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How segregated housing helped liberal Sweden's far right dominate the debate

A migrant woman walks through a railway tunnel in Flen, about 70 miles southwest of Stockholm, on Aug. 30. (Michael Probst/AP)

By Rick Noack
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STOCKHOLM — When a party with neo-Nazi origins made the biggest gains in Sunday's Swedish elections, capturing 18 percent of the vote, the story line appeared familiar: a far-right party capitalizing on fears of a white majority in a nation that experienced a major influx of refugees in recent years. False claims. Polarization. In the end, the question is how the far right got here — and if it's here to stay.

There are a number of possible explanations. Many circle around 2015, when Sweden took in more refugees per capita than any other European country. Others suggest economic promises motivated the majority of the far-right's voters.

But to understand how one party managed to dominate public discourse, it helps to go back 50 years and take a 15-minute metro ride from Stockholm's city center to the suburb of Husby.

"This was always supposed to be a good place on Earth," said Magnus Duvnas, the principal of Husby's main high school, pointing toward a gray housing complex outside his window during an interview last week. "When those houses were built in the 1970s, a lot of people wanted to move here."

Half a century on, virtually all of the dozens of districts built as part of the same scheme have become areas that are shunned by white Swedes. The district made global news in 2013 when it was hit by violent riots. Out of Husby's more than 10,000 residents, almost 90 percent are foreigners or children of migrants.

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The far-right Sweden Democrats, a party with neo-Nazi origins, garnered 18 percent of votes in Swedish elections Sept. 9. (Michael Birnbaum/The Washington Post)

To Sweden's far right, Husby and similar suburbs have become a rallying cry. Throughout the most recent campaign, they portrayed them as areas where foreigners — unwilling to integrate — live miserable lives with high crime rates. President Trump brought the debate into the international spotlight last year when he asked to "look at what's happening last night in Sweden," referring to a Fox News report.

But the truth is a lot more complex.

For half a century, Sweden's strongly regulated housing market has pushed newly arrived migrants into neighborhoods that have become increasingly segregated. While the country regularly tops global education and well-being rankings, government after government have failed to tackle the emergence of an isolated and deprived minority. Segregation has created an antagonistic mentality on both sides, with many white Swedes blaming migrants for their failure to integrate and migrants feeling deliberately left behind.

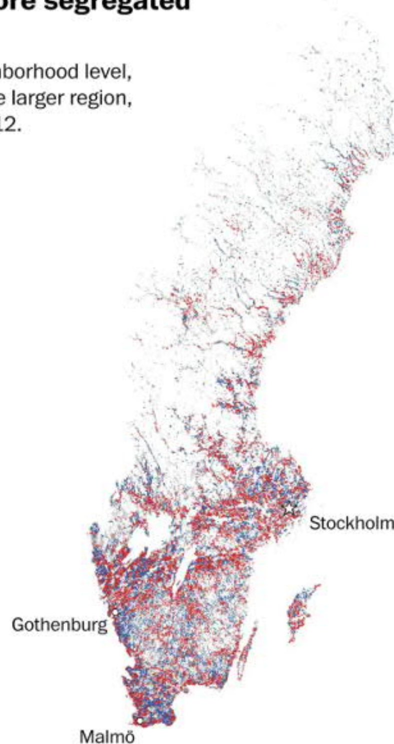
Sweden has become more segregated in recent decades

Segregation at the Swedish neighborhood level, in relation to the population in the larger region, increased between 1990 and 2012.

Increase in segregation

No significant changes

Decrease in segregation



Source: M.M. Nielsen, P. Hennerdal / Applied Geography 87 (2017)

When 51-year-old American doctor Lucie Buisseneth-Lindner moved to Stockholm to work as a teacher in a Husby school, she was shocked by the racial divide. "What a lot of children experience early on is an us-against-them mentality. We have such talented students here, but many feel marginalized by Swedish society," she said.

Husby was built as part of one of Europe's most ambitious construction projects ever, the "Million Program." Amid a severe housing crisis in the 1970s, the

Swedish government raised entirely new towns outside the bigger cities to house the working class. The idea? To create "good democratic citizens."

At the time, Swedish officials didn't hide their intention of separating the working class from the rest of society, and for a few decades, the monotonous apartment blocs were relatively popular.

That started changing in the 1990s after hundreds of thousands of workers lost their jobs in what is sometimes described as Sweden's "2008 financial crisis."

"In some districts, employment suddenly fell by 50 percent," said Roger Andersson, a professor in social and economic geography at Uppsala University. As crime rates increased, white residents moved out of the Million Program districts. When the migrants began arriving, it was often the only option available to them. Districts once built to separate out the working class were now separating newly arrived migrants from the rest of society.

"At the beginning, people blamed politicians for commissioning those districts. But gradually, inhabitants themselves were being blamed for destroying something that was very Swedish and for transforming it into something different," said Irene Molina, a researcher at Uppsala University.

"Of course, in the long run this contributed to climate of racism and stigmatization," Molina said. By 2008, official statistics showed racial segregation was widespread across the country.

"We have now reached such high levels of stigmatization that many people have absolutely given up on those districts," Molina said. The stigma is not always based on facts. While some Million Program districts have higher rates of certain crimes, they are still far less dangerous than many U.S. cities.

When 15-year-old Halima and her 14-year-old classmate Montadar talk about Husby, they mention how it is "so well connected," and they speak about the "great restaurants" and nearby concerts.

"We learn from each other here," Halima said.

"Yeah, we learn from other cultures," Montadar agreed.

"Of course, there's some violence here. But you have the same in the inner city, too," Halima said, wearing a gray headscarf and clutching her school iPad. Montadar's parents are from Iraq. Halima's parents came to Sweden from Eritrea. Both were sitting in the entrance of Husby's main public school last week, reflecting on a Swedish election campaign they felt was removed from reality.

An apartment building in Husby, a Stockholm suburb. (Rick Noack/ The Washington Post)

“Every time I go to the center of Stockholm, once I tell people where I’m from, the stereotypes automatically kick in,” Halima said. “I feel safer here in Husby than over there in the center,” she said.

The core issue, experts said, is that consecutive Swedish governments have failed to tackle the Million Program’s structural flaws that have resulted in segregation and social isolation.

Given that Sweden’s housing market offers few rental options inside city centers, migrants are often stuck to moving between or within Million Program districts. Education and employment efforts may have had some success in recent years, but the us-against-them mentality has persisted as segregation has even increased with the influx of more refugees.

School principal Duvnas has struggled to hire qualified teachers, despite having enough funding. “People think it’s wild over here,” said Duvnas, who hired Buisseneth-Lindner, the American who now works at the school as a motivational coach and English teacher.

“Children of migrants have no role models here in Sweden they could aspire to. Many here don’t feel Swedish because they feel so isolated from society,” said Buisseneth-Lindner. “So, I think to many of my students, I’m someone they can look up to: I'm black and I still work as a teacher.”

“This school is jam-packed with intelligent, creative, super-talented, super-progressive students who will make the positive changes that Sweden needs,” she said.

But getting there will take time and broad political support for the education-focused programs the Swedish government has launched in recent years. “Worse than some of the violence we’ve seen is the lack of hope in many of those districts,” said Million Program researcher Molina.

Sitting in front of their school, Halima and Montadar had a solution at hand. “The racist mind-set could end if people came here,” Halima said.

Montadar agreed: “If you get everyone together here, people would see what it’s really like.”

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