning the previous *cordon sanitaire* against the SD, and can be seen as a culmination of a period of changes in Sweden's party politics and constellations (Aylott and Bolin 2023; Backlund 2020). In European comparison, Sweden was long regarded as a deviant case with the absence of a successful anti-immigration party (Demker and Odmalm 2022; Rydgren 2002). The 2010 general election, however, signified the breakthrough for the far right in Swedish politics when the SD was able to gain national representation (Dahlström and Esaiasson 2013, 344-345). While the party had long been considered non-respectable, shifts in party alliances and power balances, as well as public policies increasingly directed towards issues related to immigration and law-and-order, eventually compelled three of the right-wing parties to begin cooperating with the SD (Demker and Odmalm 2022; Aylott and Bolin 2023).

Despite the electoral success of the SD, receiving 20.5 % of the votes (Election Authority 2023), they agreed to relinquish claims to ministerial posts in the governmental coalition, led by the Conservative's Ulf Kristersson. However, the government, depending entirely on support from the far right, had to negotiate with the party on a number of "cooperation projects" pertaining to certain policy areas, including law-and-order, immigration, and climate and energy. The deal was sealed by the Tidö Agreement, which granted all parties equal influence on the negotiated projects (Aylott and Bolin 2023, 1058; Moderaterna et al., 2022). Since its establishment in 1988, the SD has made the journey from a neo-Nazi movement to an established populist far-right party. From the mid 1990's they worked to actively detach from their roots – or, as critics would say, create an image of doing so – by presenting themselves as a social conservative party with a nationalistic outlook (Mulinari and Neergard 2016; Sverigedemokraterna 2024; Halldorf 2019). Now, they were given significant political power, while simultaneously being absolved from direct responsibility.

Yet, the growing impact of the SD was notable in Sweden for a longer time, not in the least in relation to its main issue of immigration. Previously classified as a vanguard nation, Sweden has been known for its typically liberal asylum policies and emphasis on inclusion. The emergence of the SD in parliamentary politics did, however, introduce new cleavages through which migration was framed, and the 2015 "migration crisis" continued to mainstream their policies (Demker and Odmalm 2022). In the 2022 national election, the adoption of the party's rhetoric was crystallized even further with the Social Democrats, the biggest party in parliament, attempting to neutralize issues of immigration and law-and-order, traditionally a political territory of the right (Aylott and Bolin 2023). The SD had for years been a driving force in restrictive immigration policies. With the ground gained in this political area, the party increasingly turned towards the arena of climate and energy to fight its new "cultural war".

2.2. A fading "green" northern light

Sweden has been known for assuming global leadership in climate politics (Vihma, Reischl, and Nonbo Andersen 2021). Often described internationally as a pioneer in mitigating climate change, the country has sought to "lead-by-example" by combining high environmental standards with economic growth. As an example, due to the expansion of hydropower and nuclear power, and later introducing renewables in the energy mix, Sweden halved its emissions generated from electricity and district heating since the 1970s (Sarasini 2009). Likewise, the adoption of the carbon tax in 1991 has been recognized as a key instrument for decoupling economic growth from domestic emissions (Hildingsson and Knaggård 2022). Sweden's previous reputation as an environmental actor made the new government's politics all the more controversial. Following the recent election, the four parties of the Tidö Agreement continued to announce policies diverging from the pioneering path. As aforementioned, a topic of debate has been reduced taxes of fuels and lowered reduction mandate on biofuels, lobbied hard by the SD (Nyheter 2023b). The government instead privileged nuclear power and technologies for carbon capture as well as carbon offsetting abroad (Moderaterna et al. 2022). In october 2023, Professor John Hassler (2023) presented his report, commissioned by the government and the SD, with suggestions of changes in the national phase goals on climate mitigation, most notably the goals for transport – suggestions critics argued would increase near-time emissions (Naturskyddsföreningen 2023).

For the first time, the SD now announced their support for the national climate goals (SVT Nyheter 2023a). The move indicated its current sway over Swedish climate politics. Indeed, climate mitigation policies have been described as an ideal target for far right populists agendas (Vihma, Reischl, and Nonbo Andersen 2021). With its entrance into parliament in 2010, the SD introduced climate denialism in national politics, backed by its close ties to the denialist network the *Stockholm Initiative* (Hultman, Björk, and Viinikka 2019; Vowles and Hultman 2021a). It began spreading doubts about climate change in parliament and used scare-quoting in order to delegitimize the truth in climate science (Vowles and Hultman 2021b). In recent years, however, the SD altered its tone to express concern over global emissions. It started to opt for a "realistic" and cost-efficient climate politics that focused on international governance (Sverigedemokraterna 2018). In its nationalist framing of climate it is posited that mitigation should not come at the expense of the nation's wealth of lifestyle, but rather take place abroad (Vihma, Reischl, and Nonbo Andersen 2021). The shift signified a break from what Ekberg et al. (2023) calls primary obstruction of explicit denial to a secondary mode of acknowledging the existence of the climate crisis, yet actively delaying progressive climate measures.

Still, how bright the green light really radiated from Sweden had been questioned since before the rise of the SD. Following the installation of a right-wing government in 2006, several domestic policy changes in certain environmental areas took place that raised criticism for focusing on "cheap" emissions and technological innovation. At the time, Sweden continued to rhetorically retain high environmental ambitions (Hysing 2014). Embracing the role of a frontrunner in climate policies can lead to strategic advantages, as laggard countries tend to adopt the standards set. Seen from this perspective, constituting leadership in climate politics may be motivated rather by upholding competitiveness (Sarasini 2009). The "green" northern light had been fading for some time.

Though it is clear that the backlash for climate in Sweden cannot be attributed to the far right alone, the influence of the SD must remain indisputable. If anything, it consolidated the dismantling of the pioneering politics by asserting its influence over climate and energy politics. A key issue for the SD was shifting investments away from

renewables. In May 2023, it accused the government of side-stepping them in approving new offshore wind farms (Rasmussen 2023). The party has identified electoral gains through energy populism and a climate program aimed at protecting people's lifestyles, the economy, and preserving natural landscapes. To understand the far right's affection for nuclear power, it is thus useful to analyze it in relation to their stances on other energy sources.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Far right politics of nostalgia

Nostalgia is commonly defined as looking back, often through a sentimental framing of an idealized past. The term itself derives from words in Greek that refers to "return home" and "longing", hence, nostalgia alludes to feelings of loss, displacement, and a yearning for an imagined home (Elgenius and Rydgren 2022, 1230-1231). While references to the past may increase in the broader society in times of rapid changes and crisis', research has emphasized the particularly central role of contemporary politics of nostalgia in far-right populism, typically expressed as a lost sense of place and national sovereignty (Schreurs 2021, 128). Nationalist rhetoric is based on claims of national identity, solidarity and unity, and, moreover, claims of entitlements and belonging. The loss of national identity and socioeconomic progress is commonly attributed to immigration and internationalization. In the resurgence of the far-right in Europe and the U.S, the national past and history have been a key feature in the discourse and legitimacy of ethno-nationalism (Elgenius and Rydgren 2022, 1231; Elgenius and Rydgren 2019, 584).

Fundamental to the historical narration of the far-right is the discursive construction of a golden age of the nation, a specific time period in the process of nation building, often framed along the lines of ethnic homogeneity and socioeconomic development. Golden ages are pitted against images of present moral decay and crisis, of something good currently being lost, which an idealized past serves to enhance (Elgenius and Rydgren 2017, 354-355). In the rhetoric of decline, threats against welfare, national identity and national sovereignty are generally caused by internationalization and multiculturalism. Golden ages are thus associated with defining national origin, cultural heritage, and important historical events for the sake of political purposes of the present, in order for the far right to reconstruct, at least in spirit, the times they idealize (Elgenius and Rydgren 2017; Elgenius and Rydgren 2022, 1235).

As such, nationalist nostalgia is directed towards returning to a future past: the emphasis on a glorious history used rhetorically as a blueprint for a brilliant future (Mudde 2018, 108). Notions of nations in need of saving from further degeneration and restoration to former glory, echoes fascists struggles for national rebirth. The core of fascism has by

Griffin (2022) been termed "palingenesis" which entails visions of a future renewal of the nation in ultranationalist terms. For a new social order to take form, the internal liberal threat as well as external ideological enemies of the nation must be defeated (ibid). When fascism sets out to execute the myth of palingenesis it thus outlines a past national grandeur, followed by a period of decline and chaos, to inspire a regeneration of the nation (Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021, 255-256). For the SD, Sweden's golden age is located in the 50s and 60s. The concept of *folkhemmet* therefore serves as a rhetorical image of the nation's past, often framed as a kind of "paradise lost" (Andersson 2009) Nationalist ideology relies on assumptions of national exceptionalism. In the Swedish context, notions of exceptionalism are grounded in the idea of the country as a "moral superpower" and can be traced to the establishment of the welfare state (Jansson 2018, 83).

Previous research has argued that politics of nostalgia, along with ideas of the failure of the welfare state, resonates well with an electorate of predominantly older white males, generally driven by discontent. However, far from belonging mainly to the lower social stratas, supporters are often found in the middle class (Schreurs 2021, 128). These groups are motivated rather by a "fear of falling" and a sense of deprivation due to increased socioeconomic risks and loss of status. Such attitudes have been coined welfare chauvinism or welfare nostalgia, in the defense of the interests of natives while scapegoating immigrant groups (Schreurs 2021; Bell, Valenta, and Strabac 2023; Norocel 2016). Nostalgic reminiscences of the nation's past, of social well-being and cohesion, therefore function as a mobilizing rhetoric among far-right parties and gives substance to nativist populist ideology. This nostalgic content is group-based (alluding to traditions) rather than personal and implies a strong identification with a particular social group or one's country (Versteegen 2024). It invokes longings for a group-based past and feelings of group-based relative deprivation that make people evaluate the societal present as worse than the past. For the far right, this longing for society's past generally alludes to ethnic elements. Common nostalgic traits are therefore societal dissatisfaction, outgroup animosity, and attempts to restore a favorable past (ibid).

3.2. Technopolitical regimes

Few technologies have historically come to signify modernity and national power such as nuclear technology. Throughout Western countries during the atomic age, modern

technology and science were the new objects of worship, hailed as the faith of mankind, as the world was re-enchanted (Anshelm 2010, 50). In her historical research on how France in the new geopolitical landscape after World War II turned to large-scale technological projects, and nuclear technology in particular, to regain its former radiance, Gabrielle Hecht (2009, 2-5) emphasizes the interconnections between technology, politics, and culture. In the postwar world, when many countries were rebuilding both their economies and cultures, national nuclear power programs became symbols of the links between national identity and technological prowess (ibid). Studies comparing technological systems in different countries have shown how distinctive approaches to system building emerge in response to the particular conditions of their contexts. The relationship between context and content has been described as an interaction, sometimes referred to as a "seamless web", in order to understand the connections between technological, social, political and economic dimensions (ibid; Hughes 1986). As found in Hanel and Hård's (2015, 85) cross-national studies on civil nuclear power programs in Sweden and Germany, patriotism was inherent in the technological choices made by both engineers and politicians, giving rise to a kind of technological nationalism and national patterns. At the same time, states identified nuclear technology as an area through which to project a strong self image onto the world (ibid).

As Hecht (2009, 8-9) argues, it is thus essential to study both the construction of technology and the construction of culture and politics. Central here is the understanding that technology, politics and culture are mutually constitutive. Rather than technology being understood foremost as an outcome of social processes and political decisions, technology in turn shapes policy decisions, societies and culture (ibid, 8-9). How culture is performed and reconfigured through technological changes thus requires explanation. Interesting for the analysis at hand is the focus on manifestations of culture as national identities. National identities are generally grounded in the nation's past, though ultimately, they are about the future (ibid, 12). By combining technology studies with those of political and cultural history, Hecht proposes the concept of technopolitical regimes, the term itself breaching the divisions between technology and politics. Technopolitics refers to how technology is used to enact political goals and shape industrial policies. However, technology cannot be reduced to politics, they are bound to a material reality. The regimes surrounding

technopolitics consist of a range of actors, institutions, their ideologies and pursuits (ibid).

The concept will be used foremost as inspiration in discussing the role of technology in the construction of national identities, as conceptualized by the SD. Hecht's research on the connection between nuclear power, culture, and politics shows the particular relevance of large-scale technological projects within nationalism and in (re)defining national identities. Reminiscences of past achievements and national grandeur seemingly works to legitimize technological changes. Hence, the notion of nuclear nostalgia holds the theoretical framework of this thesis together and I relate it to ideas of exceptionalism, modernism, and the nation.

3.3. Technocracy and nuclear power

There is a specific type of relationship between technocracy and nuclear power. From the very beginning, the technology has been described as incompatible with democracy, and decisions around it have been kept out of public scrutiny (Gorz 1980). In general terms, the technocratic rule indicates that significant influence over policy processes is handed over to appointed experts with specialized knowledge in an apparent depoliticization of technological decisions (Centeno 1993). In so, the technocrat differs from the technician in that he/she is concerned with the *organization* of technological processes and is often committed to a scientific discursive rationality. Critics have argued that this mode of policy-making leads to the scientification of politics and inevitably an authoritarian rule (ibid). Due to the technological complexity and scale of nuclear power, governments have generally placed it firmly in the realm of experts and engineers. In the words of Gorz (1980), however, the nuclear option is a preeminently political choice, often hidden behind a technocratic rationale. This is because nuclear installations inevitably produce a particular kind of society. It implies large state investments – with the circulating capital enabling profit – and consolidated state power due to the immense security risks. The economic and technological nature of the energy source is thus consistent with industrial needs and a strengthened centralized government.

3.4. Literature review

While the literature on far right climate skepticism and the connections to fossil fuels is quite extensive (Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021; Kuchler and Bridge 2018; Daggett 2021; 2018), research on populist far-right parties' relation to nuclear power and why they may favor this energy source remains limited. An outlook on members of this party family shows that they tend to be positive towards nuclear power and less supportive of renewables (Lockwood 2018, 712, 716; Praet 2022; Boecher et al. 2022). Praet (2023) writes that the distaste for renewables is closely related to a climate skeptic critique of mitigation policies and conservative resistance to social change. In European countries where the far-right has attained power it has sought to roll back progressive climate policies. Since climate mitigation requires international cooperation, these parties generally view such policies as a challenge to national interests (Lockwood 2018, 722). Nuclear power may therefore be associated with self-determination and self-sufficiency.

It has been asserted that nuclear power resonates well with nationalist ideology and calls for domestic energy production (Praet 2023). Actors on this political spectrum often frame nuclear power as "cheap and reliable", while wind power especially is constructed as an unstable source. The recent energy crisis has thus offered a window of opportunity for populist far-right parties to push forward their economic protectionist agendas (ibid). In Belgium, far-right party Vlaams Belang uses the nationalist theme of energy independence to argue for domestic energy production from nuclear power. It is promoted as a sustainable alternative to renewables that, perversely, is assumed to increase dependence on fossil energy from foreign powers (Praet 2022). By framing renewables as counterproductive for mitigation and sufficiency, the party links emissions to the decommissioning of reactors. This line of argumentation also entails conservative reactions to progressive climate policies. For Vlaams Belang, replacing other power sources with renewables implies too high economic and social costs. Nuclear power presumably remedies such problems, signaling that the objective is affordability rather than curbing emissions (ibid).

Since their formation in 2013, the German populist far right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) has increasingly profiled themselves as an anti-climate party and have

sought to politicize decarbonization (Yazar and Haarstad 2023). By appealing to pseudo-knowledge production to question the validity of climate science, they argue that their perspectives on climate are being marginalized by dominant discourses driven by elites (Boecher et al. 2022). They frequently use an anti-establishment rhetoric to argue for the burdens implicated by renewables on ordinary Germans. With their climate rhetoric targeting mainly carbon-intensive regions in Germany, the AfS advocates for traditional industrialism through the promotion of other types of energy sources, including nuclear power (Yazar and Haarstad 2023). The pseudo-knowledge the party base their arguments on is often linked to interest-laden think tanks and denialist currents that argue for political alternatives such as nuclear power (Boecher et al. 2022). The AfD's promotion of this particular source may be seen as an anti-climate response towards an energy transition to renewables and an attempt to gain further ground by positioning themselves against opponents, such as the Greens.

There are also connections between nationalism and environmentalism. Romanticization of domestic nature and cultural landscapes is a common generator of populist far right opposition against, for example, wind turbines. Following Forchtner and Kølvraa (2015, 213-215), in the sphere of climate politics the symbolic dimension in nationalists' imaginings of nature, emphasizing "the historical and cultural unity of the people and their sovereign land", can take a more aggressive turn. In this framing, climate policies signal a loss of national sovereignty. By means of protecting the nation and its environment, verbal insults against opponents are a common tactic among these parties, who denigrate green politicians and activists as irrational and alarmist. This type of rhetoric, targeting those who "threaten" society, can be considered as one authoritarian dimension within nationalist ideology (Praet 2022). As Lockwood (2018, 722-724) writes, the far-right treat the Green's and climate activists the same way as they treat immigrant groups, figuring as "nefarious minorities" in the sphere of climate politics, against whom ordinary people must be protected.

Thus, nationalism, conservatism, authoritarianism and populism may to various degrees be present in the energy discourses of the far right (Preat 2023). Their policies on energy are often accompanied by calls for realistic and reasonable climate policies. Following this review, nuclear power may be favored because it presumably allows for the *status quo* to be maintained, by delivering a vast amount of "cheap" low-carbon

electricity without compromising socioeconomic progress and national sovereignty. However, comprehensive studies concerning the links between the far right and nuclear power are lacking. This thesis seeks to contribute to filling this knowledge gap, and improve the understanding of the relationship between the far right and nuclear power and what role ideas about the nation play in its appeal.

4. Methodology and methods

4.2. Critical realism

This study sits within the philosophical tradition of critical realism. Critical realism views ontology, the philosophical study of being, as distinct from epistemology, the philosophical study of knowledge. This distinction is based on a critique of what has been called the epistemic fallacy of reducing being into knowledge (Bhaskar 2010). Human knowledge captures only parts of reality and we can get closer to reality through theories and philosophy (Fletcher 2017). In so, it is a philosophy of science that combines an ontological realism and an epistemological relativism. In a critical realist ontology reality is divided into three levels. The empirical level refers to what we experience, which can be measured empirically but is mediated through meanings, social ideas, and interpretations. At the actual level, events occur irrespective of human experience. The final domain is the real, in which structures or mechanisms act as "causal forces to produce events (i.e those appearing at the empirical level)" (Fletcher 2017). However, these levels are part of the same reality. The social exists and causal mechanisms both generate and are produced through social activities (ibid).

Critical realism is therefore an ontology suitable for research in the realm of complex phenomena such as climate change. Human knowledge of a changing climate is partial and socially constructed, but the event itself operates independently from and is "externally real" to human experience (Forsyth 2001). Further, the ontology allows for structures, difference and change in the world. Open-systemic phenomena, like climate, which requires a multiplicity of causes, mechanisms, and theories in its explanation, establishes the need for interdisciplinarity and an ontology that includes different levels of reality, rather than a flat ontology (Bhaskar 2010). In studies dealing with human-nature relationships, an interdisciplinary approach covering a range from biophysical climate science to the social processes that frame human action is thus vital (Cornell and Parker 2010).

4.3. Qualitative interviews

The analyzed material consists of mainly five interviews. In-depth interviews in qualitative research allows for researchers to gain insights into the internal workings of the respondents, into how they think and what they believe. Four of the interviews are

with members of the party elite from the Sweden Democrats and one with a Sweden Democratic municipal politician. Four interviews were conducted during an internship within the framework of a larger research project in fall of 2023, and one in the spring of 2024. Together we were four interns – Johanne Grønkjær Tagmose, Olivia Medin, Martin Charlier, and myself – working as research assistants on the political ecology of the Sweden Democrats. The overarching purpose of the internship was to examine the party's climate and energy politics, and their ideological underpinnings, through individual case studies, in light of the party's growing influence in Swedish national politics.

While each of us focused on our own topic of interest, we conducted the interviews in groups or pairs. We took a semi-structured approach that followed an interview guide and included sets of questions that covered the specific topics we wanted to discuss (Knott et al. 2022). Beforehand, we had done a literature review and read interview articles with politicians, public statements, and official documents of the Sweden Democrats related to climate and energy. During the interviews, I was guided by my own topic of study and my interview questions were organized around the themes and arguments I had identified with my own research questions in mind (ibid). I did minor changes in the interview guide depending on the respondents' work titles and political engagements and moved from broader to more direct topics using open-ended questions to allow for rich, elaborate answers and in the hopes that new findings and insights would also emerge.

For two of the interviews, we were invited to their offices in the parliament and three interviews were conducted digitally on Zoom and lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted mainly in Swedish to allow for more comfortability and elaborate answers. We had to navigate between not being too provocative while still prompting the respondents to reflect on certain topics. At some point, a respondent would dismiss a question and one reacted negatively to the term "climate crisis", but overall they were relatively at ease and accommodating.

4.4. Sampling

Since we wanted to interview members of the party elite from the SD engaged in the topics we were researching, the selection of relevant respondents was already somewhat

narrowed down. We opted for purposive sampling and began in the initial phase to identify party representatives on the parliamentary committees working on environmental and energy related issues and authors of motions concerning climate and energy. In purposive sampling, the respondents that are most likely to provide useful information are selected, thus improving the trustworthiness of the data (Campbell et al. 2020). Characteristics of the sample are defined to align the aim of the study. A larger number of selection criteria allows a more purposive sample and higher internal validity, while limiting the external validation and generalizability (Andrade 2021). The respondents in this study were therefore recruited based on their relevance for the research topic, while still retaining some diversity.

Locating respondents proved to be relatively easy. The politicians interviewed in this thesis are all office holders of the Sweden Democrats on national or local level. Hence, their email addresses are public on the official web page of the Swedish parliament and specific municipality respectively. Not everyone that was contacted for an interview responded to our emails, and some referred us instead to specific people within the party. When contacting the party's press department, we were also given the phone number of a politician who later agreed to be interviewed. In this way, the so-called "snowball technique", used in qualitative methods to expand networks and reach respondents was a useful additional sampling method (Damhuis and de Jonge 2022). While it did take some time to secure interviews, we did not particularly experience problems with gaining access to respondents. For example, Ellinas (2023) notes that the far-right is a hard-to-reach population for interview studies due to its general suspicion towards academics. In our case, several members of the party elite agreed to be interviewed. This may be a reflection of the party's move from a marginal to an established position in contemporary national politics.

The people interviewed in this study are the Sweden Democrats' energy spokesperson Jessica Stegrud; environmental spokesperson Martin Kinnunen; party secretary and former spokesperson on energy Mattias Bäckström Johansson; chairman of the parliamentary committee on Industry and Trade Tobias Andersson; as well as a municipal politician in a region where an active nuclear power plant is located. The interviews with the environmental spokesperson and the party secretary were conducted by all four of us, while the interviews with the energy spokesperson and chairman of the

committee on Industry and Trade were conducted by me and Johanne Grønkjær Tagmose. I did the interview with the municipal politician on my own.

In addition to the interview data, parliamentary motions and published statements of representatives from the SD concerning climate and energy have been included. Quotes and paragraphs have also been sourced from personal social media platforms of politicians from the party, such as X, as well as the party's official media channel Riks on YouTube, in order to underpin certain perspectives and arguments in the analysis.

4.5. Thematic analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed immediately afterwards and while still fresh in mind. As I transcribed them, I made analytical memos and highlighted sections that seemed interesting in order to acquaint myself with the material before the coding process. This allowed me to identify important topics and also add potential sub-questions in the interview guide. The interviews are transcribed in the form of intelligent verbatim, which means non-verbal details and repeated words have been removed (Knott et al. 2022). Thereafter, I started to organize my data in sets of codes to produce analytical insights. I re-read the transcripts in detail and labeled short segments that captured something relevant in relation to my topic. Going over my coding frame, I began to synthesize my findings and recognize patterns and certain tropes across the interview data that I developed into themes (ibid). Since the interviews were conducted in Swedish, I have translated the parts that were paragraphed or quoted in the analysis to English.

Thematic analysis is a method for "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006). It is a flexible method in that it can be applied to different philosophical paradigms and within different theoretical frameworks. The thematic analysis in this thesis is positioned as a contextualist method, i.e it is situated between the poles of an essentialist and constructivist paradigm. Hence, it acknowledges the relationship between individuals and their physical and social worlds and studies the meaning-making of individuals as well as how social contexts influence those meanings (ibid). The prevalence of the themes in my analysis was determined by whether they helped me answer my research questions, but were generally supported by codes that appeared on several instances across the data set. This

may of course be due to the nature of the interview questions or the respondents reflecting the general party line. As such, themes were selected based on their relevance for the study, an approach that highlights the active role of the researcher in creating themes in a process of analyzing that is generative rather than extractive (ibid; Knott et al. 2022).

For the analytical framework I took an abductive approach that combines inductive and deductive elements and alternates between the data and predetermined theories. A traditional inductive approach begins with the empirics to generate an analysis and build new theories, while a deductive analysis applies an already developed theoretical framework (Knott et al. 2022). Since the links between the party family of the populist far right and nuclear power is rather understudied, my analysis is to some extent data-driven and not fully determined by preconceptions (Braun and Clarke 2006). On the other hand, I am working from a loose hypothesis that is based on official statements and published material from the party as well as existing theoretical understandings on the nature of nationalist parties, its rhetoric and aims. An abductive approach is therefore suitable precisely because it allows for an iterative analytical process, for going back and forth between empirics and theories (Knott et al. 2022). One objective of the study has been to examine the underlying ideas and ideological traits dominating the party's politics on nuclear power. The development of themes and analysis is therefore more interpretative, while still acknowledging the material limits of reality (Braun and Clarke 2006).

4.6. Positionality

Interviewing politicians within this party family comes with certain challenges. As Damhuis and de Jonge (2022) observe, social scientists interviewing respondents from the far right might face issues that are inversely related to the problem of "going native". Rather than embracing the views of the native's they research, social scientists can experience a lack of proximity to this particular social group due to their, oftentimes, political distances. This dimension I experienced as well. A key to building rapport with the respondents was to be mindful of being non-offensive and choose meeting locations that allowed the respondents to feel comfortable and, in a sense, in control (ibid; Ellinas 2023). In my position as an anti-racist and as a student of critical theory, I did have certain prejudices towards the respondents. As researchers, we are to

some extent biased and my own identity and preconceptions will inevitably shape the knowledge produced (Knott et al. 2022). I have actively been practicing reflexivity and checked my assumptions during the interviewing and writing processes.

4.7. Ethical considerations

Before conducting the interviews, we gave an account of the topics of our research, and I explained what I specifically was interested in discussing. The respondents were offered anonymity, though the party representatives on national level all agreed to be named in the study due to their role as public figures. The municipal politician has been anonymized both in the text and the transcript. If they were directly cited in the text, the respondents were sent the quotes by email beforehand for approval. Consent for audio recording, transcribing and for using the interview material for the study was obtained verbally and recorded (Knott et al. 2022). The audio recorded interviews were deleted after having been transcribed. A challenge I had to navigate was the aforementioned ideological gap between me and the respondents. The ethical dilemmas this may give rise to relates to how our obligation to not harm our respondents (ie. by, for example, our representations of them) conflicts with our own morals (Ellinas 2023). While I had a critical stance towards their politics, I have tried to avoid simplifications or stereotypical representations of them or their views.

4.8. Limitations

Because qualitative studies generally concern subjective views of the group researched, interviewing politicians from party elites may involve certain limitations. Bull et al. (1996) suggests that politicians have three faces they must defend – their own personal face, the face of the party they represent, and the face in relation to party "others". This will inevitably have affected their answers during our interviews. However, in this thesis I am interested in the general line of the party as well as the subjective understandings of the politicians interviewed. The respondents were sampled according to certain criteria, i.e. working with energy or environment, which is both an asset and limitation of the study. They were able to provide relevant information due to their commitments. On the other hand, this may also produce a somewhat biased sample. Though I reached out to other Sweden Democratic politicians to request an interview, some were adamant that I should speak to people responsible for the political areas relevant for my study, i.e the energy spokesperson and environmental spokesperson.

Hence, they get to represent the party on the topics discussed. As already mentioned, the analysis also involved translating the data from Swedish to English. This raises concerns about interpretation and meaning getting lost, as the process of translating may potentially introduce the bias of the researcher (Temple and Young 2004), a dimension I had to be conscious of during the entire writing process.

5. Findings and analysis

Four themes were generated when analyzing the data that follow a kind of timeline and relate to how nostalgia permeates the SD's rhetoric on nuclear power and how nationalism takes form through this particular energy. The first two themes include retrospective narratives. These are the construction of nuclear power in the nation's history and technocratic ideals. The third theme is fear of energy shortage and concerns the present context. The last theme entails visions for the future, and revolves around nuclear power and electric nationalism. After introducing the themes supported by the data, I will discuss them in more detail together with the theoretical framework.

5.1. Nuclear power as an embodiment of the nation's past

A prevalent theme identified when asking the respondents of their views on the importance of nuclear power in Sweden was that the technology appeared as a source of national pride and as a symbol of bygone times. Returning to the slogan "Swedish industriousness and nuclear power built Sweden" on the party's official web page (Sverigedemokraterna 2022a), the quote paints an image of past times in which the development of the technology and the work ethics of Swedes laid the foundation for the country's socioeconomic progress. In like manner, the respondents painted a very positive picture of the significance of the particular technology. "It was a fantastic example of Swedish enterprise", declared Martin Kinnunen, environmental spokesperson of the SD (Interview). During our interview, the SD's party secretary and former energy spokesperson Mattias Bäckström Johansson spoke with fondness of the fact that Sweden was one of only three nations that independently managed to develop nuclear power for electricity generation, even competing back in the days with the "yankees" in the U.S in advancing reactor technology. According to Bäckström Johansson, the achievement has not received enough recognition as the impressive feat appears almost as an embarrassment to Swedes (Interview). Recalling the building time of reactor number three of the nuclear power plant in Oskarshamn on the Swedish east coast, Tobias Andersson, chairman of the committee for Industry and Trade, similarly stated that "there is no reactor in the world of that scale concluded in such a short span of time" (Interview).

Far from being merely a technological accomplishment, state investments in nuclear power, together with hydropower, was a major factor in replacing fossil fuels in

household heating and domestic industry. Since the 1970s Sweden has indeed succeeded in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, owing largely to its low-carbon electricity supply (Sarasini 2009; Hysing 2014). The supposed "carbon-neutrality" of the electricity sector has been emphasized repeatedly by the SD. In a motion from 2019, Kinnunen and others (2019), consistent with the idea of Swedish exceptionalism, observe that Sweden has since decades phased out fossil fuels from electricity production. Hence, they claim, it is not reasonable that the country should increase mitigation, instead bigger emitters should now carry the burden. This argument was echoed by all respondents in the interviews: due to our fossil-free electricity, all the "low-hanging fruits" have already been picked in Sweden (Kinnunen, interview; Bäckström Johansson, interview). Andersson made a case for the exceptionality of Sweden in the area of climate, stating that our previous knowledge in the field of nuclear "created the fossil free energy mix that we have had for a long time and that we have basically been alone in the world with" (Interview). For Jessica Stegrud, SD's energy spokesperson, becoming a nuclear nation and reducing the import of fossil fuels has historically meant nothing short of "everything" for Sweden's socioeconomic development (Interview).

Some of the respondents discussed the history of reactors in Sweden as intertwined with the cultural heritage of their locations. Maintaining that Sweden has a long tradition of nuclear power, Andersson spoke in our interview of the congruous relationship between regions and plants, saying that:

> "If you look at the local anchoring where we have nuclear power plants, the three locations today, there is a strong local support. It has meant work opportunities in a way that wind power doesn't have and solar power doesn't have. They have become like regional treasures. Everyone knows someone who works at the nuclear power plant in Oskarshamn, for example, if you live there. They've got a very strong local support where they are located in a way that really no other energy source has" (Interview).

Describing nuclear power plants in phrases such as "regional treasures", as built artifacts that have come to be cherished by the locals and function as a social fabric in communities, is noteworthy. It presents a stark contrast to the SD's sentiments towards

wind turbines in national landscapes. The party's economic spokesperson Oscar Sjöstedt suggested in March 2023 that apart from limiting expansion of wind power, existing wind turbines should be taken down (Arenander 2023). While talking about the social sustainability of nuclear power, Bäckström Johansson stayed with the notion that the local perception of this energy source is more positive than, for example, of wind power. He understood this as a consequence of reactors "symbolizing welfare" to the region (Interview). In their view, local support is explained by the historical wealth and distinction brought by power plants. Confirming this entangled history, the Sweden Democratic municipal politician I spoke to explained that locals feel more safe with this particular energy due to its long existence in the region, and continued to say that the local nuclear power plant is what makes his town famous nation-wide (Interview).

5.2. Longing for a technocratic society?

A related theme I identified throughout the data set was an apparent yearning for technocratic leadership, which becomes visible in how the respondents talk about nuclear. The success of the nuclear power program is understood foremost as a result of the extraordinary ingenuity of the Swedish engineers at the time as well as a strong political trust in science and technological development. In their views, Swedish nuclear technology is not only synonymous with the nation's past development but also encapsulates the spirit of the time. According to Andersson, the "work mentality" and "determination" characteristic of the time period of the establishment of the nuclear power program initiated this opportunity: "We did it because we decided to. It was not because we had a lot of previous knowledge or the best conditions for nuclear or most worked-up competence, rather, we said "let's do this". It's been a long time since Sweden made those kinds of industrial decisions" (Interview). This statement places the engineers at the forefront of this development – politicians put their faith in experts and, in turn, they were able to bless society and industries through their knowledge. "We had no nuclear competence when we started building nuclear power. None. We had engineers, we had good engineers, and suddenly those engineers were to build nuclear power and had to be good at it", Andersson continued (Interview). For both Bäckström Johansson and Stegrud, the advancement of the technology was an outcome of "forward-thinking" and a "future-oriented vision" of politicians and engineers alike (Interview; interview).

Moreover, not only is Swedish nuclear power seen as a product of political foresight and the skills of the experts, the respondents hold that the technology also shaped the image that Sweden could portray onto the world. In the words of Andersson: 'it has been incredibly important for our business sector and private consumers, but also on a competence level, that we showed that we could do it'. He further elaborated that "the competence we built up on the engineering side when we built nuclear power, and went from a country with no experience of nuclear technology to become a world leader, have led to spin-off effects and really put Sweden on the map" (Andersson, interview). Bäckström Johansson related that advancing reactor technology has been vital for Swedish engineering technology in general: "it created the image of Sweden as an engineering nation" (Interview). What Andersson and Bäckström Johansson refers to is the so-called "Swedish line" in reactor technology: a reactor type with the formula of natural uranium and heavy water, which received government support as the national path up until light-water reactor technology from the U.S came to dominate (Hanel and Hård 2015). Thus, they construct an image of a society that, when the innate potential of experts was unleashed, became an industrially advanced nation. Nuclear technology seemingly epitomizes this technocratic ideal and appeals to scientific expertise.

As established in the theoretical chapter, technocracy implies that technological and political choices are to be placed in the hands of supposedly impartial scientists and positions them, rather than politicians, as trustees of public interests (Gorz 1980). During our interview, Kinnunen argued for "technological neutrality" among energy sources, and indeed claimed that '[...] politicians are clearly not particularly good at determining which technology will win and I don't think that should be our job either' (Interview). Several of the respondents alluded to the notion that the opposition parties and the EU alike have interfered too much with the energy market. Bäckström Johansson chimed in, claiming that politicians should avoid trying to control the domestic energy mix and pointing towards the Green Party as having been particularly meddlesome (Interview). This interference has, according to Andersson, meant a disadvantage to nuclear power because of the "dogmatic" and "ideological" resistance to the energy source (Interview). Hence, the "green ideology's" favoring of renewables, the respondents claim, has left the Swedish energy system vulnerable.

5.3. Nuclear modernism as the anti-dote

In a YouTube-clip from September 2022, Jessica Stegrud takes the stage at a public meeting to talk about Sweden's rising electricity prices, and begins by sharing a story: Sweden was once a nation with wide-spread poverty. Then, she explains, something happened with the country in the mid twentieth century. Suddenly, this tiny country in the north became a successful exporting nation, and the key factor to this revolution, she continues, was the electricity supply delivered by nuclear power (Riks 2022). The success story of Sweden was in the same speech contrasted to the energy crisis plaguing the country the same year, which, Stegrud says, is rooted in political decisions of previous governments (ibid). The argument that the energy politics of the opposition has destabilized the Swedish electricity system has been perpetuated repeatedly by representatives from the party. In August 2022, Bäckström Johansson declared the high electricity prices as "Sosse-prices", a nod to the Social Democratic-Green government who held office from 2014-2022 (Rikner 2022). For the SD, the previous government's decision to increase taxes on electricity from nuclear power in 2015 is assumed responsible for the decommissioning of two nuclear plants in the years following. Or as Stegrud and Andersson (2023) wrote in September 2023, it led to "one of the world's most powerful energy systems being destroyed".

During the interviews the respondents displayed concern over the consequences of depending on electricity supply from renewables. "The problem with weather-dependent energy is exactly that it's weather-dependent", proclaimed Kinnunen; therefore, "we can't rely on a constant electricity supply" (Interview). Wind power, especially, is claimed to lead to higher "volatility" in the energy grid, ultimately causing prices to fluctuate and negatively affecting profitability (Andersson, interview). The unreliable nature of these particular sources was problematized also by Stegrud: "We have a market where we alternate between over-production of electricity and power deficit", something she fears will lead to turbines closing down, leaving "long graveyards of wind farms not in use" (Interview). Efforts to cut emissions by transitioning to renewables is perceived by them as a threat to national wellbeing. For the respondents, the associated risks amount to losing industrial competitiveness and socioeconomic welfare. Andersson exemplified this by explaining that he wouldn't want Sweden to become uncompetitive on the global market and end up a "lost cause" without prosperity or growth, and further asserted that he doesn't think Swedes are

willing to live in sheds in the woods (Interview). Bäckström Johansson related his worries that the competitive advantage brought by cheap and reliable power production is currently withering away in the country. He painted a similarly grim picture, saying that without industrial competitiveness "it would be rather miserable to live in Sweden and it would not lead to emissions decreasing globally either" (Interview).

If the opposition's hostility towards nuclear power is perceived as having caused a demise of the domestic energy system, it also opened the door to foreign powers entering the Swedish energy market. Stegrud related her concerns of the influx of foreign investors projecting for renewables on Swedish soil: "It is not some German neighbors, it is China, Qatar. It's rather dubious countries and dubious corporate structures". She continued to say that "it's problematic that we're talking about a so-called "green transition" and the need for renewables, but China owns the majority of all the large wind farms. It is incredibly problematic because they are the big emitters, they increase all the time" (Stegrud, interview).

Reversely, nuclear power is hailed as the energy compatible with national interests and the solution to stabilize the energy system and uphold domestic growth as well as welfare. According to Stegrud, without it Sweden may face the same fate as one of its neighbors: "there's been reports from Germany where the balancing costs have skyrocketed when they decommissioned nuclear power plants" (Interview). Investments in new reactors are presented as a measure to both secure competitiveness and curbing emissions. A recurrent argument used by the SD in favor of a nuclear expansion is that, in order to further electrify industrial processes, we will need tons of more electricity in the near future. Andersson maintained that it simply won't be possible to get another 150 terawatt hours of electricity from renewables into the grid. "If we want a lot of electricity, and if we want electricity all the time, we need plannable power production", that is why nuclear is important, he continued (Interview). Due to Sweden's low-carbon domestic energy mix, upholding national competitiveness is therefore portrayed as a sufficient mitigation policy.

The respondents perceive themselves as the ones who have to turn this apparent negative development on the energy market around. Opposition to nuclear power was by some of them presented as detached from reality and not based on actual facts

(Kinnunen, interview; Andersson, interview). As such, they positioned themselves as the voice of reason. When she spoke to us, Stegrud explained that she is happy that the current energy debate is starting to take a more holistic approach to the energy system as a whole, something she understands as an outcome of the perspectives she and her party have injected into national energy politics (Interview). The suggestion that the nation needs to be saved and that they are in the best position to curb the current destructive path is customary to the party. An example of this is when the SD's party leader Jimmie Åkesson during a party conference in his re-election speech sent this apocalyptic message:

> "We do this because we are we. We do this because we feel that we must. We do this because we know that it is us, and no one else, who are put to save our beloved country from ruin, and that is exactly what we are going to do" (Sverigedemokraterna 2023b).

While this type of rhetoric is typically used by the party when referring to their key issue of immigration, it is increasingly spilling over to their discourse on the effects of energy policies.

5.4. Restoring national glory

A final theme identified in the data set was how the respondent's visions for the nation gained substance in their politics on nuclear power. Stegrud told us that she welcomes what she calls the "nuclear revival" throughout numerous countries, and held that Sweden could have been much further ahead had we not stopped the development of the technology: "We were once very good at it, and we need to get back to that", she added (Interview). If the exceptionality of Sweden is understood as having given rise to the nuclear power program, the technology now presents another chance for the country to carve a distinguished role for itself. In the views of the respondents, the energy is a means to strengthen the nation and retain Sweden's position as a leading industrial nation and as a global climate frontrunner. Andersson claimed that "Sweden is a front liner in actually handling climate change and truly having the technology, the innovations and the competence to help others to reach further" (Interview). Rather than shifting towards reduced energy consumption, Sweden's responsibility in global mitigation will be fulfilled by maintaining national competitiveness and technological

development. Andersson rationalized this position by saying that "there's of course also the question, what makes the most difference? Is it for us to limit our consumption or to limit our growth in Sweden? Or is it for Sweden to try and help others to transition to more fossil free energy mixes and better and better industry processes?" (Interview). On the logic of exceptionalism, as long as Sweden meets the needs of the industry by massively increasing electricity production from nuclear, it has done its share. Despite maintaining that Sweden is too small of an actor to have any real effect on global emissions, Bäckström Johansson explained how he think the country should contribute to reaching global goals for mitigation:

> "Sweden's greatest chance to influence is by actually using our background as an engineering nation, that we produce a lot of electricity, we have a strong base industry, we have products we can export on a global market that have a very low climate footprint in terms of emissions from greenhouse gasses, and in that way we can contribute to reaching them" (Interview).

According to the respondents, the industrial benefits and self-determination the nation used to enjoy is getting lost in the green transition. The EU's implementation of political instruments that favor renewables is seen as undermining the sovereignty of nations. When he spoke to us, Kinnunen claimed that it is, as a matter of principle, wrong of the EU to enforce these mitigation measures on countries, and that "how member states choose to do this, if they implement different forms of taxes – it should be up to them, it shouldn't be decided on a European level" (Interview). The importance of energy autarky is a salient argument by the SD. While noting that Sweden regrettably is indeed bound by EU legislations to export energy, Stegrud told us that nuclear power is better suited for the purpose of energy-sufficiency and expressed that: "we are more of the belief that there are certain things you should be self-sufficient in, and energy is one of those" (Interview). In their views, nuclear remedies the intrusions brought by the green ideology and strengthens national sovereignty. "To be dependent on other countries for your energy supply is dangerous. That's also one of the strongest arguments for electrification, to move away from coal, oil and gas, which we, at least, in Sweden depend on imports from, to having a power production that we use through electricity instead of other sources", and for that, Andersson affirmed, we need planable power production (Interview). He proceeded to say that he would like to see the uranium

mining ban lifted in Sweden to allow for exploration in the country once again, a sentiment he maintains he shares with the population: "I believe most people in Sweden are suddenly waking up to the importance of self-sufficiency. And that could be in terms of food supply, that could be in terms of minerals, that can be in terms of energy and so on. [...] So more and more Swedes are realizing that it's important for us to be able to have national power supply and many other things in order to be more prepared in case of the worst" (Interview).

Then and now, nuclear technology entails promises of a bright future and unparalleled amounts of energy. While discussing that the early advances in the technology had marked a renewal of the Swedish society, the Sweden Democratic municipal politician held that "it was a restart in the country. And we needed to situate ourselves in the right course of time" (Interview). What is reflected in the statement is that nuclear power brought the country into modernity. Similar aspirations are reflected in the Tidö Agreement's extensive backing of this energy source (Moderaterna et al. 2022). In June of 2023 the government together with the SD announced a proposal referred to the council on new regulations around nuclear power. The proposal included removing the regulations in the Swedish environmental code limiting the number of reactors and permitted building locations to facilitate an increased nuclear capacity. "The glory days of nuclear power are ahead of us", declared Andersson in the same press release (Swedish Government 2023a). For the SD, it signified a step towards realizing one of the tenets of the Tidö Agreement to increase power production from this particular source. "The industrial renaissance demands a nuclear renaissance", Andersson assured again (Swedish Government 2023b).

The SD's aim to increase electricity production from nuclear power and reverse what it deem to be detrimental effects of progressive climate politics seemingly corresponds with another main objective of the party, that of reversing immigration and returning the country to a past of perceived unity and harmony. "Soon we will start to build nuclear power and expel criminal foreigners out of the country", Josef Fransson, Sweden Democratic member of parliament, commented on his own post on X ([@FranssonJosef] 2023), neatly capturing the party's position. The image of Sweden as an engineering nation – the party's notion of the extraordinary exceptionalism of the nation – is derived from the period of the development of nuclear technology.

According to the SD it was also a time when the country had a homogenous population, and Swedes felt more at home.

5.5. Channeling Swedish exceptionalism

The respondents associated the early historical advances in nuclear technology with Swedish exceptionalism, thus confirming theoretical understandings of how technological projects can become linked to nationalist agendas. Nationalist claims gain legitimacy by defining the nation as it once was, through historical origin, cultural heritage, and significant national events in an effort to promote continuity in times of adverse change and crisis (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019). For this purpose, the construction of golden ages and times of national grandeur serves as sources of authenticity and authority in ethnonationalist terms (Elgenius and Rydgren 2017). Similarly, artifacts and institutions likewise contribute to the discourse of golden ages (Elgenius and Rydgren 2022). The SD's nostalgic idealization of the mid 20th century Swedish welfare state, its golden age of the nation, is well documented. It is portrayed as the beacon of socioeconomic wellbeing, safety, and cohesion, linked to the absence of immigrants (Elgenius and Rydgren 2017). This period in the nation-building, figuring as the backdrop for the direction of its endeavors to reconstruct the past (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019), corresponds with the launch of the national nuclear power program. The energy source is therefore affiliated with their imagery of authentic Sweden in the sense that the nuclear power program epitomizes certain ideals and characteristics ascribed to their golden age of the nation. It captures the spirit of optimism of the time as well as the technological prowess of the nation. What is reflected in the sentiments of the respondents is that Sweden used to be more Swedish back when the nuclear power program was developed and the country rose to become a leading industrial nation.

Following Jansson (2018), the notion of Swedish exceptionalism is based on the idea of the country as a "moral superpower", a model for other countries to emulate, and has its roots in *folkhemmet*. Sometimes referred to as the "Swedish model", the welfare state constituted a middle way between socialism and capitalism that protected the interests of workers through collective agreements while paving the way for national and global corporations. Owing to its reputation, Sweden has likewise been known for cultivating humanitarian, democratic, and anti-racist values (ibid). This classic foundation of Swedish exceptionalism, ideas of Sweden as an exemplary state of virtue, is something

that the SD generally raises an objection to. However, it functions as a springboard for the party to project its own re-formulated version of it. It diverges from ambitions of championing "goodness" – in this case, by arguing that Sweden has done enough for global mitigation – yet, proposes that Sweden shall continue to be a global role model for energy transitions, by favoring national industry and interests. In his article, Jansson (2018) points to the inherent cognitive dissonance in the understanding of Swedish exceptionalism; often portrayed as the national consciousness of the world, while simultaneously exporting weapons and depending highly on global trade. Hence, the image of exceptionality reflects only parts of a larger picture and enables the continued production of denial and ignorance – a disconnect between rhetoric and reality transferred by the SD to the area of climate (ibid). Its argument that Sweden since long reduced its dependence on fossil fuels by replacing it with foremost energy from nuclear power lends legitimacy to the claim that mitigation should happen elsewhere. Calculations of Sweden's falling emissions account, however, only for those made within its territorial borders (Naturvårdsverket 2023). Were consumption-based emissions to be included, Sweden's per capita emissions would be measured to 8 tons. To put these numbers into context, in order to reach the goals in the Paris Agreement the global equivalent would have to drop to no more than 1 ton per person by 2050 (ibid). In consequence, the SD's promotion of the continuation of nuclear power must be seen also as obstructionist. It allows for the party to propose to do as little as possible, on the basis of previous greatness, while maintaining the *status quo*.

For nationalist ideologies, the emphasis on origins is central for distinguishing the national culture. The distinctiveness of nations is founded on ideas of a "spiritual genesis" constituted by traditions, customs, and cultural ways. Nationalists are claimed to have a right and duty to protect the national culture and maintain the historical continuity of the genesis in a process of cultural transmissions that connects ancestors with coming generations (Elgenius and Rydgren 2017). Nostalgic references to Sweden's long nuclear tradition and portrayals of plants as "regional treasures" in the data exemplifies such transmissions. The notion of "modern" Sweden originates from the period of *folkhemmet* (Jansson 2018), its genesis. It signified the birth of the nation as we know it, or rather, it gave birth to the Swedish national identity and self-image, as perpetuated by the SD, as an industrial leader and technologically extraordinary. In this way, its image of Swedish exceptionalism functions as a bridge between a mythical past

and potential future, mediated by nuclear power. In the eyes of the party, the energy source becomes a symbol of the nation's glorious history, and plants themselves monuments of national achievements. Nuclear is in the nation's veins – hence an expansion is presented as only natural.

5.6. A longing for simpler times?

What can be concluded from the interviews with the respondents as well as the examined published material is that the SD invokes a kind of Swedish essence in its explanation for how Sweden became a nuclear nation. Something particularly Swedish was distilled and manifested in the nuclear power program. In this way, far right parties and movements mobilize on the basis of a national identity, rooted in the past (Elgenius and Rydgren 2017). According to the respondents, the development of the technology likewise enhanced the Swedish self-image. It became an engineering nation, which could thereafter be diffused and influenced industrial policies across other sectors. This points to the necessity, as argued by Hecht (2009), of giving relevance to both the construction of technology and the construction of culture. The concept of a technopolitical regime is founded on an understanding of the mutual relationship between culture, politics, and technology, with an emphasis on how technologies "constitute a terrain for transforming, enacting, or protesting power relations within the social fabric" (ibid). A nuclear power plant may be described as a technopolitical machine because it is part of an entity constituted by a range of elements, rendering it both technical and political. It is technically capable of producing electricity and a political device designed to enhance industrial advancement (ibid). Whether the socio-technical arrangements that gave rise to the national nuclear power program can be defined as a technopolitical regime remains beyond the scope of this study to assess. What is of relevance is how the respondents constructed the history of the development of the technology, both in the past and the present, and the heterogeneous elements they draw from. The strength of the concept is that it focuses on how technical materialities, discourses, policies, procedures etc, are mutually interdependent in technological change (ibid). Accordingly, historical references and discursive elements can be utilized to link technology to national identities, presenting it as a natural extension of the nation. By blurring the boundaries between technology and politics, the respondents created a history where Swedishness was both performed and reconfigured through nuclear technology.

The question also arises as to why the technocratic ideal that nuclear power seems to symbolize is emphasized by the SD? At first glance, it can be difficult to reconcile the call for expertise with the party's typical political stance, given their general distaste and skepticism towards other types of scientific knowledge, most notably climate science. One explanation may be that it reflects a longing for a past when society appeared to move in unity in the same direction. An imagined time period where it was still possible to believe in never-ending progress, and the supposed current contention between the elites and the people seemed absent. As portrayed by the SD, people in influential positions, politicians and engineers alike, cared for the wellbeing of Swedes. When handed power, they acted selflessly in the interest of the nation, as opposed to today. This innocent picture of Sweden is a favorable image to filter history through. In this way, the party makes a fundamentally political choice, such as nuclear, seem like a technological one. Their plea for submitting ourselves to the technological knowledge of experts and engineers, while simultaneously promoting nuclear power as synonymous to national interests, exposes a likeness to Gorz' (1980) theorizing of the dynamics underpinning the nuclear option. While politicians can easily hide behind the technological arguments of engineers, beneath the surface the nuclear option harbors political and ideological agendas. According to Gorz (ibid), the nuclear option represents a means that predetermines certain ends, as it prepares the ground both for industrial growth and an increasingly militarized society, a new despotism. The longing for simpler times and technocratic rule can therefore also be read as, partly, a longing for an autocratic rule.

5.7. The rise and fall of nuclear power… and future revival

A central mechanism of the politics of nostalgia is the comparison of an idealized past to a less favorable present. For the populist far right, the nostalgic content of "saving the nation" rests on ideas of present moral decay and lost virtues, suitable for the narrative of rebirth (Elgenius and Rydgren 2022). Its apocalyptic framing often includes identifying a politically correct elite as having betrayed the nation'. The preferable past entails visions of, among other things, identity, authenticity and legitimacy along ethnic lines, whose continuity is currently blocked by the present (ibid). While political actors of the far right generally relate multiculturalism and internationalism to the decline of nations, in the case of the SD it is useful to examine ideas of betrayal and crisis in

relation to perceived increased socioeconomic risks. Reminiscences of a lost Sweden, a nation once in its prime, is echoed in the respondents' understandings of how Sweden became a leading nuclear nation. Then, the Social Democratic-Green's, due to their blatant indifference for the good of the nation, sent the Swedish energy system into turmoil. Further, their general favoring of renewables is portrayed as jeopardizing Swedish security by strengthening the geopolitical power of foreign nations, such as China. This reasoning is akin to the attempts of the far right to reduce dependence on fossil fuels from the Middle East in order to cut ties with Islamic regimes (Praet 2023). In line with their nationalist views, the respondents relate some energies with nations deemed inferior and dangerous. Here also lies an obvious contradiction in their argument, given that Sweden imports its uranium.

In the 1950s, the nuclear power discourse in Sweden was saturated with visions of the technology's revolutionary qualities. Politicians and scientists alike were convinced of its ability to solve a number of social, economic, and political problems. It was asserted that Sweden would run the risk of becoming an old-fashioned country and lose industrial advantages and material well-being unless the energy was exploited (Anshelm 2010). A similar line of argument was used by the respondents. During the interviews, they indeed depicted the current state of the Swedish energy system in a gloomy light and the chaos awaiting Swedes if the state fails to invest in new installations. Nationalists often translate threats to the survival of the nation and loss of national identity into sentiments of nostalgia, and because of this they seek to define how society was and the way people were (Elgenius and Rydgren 2017; Versteegen 2024). For the SD, a nuclear revival may therefore offer a perceived sense of stability and a return to previous industrial progress, in times of globalization and unsettling changes. This is characterized by promises to recapture what the country has been deprived of. Nostalgia is intimately connected to entitlements and reclaiming what rightfully belongs to the group in question. The utopianism seemingly inherent in nuclear projects and discourses makes for a useful canvas for the Swedish far right to project images of a nation in free fall and the potential of the technology to reconstruct the nation in a bright nuclear future.

The narrative of the rise and fall of nuclear power, and its potential revival, fits well into the myth of present decay, again providing legitimacy to the struggle to return to what

was once good in the nation.Those who oppose nuclear power, oppose the progress and wealth of the nation, and these internal enemies must be delegitimized for the country to flourish. The SD's rhetoric of the betrayal of the Social-Democratic-Green's and their destructive energy politics is also fueled with populist tendencies, which allows for it to perpetuate ideas of a nation in need of saving and to position themselves on the opposite side of ideological opponents in a "cultural war" against climate politics. Hence, nostalgia connects nationalism, populism, and resentment (Elgenius and Rydgren 2022) and becomes a catalyst for the aim of the party to enforce a paradigm shift in Swedish energy politics.

5.8. Electrification to power a national rebirth

As has been demonstrated, the politics of nostalgia is less about the past than it is about the future. The nation's past is constructed so as to serve political purposes in the present, and ultimately, guide the creation of a utopia resembling the past (Elgenius and Rydgren 2022). The rise and fall of nuclear power in Sweden have become a mobilizing myth for the SD. To restore its significance in Sweden, is to restore the greatness of the nation. Via the establishment of the nuclear power program, the respondents sustained the idea of a national identity of exceptionalism. As Jansson (2018) writes, virtually all nations perceive themselves as exceptional in some form. In the data, Sweden is presented as an engineering nation, and should therefore continue to disperse its ingenuity to the world. Given the emphasis on continuity within nationalist ideology, this is not surprising. In the words of Hecht (ibid, 12), characteristics of nations are imagined "through a telos in which the future appears as the inevitable fulfillment of a historical legitimate destiny". The longing for a so-called "nuclear renaissance" can therefore be regarded as a quest to reestablish their notion of Swedishness. For the SD, it can in part be conceptualized as a way to achieve the purpose of the nation, coherent with past achievements, and uphold Swedish exceptionalism – and Sweden must be exceptional in order to maintain its Swedishness!

The general Swedish self-image generated from *folkhemmet* not only resides upon perceived moral superiority; another factor underpinning it was its association to ideas of "newness". "The people's home" was about nothing less than the creation of a new modern nation. Swedish exceptionalism is in this sense related to modernity, a new man (Jansson 2018). From a political economy perspective, it was in part a project to

navigate global capitalism and soften the disruptiveness of industrialization. The link between a Swedish nationality and modernity made the perspectives and aspirations of experts and technocrats pivotal (ibid). Electricity production from nuclear power was central to modernizing Sweden – the country rose from relatively modest wealth to being an industrial leader. Hence, the SD associates the energy source with the birth and subsequent rebirth of the modern nation. This palingenetic idea is fundamental to the party, in which the technology may propel its visions for Sweden. Parties on the far right end of the political spectrum take inspiration from the palingenetic mission, but are generally concerned with renewing society from within existing systems by de-liberalizing it and thereby strengthening the relationship between humans and nations (Griffin 2022). The nuclear nostalgia of the SD is thus not really about the old, but the new. The party's mission to blow new life into Swedish nuclear technology also signifies a step in their ethnonationalist project of returning to the nation's (white) past.

In more concrete terms, its potential revival becomes a means to reestablish Sweden as a leading industrial nation. In the eyes of the SD, since Sweden is already extraordinary in curbing emissions, the nation should now be prioritized – its perception of Swedish exceptionalism in this way inseparable from its climate nationalism (Vihma, Reischl, and Nonbo Andersen 2021). By intensifying electrification of domestic industry, Sweden shall instead continue to grace the world with low-carbon technology and general "know-how". Not all sources are equally welcomed to contribute to the electrification of the nation, however. For the SD, nuclear power is the energy source most natural to the nation and a logical continuation of the nation's past. By again taking the lead as a technological pioneer, Sweden will regain its grandeur. The Tidö Agreement's proposals to advance technology for small modular reactors (SMR) exemplifies this (Moderaterna et al. 2022)**,** possibly with Sweden as a potential frontrunner in the field – a new, modern Sweden. Nuclear power thus signifies a vehicle to reboot the country and return to the paradise lost. This is how nationalism takes form through industrial projects such as nuclear installations (Hecht 2009). It allows for nationalists to promote a regeneration of the nation through technological change.

6. Conclusions

In this thesis I approached the relationship between the far right and nuclear power by studying the case of Sweden. To do this, I sought to understand the role of nostalgia in the Sweden Democrats politics on nuclear power. Far right politics of nostalgia are rooted in ideas about the nation as a unified community of people. It served as an entrypoint in order to identify the party's objectives as well as how nationalism relates to nuclear power. The analysis shows how perceptions about the nation and its potential future come into being in the energy politics of the SD. Nostalgia was employed, by the respondents and in the published material, to naturalize an expansion of Swedish nuclear capacity and as a way to strengthen the nation. Further, it allows for the party to maintain the claim that Sweden has done its share in global mitigation. It is thus a way to both obstruct mitigation policies and to reconstruct an idealized Sweden.

Through nostalgic references, the party forge a relationship between its notion of Swedishness and this particular technology. The technocratic element in its rhetoric can be understood as a way to foster the idea of Sweden as an engineering nation and as a longing for a time when the relationship between the elite and the people, as imagined by the SD, were based on trust. This does not, however, exclude authoritarian tendencies in their aims and motives. The extensive long-term control, security, and regulations surrounding power plants implies a large state and military apparatus. As the expansion of large-scale nuclear power plants appears synonymous to a more autocratic rule, the appeal of the far right seems obvious. For the SD, the potential of nuclear power to restore the glory of the nation also lies in the ability for Sweden to export expertise and technological knowledge, thereby retaining its notion of Swedish exceptionalism.

The SD refers to Sweden's electricity production from nuclear power to maintain the image of a country that has already mitigated enough. It offers an opportunity to propose doing at least something, while changing as little as possible in terms of wealth and power relations. Its promotion of nuclear power is intimately connected with the delegitimization of renewables in general, and wind power in particular. In this way, appealing to the technology, in the context of the Swedish far right, reflects how parties on this political spectrum continue to shift their politics to new fronts in the obstruction of progressive climate action. Simultaneously, the energy gives flesh to the nationalist

aim of the party to return the nation to what it once was.

The objectives of its promotion of the technology cannot be seen as a mere reaction against climate measures favoring renewables, or a way to maintain business-as-usual: it is more proactive than that. The party's nuclear politics is aimed at returning to a "paradise lost" in which the energy source, associated with authentic Sweden, functions as a driving force. It should also not be undermined that the idealized period of *folkhemmet*, during which Sweden built nuclear power, is also associated with ethnic homogeneity. As noted, for the SD it was a past characterized by cohesion – or *whiteness* – and industrial progress. Their endeavors to blow new life into nuclear power to restore the glory of the nation can therefore also be seen as a struggle to restore Sweden to a time when, according to the SD, ethnic Swedes felt more at home. Further research in other national contexts where the far right advocate for a revival of nuclear power would be needed to establish if these results have bearing outside of Sweden. If so, the technology may present another catalyst for the nationalist visions of the far right.

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8. Appendix

8.1. Interview guide

1. Är du nöjd med det inflytande Sverigedemokraterna haft över Tidö-regeringens klimatpolitik?

2. Hur mycket av er klimat - och energipolitik anser du reflekteras i regeringens politik?

3. Vad hoppas partiet kunna åstadkomma vad gäller Sveriges klimatpolitik under denna mandatperiod?

4. Sverigedemokraterna har argumenterat för att en utbyggnad av kärnkraften är nödvändig för att nå klimat - och energipolitiska mål. Varför är specifikt kärnkraften så viktig för Sverige?

5. Partiet har en tydlig linje att begränsa vindkraften till fördel för kärnkraften. Vilka intressen anser du finns bakom att bygga ut vindkraften?

6. Ni har diskuterat att landbaserad vindkraft påverkar kulturlandskap och den sociala hållbarheten negativt. Jag skulle vilja veta hur ni anser att kärnkraftverk står sig, vad gäller det?

7. Sverigedemokraterna betonar vikten av inhemsk elproduktion och kontroll över sin egen energiförsörjning. Vilka fördelar har kärnkraften i det avseendet?

8. Vad skulle en utbyggnad av kärnkraften kunna innebära för Sverige som samhälle?

9. Sverigedemokraterna har antytt att motståndet från vissa partier mot utbyggnad av kärnkraft är ideologiskt motiverat. Skulle du kunna utveckla det lite?

10. Under Sverigedemokraternas energipolitik på er webbplats står bland annat att "Svensk flit och kärnkraft byggde Sverige". Vilken betydelse anser ditt parti att kärnkraften haft historiskt för det svenska samhället?

11. Under energipolitiken på er webbplats går även att läsa att tidigare låga elpriser har gjort Sverige till en ledande industrination. Hur föreställer du dig Sverige som industrination i framtiden?

12. Vad tror du bidrog till att kärnkraftsprogrammet blev ett lyckat projekt i Sverige när den byggdes?

13. Vad skulle du säga präglade den tid då kärnkraften byggdes i Sverige?

14. I Sverigedemokraternas partiprogram från bland annat 1996 står att kärnkraften bör avvecklas. Av vilka anledningar har den inställningen ändrats inom partiet?

14.1 När kom den uppfattningen att ändras?