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# Migration and Welfare: Differential Grievabilities in the Swedish Right-Wing Continuum

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we examine the way access to welfare provision for migrants is articulated discursively among three right-of-center parties in Sweden. For this, we suggest two theoretical advances. First, deploying the concept of the right-wing continuum, we highlight the gradual and reciprocal alignment between mainstream right-of-center and radical-right populist parties. Second, by resorting to the concept of grievability, we analyze the implications for migrants of such an ideological alignment. We argue that this specific alignment along the right-wing continuum is best understood by means of a series of discursive (re)articulations, whereby migrants have been progressively excluded, devalued, and construed as ungrievable, to the point where the different actors on the right-wing continuum no longer find collaboration among themselves unthinkable. Employing a methodological approach embedded in Political Discourse Theory, we evidence how the radical-right populist Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, SD) has articulated welfare provision in a restrictive manner, which consequently excluded migrants. Concomitantly, the mainstream right-of-center parties, namely the liberal-conservative Moderate Party (*Moderaterna*, M), and the social-conservative Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna*, KD), have gradually radicalized their positions and aligned with those of the SD.

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## INTRODUCTION

On the eve of the 2022 parliamentary elections, the Swedish political landscape witnessed a fundamental transformation, whereby several right-of-center political forces embraced openly anti-immigration rhetoric, which has been the key policy pursued by the radical-right populist Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, hereinafter SD) since they entered the parliament in 2010 (Hellström 2016: 176–177; Nordensvärd & Ketola 2015: 367–368). For example, Elisabeth Svantesson, the economic policy spokesperson of the liberal-conservative Moderate Party (*Moderaterna*, M), commented favorably on the already heavily critiqued proposal advanced by her party to introduce ADHD-rapid testing of children of school age living in so-called ‘marginalized areas’ (*utanforslopsområden*),<sup>1</sup> a stigmatizing appellation that refers to areas with social deprivation and racialized migrants (Dahlstedt & Neergaard 2019: 128–129). Not missing the opportunity, Ebba Bush, the leader of the social-conservative Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna*, KD), doubled-down on her party’s previous promise to modify the existing Biobank Act (*biobankslagen*), and argued for renewed and tighter migration controls, permitting Swedish authorities to fingerprint, photograph, and document (including DNA-swabs) whenever controlling the legal status of migrants in the country.<sup>2</sup> Both Svantesson’s and Bush’s comments appear to merely continue the line of argument previously laid out by Jimmie Åkesson, the SD leader, who accused the center-left governing coalition of their ‘irresponsible [immigration] policies’ that ‘fundamentally affect our common welfare in a negative way,’ and warned that the ‘price is paid by our elderly, sick and wage-earners who, despite a lifetime of struggle, see welfare collapse when it is needed most.’<sup>3</sup> This is indicative of the gradual rapprochement since 2019 between the M and KD and the SD (Leander 2022: 340–341), which eventually manifested as a coordinated effort informing their budget motions for the final session of the 2018–2022 parliamentary cycle.

This rapprochement seems to indicate a recent alignment along a right-of-center political band—stretching from the liberal-conservative M to the social-conservative KD, and the radical-right populist SD—which we label as the right-wing continuum in this study. Such an alignment is perplexing, since mainstream political parties have resisted collaboration with the SD in the Swedish Parliament (*Riksdag*), unlike in other Nordic countries, such as Denmark and Finland (Poyet & Raunio 2021; Suárez-Krabbe & Lindberg 2019). Indeed, the SD had previously been isolated from real political influence on grounds of the party’s uncertain commitment to democratic parliamentarism, given the SD’s founding through the fusion of several far-right nationalist fringe parties and neo-Nazi movements (Aylott & Bolin 2019: 1505; Hellström & Nilsson 2010: 57–58; Rydgren 2006: 108).

This political alignment becomes apparent especially on matters concerning the crystallizing distinction between Swedes, understood in ethnocultural terms, and their proprietary right to welfare provision, on the one hand, and the racialized migrants

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1 <https://www.svd.se/a/wO7awd/adhd-forslag-far-tummen-upp-av-elisabeth-svantesson>.

2 <https://www.dn.se/verige/studio-dn-partiledarintervju-med-ebba-busch-kd-inga-problem-att-saga-att-mamma-pappa-barn-ar-en/>.

3 <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/R95BXW/aldre-och-sjuka-betalar-priset-for-invandringen>.

that are collectively suspected of harboring criminality and burdening Swedish welfare, on the other (Barker 2018: 58–70; Borrelli & Lindberg 2019: 55). The coalescence of this right-wing continuum seems indicative of a dual political process. On the one hand, we witness the mainstreaming of the most important radical-right populist party in Sweden (namely the SD, which has continuously attempted to repackage its reactionary agenda into being ‘socially conservative with a nationalist outlook’<sup>4</sup>), which accompanies the more general growing prominence of far-right ideas in the public sphere (Abdelhady 2020; Dahlstedt & Neergaard 2019; Ekman & Krzyzanowski 2021; Norocel 2017). On the other hand, there is a mirror process of radicalization of the mainstream, whereby a shift takes place among mainstream parties across a number of European polities to accommodate and co-opt far-right ideas into their own policies and discourse (Akkerman, de Lange & Rooduijn 2016; Brown, Mondon & Winter 2021; Krzyzanowski 2020).

Aiming to shed light on this dual process, in the present study, we concentrate on the way migration is addressed in the context of a welfare system undergoing dramatic changes. We do so by examining critically the political activity of the parties on this right-wing continuum in the parliamentary cycle 2018–2022, when this process has arguably gathered pace. More clearly, we ask: *How is access to welfare provision for migrants articulated throughout the parliamentary cycle in the budget proposals of the parties on the right-wing continuum in Sweden?* Our argument is that this specific ideological alignment is best understood through the prism of the discursive shift dependent on a series of (re)articulations whereby migrants have been progressively excluded, devalued, and stripped of politically endorsed care or grief to the point where the different actors on the right-wing continuum no longer find collaboration among themselves unthinkable. This is reflected in their signing, in the aftermath of the 2022 parliamentary elections, of the Tidö agreement (*Tidöavtalet*). The agreement served as the basis for the establishment of a M-led government together with KD and the Liberal Party (*Liberalerna*, L), but at the mercy of SD support. Reflective of SD’s influence, the agreement pays particular attention to issues of migration, integration, and gang criminality in two of its seven constitutive sections.

The article is organized into four further sections. The first section presents the theoretical scaffolding undergirding our study. The following section discusses the methodological apparatus, as well as the criteria for selecting the empirical material during the chosen timeframe. The third section details the empirical findings of our study. The fourth and final section provides a concluding discussion, situating these findings in the wider theoretical and empirical context of Nordic migration research and adjacent fields of relevance.

## THEORETICAL SCAFFOLDING

Although not explicitly a key tenet of right-of-center political views, the question of funding the Swedish welfare system has increasingly become mobilized as an arena wherein racializing nativist perspectives are projected onto migrants to question their right to access welfare provision, regardless of their regularized or irregular status (Mulinari & Neergaard 2022; Nordensvärd & Ketola 2015). Some scholars have

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4 <https://ratatosk.sd.se/sd/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/16092141/Sverigedemokraternas-principprogram-2019.pdf>.

examined this phenomenon in various European contexts, generally conceptualized as ‘welfare chauvinism’ (Andersen & Bjørklund 1990; Careja & Harris 2022; Keskinen, Norocel & Jørgensen 2016), unveiling the rearticulation of the welfare system in nationalist and racist ways whenever operating with the categories of ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’ (Dahlstedt & Neergaard 2019; Mulinari & Neergaard 2022). On this matter, while we deploy here the terminology of ‘migrants,’ we are acutely aware of the imbrications of processes of racialization and discussions of migration flows in postcolonial contexts (Barker 2018; Borrelli & Lindberg 2019; Suárez-Krabbe & Lindberg 2019), and consequently expose ‘the concept of migration [to be] often reserved for bodies of color, rather than white bodies (who tend to be seen as tourists, expatriates, guests, [...])’ (Lundström 2017: 80). Furthermore, some other researchers have argued that, in the Swedish context, social rights within the welfare system are construed as inherently contingent on belonging to the Swedish nation, which enables restrictive welfare chauvinist policies (Nordensvärd & Ketola 2015: 369–371). In this context, a related concept is that of deservingness, a rationale according to which welfare policies are expressed according to nationalist, nativist, and racist notions of entitlement (Jørgensen & Thomsen 2016; Keskinen et al. 2016; Nordensvärd & Ketola 2015; Saar, Sojka & Runfors 2022). More clearly, in one of the understandings of the concept we find most useful for our study, deservingness is perceived as a notion of cultural and economic worthiness, whereby non-natives are described as less worthy and thus less deserving of social provision (Jørgensen & Thomsen 2016: 346–348).

The increased mobilization of the welfare debate as an arena for xenophobic nationalist agendas constitutes a shift within the Northern European political climate that has attracted scholarly attention (Dahlstedt & Neergaard 2019; Hellström 2016; Keskinen, Stoltz & Mulinari 2021; Norocel 2016; Scarpa & Schierup 2018). Some researchers have unveiled the parallel process through which the right-of-center parties embraced neoliberalism and pursued gradual privatization and marketization of central functions in the welfare system (Larsson, Letell & Thörn 2012; Mulinari & Neergaard 2022), as the entire political mainstream underwent significant fragmentation and a shift to the right (Ekman & Krzyżanowski 2021; Loch & Norocel 2015; Pellikaan, de Lange & van der Meer 2018). As such, several scholars have argued persuasively that this shift indicates a ‘solidarity crisis’ (Keskinen et al. 2021), accompanying what some researchers labeled as a ‘walling [of] the welfare state’ (Barker 2018). In our case, it also marks the end of ‘Swedish exceptionalism’ (Schierup & Ålund 2011), whereby the notion that the country represented a paragon of progressive and egalitarian politics was dismantled by the rise of radical-right populist influence on mainstream politics (Dahlstedt & Neergaard 2019; Norocel 2017; Norocel & Pettersson 2022). Such shift, documented within various European polities, has been conceptualized as mainstreaming of the radical-right, denoting a process whereby previously unacceptable political claims from radical-right populist and far-right entities continuously pressure the boundaries of the mainstream debate until these become normalized into the mainstream (Akkerman et al. 2016; Ekman & Krzyżanowski 2021; Krzyżanowski 2020). This notwithstanding, it is worth keeping in mind that the political mainstream is not inherently good, moderate, or objective simply for being tacitly embraced by the majority of political parties. Rather, it is an arena with its own agency wherein discourse operates. In other words

[T]he mainstream is acknowledged to have a powerful role in determining its own delineation of relational differences with the extreme. It is self-

perpetuating, active in defining itself and therefore plays a critical role in determining the acceptability of certain ideas/discourse (Brown et al. 2021: 4)

Following this line of reasoning, we approach the mainstream as a discursively relevant political arena with the capacity, and most importantly, the power to alter the realm of acceptable political claims (Brown et al. 2021). Operating with such an understanding of the mainstream enables us to examine critically the shift in Swedish politics, unveiling not only the mainstreaming of radical-right populist and other far-right ideologies, but also the gradual radicalization that the mainstream right-of-center ideologies undergo.

To convey this complexity, we resort to the concept of the right-wing continuum, for which we draw inspiration from adjacent social science traditions (Kelly 2011). The concept of continuum was developed with the help of two dictionary definitions. On the one hand, continuum is used to denote an elementary joint aspect that connects many different actions. On the other hand, continuum designates a string of events or a series of elements that blend into each other and cannot be readily separated from one another (Kelly 2011: xviii). As such, firstly, we deploy the right-wing continuum to separate political developments occurring on the right of the political spectrum from other developments occurring on the left of it. Secondly, we use the concept to account for the perplexing alignment of the mainstream right-of-center M (liberal-conservative) and KD (social-conservative), with the radical-right populist SD, a party that was previously treated as a pariah by the other parties in the *Riksdag*. Deploying the concept enables us to evidence the processual dimension of such alignment during the 2018–2022 parliamentary cycle, highlighting the nativist and racializing (re)articulations of welfare policies that have contributed to said discursive shift.

In addition to this, we deploy the concept of grievability (Butler 2016) to better account for the discursive implications of such articulation. Grievability stems from the notion of grief and is used conceptually to refer to the discursive constructions of grief for a lost life and the social and political conditions that enable said life to be lived fully (Butler 2016: 14–15). The concept is not completely new in the field of migration research, as it has already been used by several scholars in their analyses of borders (Kovras & Robins 2016; McLean 2020). In one case, grievability was used to draw attention to the political conceptualization of death in relation to the external borders of the European Union (EU) (Kovras & Robins 2016). In the other, grievability was deployed to examine the struggles of Central American families, serving as a means to convey a sense of collective sense of grief in their search for their loved ones along the migrant route in Mexico (McLean 2020). This notwithstanding, for the present study, we decouple the concept from the study of borders. We deploy it instead to examine the discursive exclusionary articulations of welfare provision, given that welfare provision is a cornerstone for social and material wellbeing. Since a central prerequisite for a life to be understood politically as grievable is recognizability, norms of racism and xenophobia forego recognizability. Consequently, exclusionary articulations of welfare provision determine whether the loss of a life is registered within the political consciousness as a loss, or is dismissed as ungrievable (Butler 2016: 6–24). As such, the politically conditioned sense of grievability for a life then affects the collective feelings of responsibility, as well as guilt, shame, respect, and loss toward it (Butler 2016: 23–24).

In our view, grievability provides a framework for understanding the hegemonic discursive conventions at work in the welfare debate in Swedish politics as the process through which the value of life is distributed differentially, contingent on nationalist and racializing divisions. Whereas the commonly deployed concept of deservingness points to the notion that welfare access is necessarily preceded by displays of eligibility that have to do with belonging to the native population and value-producing labor on the neoliberal market (Jørgensen & Thomsen 2016; Saar et al. 2022), grievability, in turn, points to the notion that access to welfare provision is fundamentally tied to a political sense of loss of a life. More clearly, grievability provides a framework through which racialized and classed notions about the value of certain lives are brought to the fore (Butler 2016). As such, grievability enables a critical analysis of the violent process through which the disregard for the life of migrants goes hand in hand with the rollback of welfare services, and the understanding of deservingness as a means through which racialized lives are devalued (Barker 2018; Borrelli & Lindberg 2019; Mulinari & Neergaard 2022; Suárez-Krabbe & Lindberg 2019). Furthermore, we argue, the concept's potential is heightened when deployed in conjunction with the mainstreaming framework (Brown et al. 2021), since it shines light onto the manner in which welfare chauvinism mobilizes welfare provision as a means to articulate different valuations of human lives. Put simply, grievability enables a multidimensional analysis of the processual aspect of articulating welfare retrenchment.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPARATUS AND EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

The methodological apparatus of this study is embedded into Political Discourse Theory (Glynos & Howarth 2007; Laclau & Mouffe 1990; 2014), whereby discourse does not merely entail 'a combination of speech and writing but rather that speech and writing are themselves but internal components of discursive totalities' (Laclau & Mouffe 1990: 100). In this context, linguistic and nonlinguistic acts are co-constitutive of 'social reality' (Glynos & Howarth 2007: 14), wherein discursive understandings of 'the reality of objects' construct them in historically and politically contingent ways (Laclau & Mouffe 1990: 119). Returning to the theoretical discussion above, such an approach enables a more nuanced understanding of what is at stake when political parties restrict the access of racialized migrants to welfare provision (Barker 2018: 44–45; Dahlstedt & Neergaard 2019: 123). Worth keeping in mind is that discourse is an active process of power through which hegemonic meanings are enforced, wherein the hegemonic position is only a temporary fixation in discourse at a specific time that is open to contestation and rearticulation of different meanings (Glynos & Howarth 2007: 105; Laclau & Mouffe 2014: 134–135). Welfare chauvinism may then be understood as a programmatic effort to transform the social reality of migrants.

Concentrating more explicitly on the methodological terminology deployed in our study, we follow the approach to discourse as a specifically structured relationship between different signs, wherein particular meanings are attached to privileged signs (Laclau & Mouffe 2014: 105). A privileged sign is subject to programmatic articulation within the discourse, and by examining these signs, we gain insights into the inner workings of the discourse under analysis since these signs relate to one another in specific ways in this discourse, and it is these relations that determine the structure of said discourse. Furthermore, depending on their position in relation to the discourse,

then, signs may be categorized as elements (signs invested conflicting meanings in the given discourse), moments (signs with a totalized meaning), or nodal points (signs with a privileged position in said discourse, around which other signs are structured) (Laclau & Mouffe 1990: 28; Laclau & Mouffe 2014: xi, 105). More clearly, in our case, we have identified *welfare*, *need*, and *beneficiary* (of welfare provision) as some of the important signs within the welfare discourse of the right-wing continuum, which, in one way or another, are continuously articulated throughout this discourse. Notwithstanding this, while *welfare* may be considered a nodal point in said discourse, as all other signs relate in particular ways to this specific sign, *need* may be deemed to be a moment within the discourse, as its meaning is relatively fixed in the discourse, and finally *beneficiary* may be understood as an element with conflicting meanings surrounding it. To complicate matters further, the meanings attributed to such signs are never fixed, as discourses are not stable (Laclau & Mouffe 2014: 134–135). We operationalize this methodological framework by mapping out the privileged signs in the discourse, inquiring what meanings are established through the interaction between signs and what competing meanings are excluded, and whether any such articulations put into question the moments of the discourse (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 33–34).

At this stage, we want to address the issue of ethics in critical knowledge production (Haraway 1988; Israel 2015; Leavy & Harris 2019). Here we raise two issues. First, we embrace methodological transparency, both with regard to our methodological and ethical choices throughout our study (Israel 2015: 3) and the manner in which the collected empirical material is examined, making clear potential discrepancies in the various sources and conveying these in our analysis (Leavy & Harris 2019: 120). Second, we subscribe to the ethical stance that deems research conducted uncritically under the pretense of objective neutrality within a society that is already structured along gendered, racialized, classed, and colonial/imperial hierarchies as merely reproducing and legitimizing these very hierarchies (Haraway 1988: 581; Leavy & Harris 2019: 98–104).

With regard to the empirical material of the present study, we have collected a set of primary material (budget motions from each selected party, retrieved from the website of the Swedish Parliament<sup>5</sup>), which we have supplemented with additional material (party programs). To begin with, we have chosen to examine the budget proposals during the 2018–2022 parliamentary cycle that the three parties have motioned for (see Table 1 for a synthetic presentation). In our view, these policy documents discuss how the Swedish taxpayers' money should be allocated. In this manner, these budget proposals are indicative of how each party on the right-wing continuum conceived of what areas of the Swedish welfare system to be prioritized (and by the same measure, deprioritized), as well as who are the envisioned beneficiaries of these proposals, even outside those sections that explicitly deal with welfare provision such as unemployment benefits, access to health care, pensions, etc. (Norocel 2016: 377–378), thereby allowing us to map out potential welfare chauvinist understandings and possible discrepancies in the discourse on the right-wing continuum. An observation is necessary here. In the first three sessions of the 2018–2022 parliamentary cycle, each party has motioned for their individual budget proposal. However, in the last session (2021/2022), the three parties under scrutiny

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5 <https://www.riksdagen.se/>.



PARLIAMENTARY SESSION	KD ENDORSED BUDGET MOTIONS (BM)	M ENDORSED BUDGET MOTIONS (BM)	SD ENDORSED BUDGET MOTIONS (BM)
2018/2019	Reforms for care, employment, and safety ( <i>Reformer för vård, jobb och trygghet</i> ) (KD bm 2019)	Sweden should stick together – reforms for increased growth and a reinstated society contract ( <i>Sverige ska hålla ihop—reformer för ökad tillväxt och ett återupprättat samhällskontrakt</i> ) (M bm 2019)	Budget proposition for 2019 ( <i>Budgetproposition för 2019</i> ) (SD bm 2019)
2019/2020	A Sweden to trust—safety and welfare ( <i>Ett Sverige att lita på—trygghet och välfärd</i> ) (KD bm 2020)	Reinstate the society contract—a budget for Sweden ( <i>Återupprätta samhällskontraktet—en budget för Sverige</i> ) (M bm 2020)	We secure the welfare ( <i>Vi tryggar välfärden</i> ) (SD bm 2020)
2020/2021	Sweden deserves better ( <i>Sverige förtjänar bättre</i> ) (KD budget 2021)	Combat unemployment and fight against crime ( <i>Knäck arbetslösheten och bekämpa kriminaliteten</i> ) (M bm 2021)	Investing in Sweden ( <i>Investera i Sverige</i> ) (SD bm 2021)
2021/2022	All of Sweden shall function ( <i>Hela Sverige ska fungera</i> ) (KD bm 2022)	Increased safety and more people in employment ( <i>Ökad trygghet och fler som arbetar</i> ) (M bm 2022)	Now it is time for Sweden ( <i>Nu är det dags för Sverige</i> ) (SD bm 2022)

in the present study have identified collectively the budget areas that were to be prioritized and allocated extra resources accordingly.<sup>6</sup> The parties eventually chose to motion their proposals structured and titled formally in an individualized fashion. We interpret this joint budget initiative preliminarily as indicative of the process of mainstreaming radical-right populism (Dahlstedt & Neergaard 2019; Ekman & Krzyzanowski 2021). Since our interest is to highlight the discursive shifts taking place during the selected timeframe, we use this criterion to exclude from our selection the nominally liberal L. We are aware of this party's later involvement in negotiating and signing the Tidö agreement; nonetheless, these have taken place in the aftermath of the 2022 elections, thus outside of the timeframe of our study. Notwithstanding this, we treat each of these three budget proposals as separate empirical items because we endeavor to map out the gradual radicalization that the mainstream right-of-center M and KD underwent (Brown et al. 2021).

We have supplemented these budget proposals with additional empirical material consisting of these parties' most recent party programs. In our view, these documents provide further ideological consistency about these parties' core ideals and principles, which serve as the basis for the budget proposal they then motion for. As such, we collected the most recent KD's Principle program (*Principprogram KD*) adopted in 2015, the M's Idea Program for 2020s (*Frihet och ansvar – ett moderat idéprogram för 2020-talet*), and SD's Principle program (*Sverigedemokraternas principprogram 2019*). This supplementary material helped us understand better and brought contextual richness to the primary material.

**Table 1** Budget motions of selected parties during the 2018–2022 parliamentary cycle.

<sup>6</sup> This joint budget initiative from the KD, M, and SD was presented by each party on their respective official webpages: <https://kristdemokraterna.se/budgetreserv22/>; <https://moderaterna.se/nyhet/moderaterna-sverigedemokraterna-och-kristdemokraterna-presenterar-gemensam-budget/>; and <https://sd.se/gemensamt-budgetalternativ-fran-moderaterna-sverigedemokraterna-och-kristdemokraterna/>.

The SD's programmatic welfare chauvinism, packaged as a desirable form of welfare retrenchment in the neoliberal context, is a distinctive trait that has been documented by previous research in the field (Hellström 2016; Nordensvärd & Ketola 2015; Norocel 2016). With this in mind, we anchor the present analysis in the party's nationalist and racializing divisions manifest in its policy documents concerning welfare access for migrants. To this, we add awareness of how grievability is distributed differentially depending on these divisions, which allows us to account for the (re)articulations of discursive signs within the right-wing continuum. Consequently, in the first step of analysis, we shed light on the discursive attempts undertaken during the selected period to mainstream radical-right populist conceptions of welfare provision. In the second step of analysis, then, we map out the manner in which the mainstream right-of-center conceptions of welfare provision manifest discursive radicalization, evidencing potential ideological alignments, concentrating on the role played in this context by the differential distribution of grievability in the process.

### GRIEVABILITY AND THE MAINSTREAMING OF RADICAL-RIGHT POPULIST CONCEPTIONS OF WELFARE PROVISION

In their first budget motion in the mandate, the SD articulated the sign *welfare* in a restrictive sense, narrowly overlapping the contours of the 'silent (ethnic) majority' of its political discourses and thereby exclusionary of migrants, such as in the following excerpt:

The SD's foundational standpoint is that the Swedish welfare entities, including healthcare, primarily exist to benefit Swedish citizens. This entails that non-citizens, generally speaking, do not have the same access to the Swedish welfare system and at a time when people increasingly move across borders it bears clarifying. At the same time, one must distinguish between people who come to Sweden for work, and those who are in Sweden for other reasons. Those who are not [Swedish] citizens, who stay in Sweden without working shall not have the right to [access] the Swedish welfare system. (SD bm 2019: 23)

The quote illustrates the articulation of the element *beneficiary* in restrictive terms of (Swedish) citizenship, and at the very least as a value-producing laborer. Consequently, the conditions of access to welfare provision for migrants are posited in terms of a neoliberal racialized articulation of the *beneficiary*. *Welfare*, as a nodal point in this context, is articulated in a manner that narrows down the means of access for migrants from the discursive construction of the beneficiary. As such, the politically endorsed sense of grief, as well as the potential feelings of responsibility or shame toward the living conditions of migrants are minimized. Consequently, articulating *welfare* along ethnic and racial as well as neoliberal categorizations renders grievability impossible for migrants.

In its subsequent budget motions, this differential distribution of grievability is further emphasized. For instance, in the 2021/2022 session, the SD underlined ethnic and racial belonging as central qualities of the element *beneficiary* by emphasizing (Swedish) citizenship, a prerequisite to welfare access, as a discrete expression of belonging to the (Swedish) national construct: 'the one who is Swedish citizen shall also be a part of Sweden and regard Sweden as their homeland' (SD bm 2022: 68).

Acknowledging the potential to acquire Swedish citizenship by some migrants, we argue, is discreetly contributing to the process of mainstreaming the radical-right populist ideology, which was also documented in previous research (Norocel 2017: 100–101). This is achieved by emphasizing an assimilatory aspect, which manifests as the expectation of becoming ‘part of Sweden’ and regarding ‘Sweden as their homeland.’

Concomitantly, conditioning access to welfare provision to providing value-producing labor in exchange, the SD also questioned the motivations of migrants to be in the country:

It is reasonable to question whether Sweden shall provide generous benefits to persons that have worked very little, if at all. Especially considering that Sweden has experienced in recent years high levels of migration by people far removed from the labor market. Settlement-based benefits, which are paid only when a person lives in Sweden, often have a negative impact on occupation levels among the newly arrived and create incentives for them to come to Sweden. (SD bm 2022: 68)

In this context, we argue that the articulation of the element *beneficiary* is further distanced discursively from migrants. Access to welfare provision, since in their case it does not occur via their ethnic and racial belonging to the Swedish nation, is tied to their deservingness expressed as value-producing labor on the market (Barker 2018; Jørgensen & Thomsen 2016; Saar et al. 2022). Even so, migrants, especially those that have arrived recently in Sweden, are portrayed negatively in the budget motion as ‘people far removed from the labor market,’ whose actual incentive to move to the country is to enjoy the ‘settlement-based benefits’ provided by Swedish welfare. We interpret this to be revealing of the processual aspects of the increasingly restrictive articulation of nodal point *welfare* by means of the differential distribution of grievability, which is rendered contingent to racial and ethnic belonging and neoliberal value-producing labor on the market.

In turn, when examining the articulation of the moment *need*, we find evidence of further discursive detachment of migrants from welfare access. Already in its most recent party program, the SD stated its approach to welfare issues, especially access to healthcare, as follows: ‘our view is that healthcare services should be financed in solidarity through taxes, be provided based on need, and be accessible’ (SD Principle program 2019: 21). This line of reasoning is consistently developed in the budget motions, for example, when addressing the issue of financial aid for sick people or people with disabilities (SD bm 2019: 29). This notwithstanding, the moment *need* is intimately attached to a definition of the beneficiary narrowly overlapping the ethnic and racial contours of the Swedish nation. This articulation becomes apparent particularly in relation to the elderly, generally understood as a ‘native’ age group,<sup>7</sup> that ‘has a right to age with dignity’ (SD bm 2019: 25) in the context in which the ‘needs for welfare services increases as the population grows. As the population grows older, the need increases even more’ (SD bm 2022: 10). We interpret this constant

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<sup>7</sup> One of SD’s controversial campaign videos depicts a symbolic battle for the state’s budgetary resources between a seemingly white ethnically Swedish pensioner and a group of racialized young women wearing burqas and pushing baby prams (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAHIZNofrKY>). The video in question is still available on the SD’s official profile on YouTube.

articulation of the elderly as the legitimate beneficiaries of welfare provision, in need of the state's welfare services, to construct discursively this group as politically grievable. The contrast between the sense of responsibility imperatively called upon with regard to the (Swedish) elderly and the programmatic distancing from the fates of migrants reveals a violent attempt to fix discursively grievability as proprietary to the white ethnically Swedish population. On this matter, we agree with previous research, which has argued persuasively that references to vulnerable groups among the Swedish nation (in our case, the elderly) allow the SD to feign a general interest in safeguarding the Swedish welfare system, and in so doing to mainstream and legitimize radical-right populist ideology (Norocel 2017: 102; Norocel & Pettersson 2022: 442).

## GRIEVABILITY AND THE RADICALIZATION OF MAINSTREAM RIGHT-OF-CENTER CONCEPTIONS OF WELFARE PROVISION

In parallel with the mainstreaming efforts undertaken by the SD, a closer examination of the policy documents of the liberal-conservative M evidences a concomitant process of radicalization of the mainstream right-of-center positions. Analyzing the articulation of the element *beneficiary*, we noted a discursive shift taking place. At the beginning of the mandate, the M and SD articulations of both signs, *welfare* and *beneficiary*, were to a certain extent congruent, with the M budget motion stating that

By living in Sweden, one is granted to a large extent access to welfare provision. This means that the newly arrived are immediately given access to the majority of these [services], without having worked or paid taxes. This risks reducing the incentive to work, while at the same time calling into question the legitimacy of the Swedish benefit system. This also leads to unnecessarily high cost. Therefore, people that come to Sweden should be given more gradual access to various benefits and social allowances, instead of gaining access automatically to very large parts of the Swedish social security system. (M bm 2019: 48)

In our view, this initial articulation of the element *beneficiary* centers on a neoliberal understanding of access to welfare provision for migrants, whereby this should be conditioned on providing value-producing labor in exchange. This articulation resonates closely with a central pillar of liberal-conservative ideology that posits 'the market' and economic exchange as the main drivers of society, which the party emphasized in its political program (Idea program for 2020s 2021: 7). It also reflects the neoliberal mantra of labor market activation of migrants, 'on the one hand, empowering—striving to motivate and release the inner creativity of the individual, and, on the other hand, disciplinary—emphasizing work as an obligation' (Dahlstedt & Neergaard 2019: 126). Concomitantly, this is indicative of *beneficiary* being a discursive element on the right-wing continuum, since in this case, the articulation appears indifferent to national belonging and citizenship, which was emphasized by SD as described earlier, inasmuch as migrants are incentivized and willing to increase the share of their value producing labor in exchange to a 'gradual access to various benefits and social allowances.'

This notwithstanding, in the later budget motions, the M moved closer to the SD articulation of the sign by emphasizing the importance of 'better integration' as a tool

to 'break the benefit dependency' of migrants and the role played by the language of the ethnic and racial majority in this context: 'Real integration starts with the Swedish language. The language shall be a common thread: from newcomer to new employee to new Swedish citizen.' (M bm 2021: 34) In the same vein, then, in the last budget motion of the mandate, the M emphasized 'permanent residence and citizenship' (M bm 2022: 23) as criteria to address the issue of 'misuse of welfare provision' and 'widespread integration problems' among migrants, since 'one in two adult immigrants cannot provide for themselves' (M bm 2022: 65). With this in mind, we argue that the continuous (re)articulation of the element *beneficiary* has gradually positioned the M closer to the SD's line of reasoning. In this manner, the lives of migrants are relegated to a position of conditional grievability, provided they succeed in identifying a niche in the market that accepts their value-producing labor, which serves as the gateway to their achieving the right to permanent residence and eventual citizenship.

When examining the budget motions put forward by the social-conservative KD, we noticed that at the beginning of the parliamentary cycle, the party anchored these into its ideological keystone, which asserts that 'Christian democracy is a democracy built on a Christian view of humans and common ethical foundations' (KD Principle program 2015: 5). Indeed, the first budget motion articulates the element *beneficiary* simply as 'those with the greatest need,' thereby following a quasi-universalist Christian-democratic approach to welfare provisions:

Our politics fosters high quality care services that are financed by all of us together, while ensuring that those with the greatest need are given priority. Those groups who have difficulties in making their voices heard or exercising their rights should be guaranteed special support. Everyone should be able to rely on healthcare to work when it is needed and to be there when it is needed. (KD bm 2019: 41)

Notwithstanding this, the KD also undertook a gradual ideological alignment along the positions of M and SD, particularly by way of migration policies and their impact on welfare provision. The KD tried to articulate some vaguely formulated humanitarian concerns for the welfare and integration of migrants. In this context, the KD proclaimed itself to be 'a guarantor of an orderly, humane and long-term responsible migration and integration policy,' carefully spelling out that such an endeavor must be 'tackling exclusion and vulnerability, housing shortages, the gap between foreign and native born in the labor market' (KD bm 2020: 78–79). To achieve this, the KD envisaged initially a stricter asylum process for those perceived as undesirable migrants that were to be subjected to 'more effective rejections' (KD bm 2019: 77; KD bm 2020: 81). This advanced further the pursuit of achieving a 'sustainable' and 'balanced' migration policy, which had been embraced as a center-left governmental policy in the aftermath of the refugee crisis, by centering on the needs of Swedish society and dismissing the potential harms inflicted upon migrants (Barker 2018: 45–46; Borrelli & Lindberg 2019: 53–54).

In time, however, this was aligned closely with the SD's demand to reduce migration to a minimum, with the KD aiming for 'more effective rejections and more expulsions' to achieve 'an improved migration and integration policy' (KD bm 2021: 87–88; KD bm 2022: 110–113). We argue therefore that the KD has embarked on a more discreet form of radicalization, at least during the examined period. The KD has taken

advantage of the fact that, in Swedish politics, it was perceived to pursue a political agenda anchored in Christian ethical foundations. Indeed, the KD has packaged its alignment with both the violently nationalist and racializing distribution of grievability of the SD, and the cold calculations of market-centric conditional grievability of M as a preoccupation to embody a 'humane' (but also 'orderly' and 'long-term responsible') face to welfare retrenchment as a means of devaluing racialized lives.

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The present study contributes to research examining the mainstreaming of radical-right populism across Europe (Akkerman et al. 2016; Pellikaan et al. 2018; Poyet & Raunio 2021; Suárez-Krabbe & Lindberg 2019) by explicitly centering on the role of migration and welfare in the ideological alignment of right-of-center political parties, and suggests two theoretical advances. First, drawing inspiration from adjacent social science traditions (Kelly 2011), we have deployed the concept of the right-wing continuum to draw attention to specific developments on the right of the political spectrum, whereby mainstream right-of-center and radical-right populist parties underwent a gradual ideological alignment (Brown et al. 2021). Second, we have adopted the concept of grievability (Butler 2016) to better map out the discursive implications of such ideological alignment. This enabled us to examine critically how access to welfare provision for migrants has been articulated in the budget proposals of the parties on the right-wing continuum during the 2018–2022 parliamentary cycle in Sweden.

In our analysis, we have evidenced that the SD has successively articulated the nodal point *welfare* along an increasingly restrictive understanding, which aimed at excluding migrants. In line with previous research (Hellström 2016; Nordensvärd & Ketola 2015; Norocel 2016), we unveiled the manner in which the SD argued for limiting access to the welfare provision to benefit mainly (Swedish) citizens, and consequently for a differential distribution of grievability. On this matter, the conditions of access to welfare provision were enunciated in terms of ethnic and racial, as well as neoliberal categorizations, which narrowed down the means of access for migrants from the articulation of the element *beneficiary*. Such discursive articulation renders grievability impossible for migrants. This notwithstanding, the element *beneficiary* is later articulated in a manner that emphasizes assimilation as a way for some migrants to potentially gain welfare access. Concomitantly, the people more recently arrived in Sweden are subject to a neoliberal evaluation of their value-producing labor on the market to assess their deservingness to access welfare provision (Barker 2018; Jørgensen & Thomsen 2016; Saar et al. 2022). By the same measure, the articulation of the moment *need* centers on the (Swedish) elderly as the legitimate beneficiaries of welfare provision and thereby politically grievable. This, in turn, precludes migrants to achieve the status of grievable lives.

At the same time, in our analysis, we have documented the gradual radicalization of mainstream right-of-center positions. Indeed, at the beginning of the mandate, the liberal-conservative M and the radical-right populist SD had only partially overlapping understandings of the element *beneficiary*. More clearly, the M articulation of *beneficiary*-traded welfare access to migrants in exchange for their value-producing labor, according to a neoliberal approach to the distribution of welfare provision (Dahlstedt & Neergaard 2019). This notwithstanding, as the mandate progressed,

the M moved sensibly closer to the SD's discursive articulations, adding an additional discursive layer that emphasized the importance of Swedish language and permanent residence (and eventual citizenship) as means to curb the welfare misuse and address the integration problems of migrants. In turn, the social-conservative KD had initially based its budget motions on Christian-democratic principles of affording welfare provision to those with the greatest need. Over time, however, the party undertook a gradual ideological alignment, which may be regarded as a form of discreet radicalization. The KD fell in line with the discursive positions shared by the M and SD, particularly on migration issues and their impact on Swedish welfare. As such, the KD announced its position of protector of a 'humane,' though 'orderly' and 'long-term responsible' approach to welfare retrenchment. In so doing, it took advantage of its public perception as a political force with Christian ethical foundations to distract from its alignment with a differential distribution of grievability, contingent on nationalist and racializing approaches, and market-centric labor demands on migrants.

In the aftermath of the 2022 Swedish elections, the liberal-conservative M, the social-conservative KD, joined forces with the nominally liberal L to form a political block with the radical-right populist SD, confirmed by signing the Tidö agreement. The agreement paved the way for a fragile M-led government, continuously dependent on SD support. In this context, an avenue of future research would be to examine further the theoretical solidity of the concept of right-wing continuum, and more topically, to investigate how the nominally liberal L accommodates it under the auspices of the Tidö agreement, and the consequences this may have to the political understanding of the lives of migrants in Sweden.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The division of labor between the authors toward publication is as follows. Hägerbäck: designing the overall study, articulating the theoretical framework; designing and implementing the study's methodological framework; undertaking the collection, processing, and analysis of the empirical material. Norocel: refining the theoretical scaffolding; fine-tuning the methodological framework; perfecting the processing and analysis of the empirical material.

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