



Sweden

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sweden is one of the world’s most outspoken supporters of democracy and one of the world’s largest donors of democracy assistance. With a long-standing consensus across all major political parties, Swedish politicians and diplomats consistently raise democracy and protection of human rights in bilateral relations and multilateral organizations.

According to the government, all parts of Sweden’s foreign policy should promote human rights. Gender equality is central to Swedish development assistance, and a significant portion of the foreign aid budget for these topics is distributed through civil society organizations. The government also emphasizes the importance of defending the defenders of human rights and democracy, such as journalists.

Sweden was, however, reluctant to call the July 2013 removal of the democratically elected Egyptian president a military coup. Sweden has also faced criticism for exporting arms and defense equipment to non-democratic states.

Introduction

Support for democratic development abroad is a primary goal of Sweden’s foreign policy.¹ Sweden is one of the most outspoken supporters of democratic values, and one of the world’s largest donors of democracy assistance in both absolute and per capita terms. In 2013, Sweden allocated some 29 billion kronor (\$4.4 billion) to development assistance, of which about 20 percent was dedicated to democracy, human rights, and gender equality.²

An important share of democracy assistance is funneled through Swedish civil society organizations such as political parties, labor unions, volunteer associations, and churches that in turn work with civil society counterparts seeking to strengthen democracy in more than 70 countries. Sweden’s policy has a particular focus on women’s rights, gender equality, and protection of minorities.

Sweden’s approach to international democracy promotion can be traced to its domestic experience with civil society actors committed to strong democratic institutions. In comparison to many other countries, Sweden’s path to democracy was piecemeal and nonviolent, with small farmers and labor organizations playing a key role. By about 1920, the political institutions generally considered necessary for a parliamentary, liberal democracy had been established. A high degree of consensus and willingness to compromise made the transition peaceful. Sweden also remained democratic during the interwar years when many other European countries experienced a rupture in democratic governance.

About this project

This project analyzes support by 11 democratic powers for democracy and human rights during the period June 2012–May 2014.

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Foreign Policy Objectives

Sweden has experienced a long-standing consensus across all major political parties for supporting democratic development as an important element of its foreign policy. Human rights and democracy promotion are a central theme of its foreign policy, and Swedish politicians and diplomats frequently raise these issues in bilateral relations as well as in multilateral organizations. In the Swedish Foreign Service, promoting human rights is a prioritized mission. According to the Swedish government, all parts of its foreign policy should reflect this mission, including development cooperation, migration, security policy, and trade.³ To this end, the Swedish government has developed a dedicated website for the protection and promotion of human rights in both Sweden and internationally.⁴

In the Swedish government's annual foreign policy declaration to parliament on February 18, 2013, which laid out the main priorities of the current government, Foreign Minister Carl Bildt stated that "human rights, democracy and the rule of law are fundamental principles for our actions, as is respect for international law."⁵

Sweden promotes the importance of democratic values both in its relations with significant geopolitical actors such as Russia and China and in its relations with smaller countries such as Belarus and Cuba. With both Russia and China, Sweden was ranked among the most outspoken European governments in promoting the rule of law, human rights, and democracy in its bilateral relations, as well as on the European level, in the 2012 and 2013 European Foreign Policy Scorecards.⁶ For example, in the Swedish government's 2013 foreign policy declaration on Russia, the foreign minister stated that although Sweden strives for closer and broader contacts, Sweden is "concerned to see that respect for human rights is deteriorating, that the scope of civil society is shrinking, and that the country's leaders appear to give priority to modernizing the armed forces ahead of modernizing Russian society."⁷

In the sections on China, the foreign minister pointed out that "China's increasingly prominent role as a global actor also increases our expectations of it taking greater responsibility in global issues. This responsibility also includes respect for the human, civil, and political rights and freedoms of its own citizens."⁸ Sweden continues to press for greater respect for human rights and democracy in its relations with China, condemning corruption

and the neglect of human rights in official communications and in Swedish government interactions with Chinese counterparts.⁹ An example is Chinese prime minister Wen Jiabao's visit to Sweden in April 2012. The official agenda of the meeting between Wen Jiabao and Swedish prime minister Fredrik Reinfeldt focused on sustainable development, but democracy and human rights were also discussed.¹⁰ The Swedish government also publishes an official human rights report on China that openly criticizes China's human rights deficits.

Swedish ambassador Stefan Eriksson frequently participated in meetings with opposition leaders in Belarus until the government expelled him in August 2012 in response to active and vocal Swedish support for civil society groups and human rights activists. Foreign Minister Bildt stated that the expulsion was "about Sweden being engaged in democracy and human rights in Belarus."¹¹

Other examples include Zimbabwe, where Development Minister Gunilla Carlsson stressed the importance of respect for human rights and the rule of law in meetings with the government in March 2013.¹² In Iran, during a February 2014 visit with President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister Bildt focused on not only the nuclear issue but also the human rights situation. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the leaders discussed the increasing use of capital punishment and limitations on the Internet in Iran.¹³

Development Assistance and Trade

In 2013, Sweden allocated around 5.3 billion kronor (\$806 million) to democracy assistance and human rights.¹⁴ The distribution of assistance is guided by the 2008 Swedish government communication titled "Freedom from Oppression," which emphasizes support for democratization and respect for human rights.¹⁵

In order to avoid spreading itself too thinly across too many countries, Sweden initiated a policy in 2008 to concentrate its aid efforts in a limited set of countries and issue areas. However, the government has found it harder than anticipated to pare down the number of aid recipient countries. In 2013, Sweden contributed more than \$4 billion in development assistance to nearly 12,000 projects in 136 countries and regions around the world.¹⁶ The Swedish government's most recent paper on the topic underlines that democracy promotion and

a gender perspective should permeate all Swedish development aid and aid programs.¹⁷ Accordingly, Swedish aid projects have supported the conduct of elections, trained journalists, and provided legal assistance to persecuted peoples and groups.

An important part of the Swedish foreign aid budget allocated to democracy promotion and human rights is distributed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) to Swedish civil society organizations, which in turn cooperate with more than 1,800 local civil society organizations in the recipient developing countries. Sida is the major Swedish aid actor, distributing more than half of the Swedish foreign assistance budget. It is also the major government agency, under the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, that implements Sweden's democracy assistance around the world. In recent years, Sida has undergone several reorganizations that included rethinking its mission and methods. Although it has been heavily criticized at times for inefficiencies, Sida's own evaluations have found that Sweden's support for democracy and human rights has contributed to significant change.¹⁸ From 2012 to 2013, for example, Sida concluded that Sweden's support to civil society organizations in Russia had yielded positive results, in large part due to long-term and flexible support to partner organizations.¹⁹ In Turkey, Swedish democracy support has contributed to the law establishing the first ombudsman in the history of the country.

Sweden has a long-term commitment to Afghanistan, where it will spend 8.5 billion kronor (\$1.22 billion) over the next 10 years to support the fight against corruption and the promotion of human rights and democratic principles. Support is provided in many forms, including education, infrastructure, and training. Women's rights are of particular importance.²⁰

In Georgia, Sweden's long-term bilateral support is focused on democracy promotion, human rights, and gender equality as well as strengthening the foundations for free and fair elections. In October 2012, Sweden expressed early support for the democratic and peaceful transition of power after parliamentary elections. The political situation in Georgia was highly polarized after an election campaign characterized by sharp rhetoric and instances of violence. To stabilize the situation, the Swedish government pledged both political and monetary support to the newly elected government.²¹

Often labeled "the last dictatorship in Europe," Belarus, a close neighbor, is of major concern for Sweden. Sweden has been a long-standing and vocal critic of the regime in Belarus, but it also conducts broad-based development work there. Swedish support is concentrated in three areas: (i) democracy, human rights, and gender equality; (ii) the environment; and (iii) market development. Support is provided for activities that contribute to greater public and political pluralism. The annual aid to Belarus in 2011–14 is estimated at 120 million kronor (\$17.7 million).²²

Sweden also funds nongovernmental organizations such as the Raul Wallenberg Institute (RWI), which organizes human rights capacity development programs in China for government agencies and universities. RWI cooperates with the National Prosecutor's College and others in China in order to improve human rights training for prosecutors, among other initiatives. In 2012, the RWI human rights program in China was evaluated as a "remarkable example of foreign engagement that has had a measurable impact in the key area of human rights education."²³

In 2010, the Swedish government published its "Strategy for Development Cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa, September 2010–December 2015," covering Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria. The overarching objectives are stronger democracy and greater respect for human rights, and sustainable development that improves conditions for peace, stability, and freedom in the region. Democratic governance and human rights is one of three sectors of focus.²⁴ This policy was amended in 2011 and 2012 to further support the democratic transitions taking place in the region.²⁵

In contrast, Sweden has scaled back its development and democracy support in Latin America. Prior to 2010, Sweden supported regional institutions promoting human rights and democracy, and worked for decades to strengthen civil society and improve equality. Since 2010, Sweden no longer has a region-wide development cooperation program there.²⁶

Sweden was the third-largest arms exporter in the world per capita and the 11th largest overall from 2009 to 2013. While the majority of exports goes to Western Europe and the United States, governmental customers of Swedish defense equipment can be found in such controversial places as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Thailand.²⁷ On paper, Sweden has one of the most restrictive arms export policies in the

world. The general rule is that no arms export is allowed without an overriding national foreign or security policy interest at stake. However, since the Swedish military was radically scaled down after the end of the Cold War, the industry has been forced to focus increasingly on export. After widespread public criticism of recent arms deals to Saudi Arabia in particular, Sweden is considering adding a democracy and human rights criterion to its arms export policy. A parliamentary commission is currently investigating the potential consequences of such an addition.²⁸

Elections

As one of the architects and main promoters of the European Union's Eastern Partnership, Sweden has consistently pushed for democratic development in countries such as Ukraine and Georgia. Foreign Minister Bildt traveled extensively to Ukraine during 2012–14 to press for democracy and free and fair parliamentary elections.²⁹ Despite official protests from the Ukrainian government, Sweden argued for the release of opposition leader and former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko in both multilateral meetings and directly with the Ukrainian leadership.³⁰ Sweden sent 37 observers for the May 2014 presidential elections.³¹

Through its bilateral electoral support in 2013, Sweden contributed to relatively successful elections in Kenya, Mali, and Somaliland (local elections). Sweden also contributed to election reform in Zimbabwe. Since ending bilateral aid to Zimbabwe in 2001 due to lack of democracy and poor respect for human rights, Sweden has instead given 200 million kronor (\$29 million) annually to civil society groups and multilateral organizations focused on democracy promotion and human rights.³² When Zimbabwe denied admission to election observers from the European Union in 2013, Sweden became the largest donor to the Zimbabwe Election Support Network, comprised of civil society organizations that trained local election observers and promoted women's and youth participation.³³ Moreover, during the development of Zimbabwe's new constitution in 2010–13, Sweden gave \$4.7 million out of a total budget of \$50 million, the largest outside contribution to the project, while serving as coordinator between donors and the Zimbabwean government.³⁴

Swedish support made possible the training of African Union election observers in international

standards and methods. Sweden also has trained more than 50 election observers from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) over the past two years.³⁵ Moreover, Sweden has provided approximately 81 million kronor (\$11.6 million) to the Carter Center for its work on elections and election monitoring.³⁶

Finally, a major Swedish contribution to the promotion of free and fair elections is the support and hosting of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). Headquartered in Stockholm since its founding in 1995, International IDEA is the only global intergovernmental organization with the sole mandate of supporting sustainable democracy worldwide by strengthening democratic institutions and processes. It shares Sweden's objective to support new constitutions, electoral system design, and political parties. Apart from being a founding member and host country, Sweden provides approximately 50 percent of International IDEA's total budget.³⁷

Disruptions of Democratic Processes

Sweden generally responds aggressively to disruptions of democratic processes such as coups. However, similar to many other Western democracies, Sweden was reluctant to call the removal of democratically elected Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 a military coup. The government did make clear that it could never approve of a nondemocratic takeover of power, even if the action in Egypt had widespread popular support. The government also summoned the Egyptian chargé d'affaires in Stockholm to express its concerns.³⁸

Sweden was likewise quiet in response to the military coup in Thailand in May 2014. Some commentators and media criticized the Swedish government for its passivity in failing to condemn the coup. One explanation for this reluctance, according to observers, could be the ties between the Swedish and Thai militaries. Thailand recently bought both fighter jets and advanced naval radar systems from Sweden.³⁹

Gross Human Rights Violations

Sweden has a long tradition of expressing concerns directly to regimes deemed to be carrying out gross violations of human rights. Swedish politicians and diplomats consistently raise the issue of human

rights in international forums, whether or not it is a topic otherwise under discussion.

In 2012 Sweden was the world's third-largest national humanitarian aid donor, providing over 5 billion kronor (\$739 million) in funding to humanitarian operations around the world.⁴⁰ In response to the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe in Syria due to the civil war, in September 2013 Sweden became the first EU country to offer Syrian refugees permanent residency.⁴¹ Widespread killing of civilians and even use of chemical warfare agents have led some 3 million Syrians to flee the country.⁴² While the vast majority of refugees have stayed in Syria's neighboring countries, Sweden granted permanent residency to at least 14,000 refugees in 2013 alone, by far the most of any Western nation.⁴³

Sweden maintains ongoing in-depth dialogues on human rights with Cambodia and South Africa. These dialogues are not only discussions between government representatives but also practical exchanges of experiences, study visits at institutions, and interactions with civil society organizations. Dialogue can then be extended to provide expert advice on how to develop processes to address challenges such as prison conditions or human rights training for court officials. Earlier dialogues have engaged Laos, China, and Indonesia.⁴⁴

In addition, Swedish aid has contributed to the establishment of legal aid centers for victims of torture in 13 Egyptian governorates.

Civil Liberties

Swedish government policy continuously emphasizes the rights to free assembly and free speech, and increasingly prioritizes support to democratic opposition groups and civil society groups. Since 2008, Sweden has supported democracy activists and their organizations in countries such as Cuba, Belarus, Zimbabwe, and Myanmar through funding, practical training, and diplomatic support.⁴⁵

In addition to supporting Burmese refugees in Thailand and providing humanitarian support, Sweden has supported the Burmese media in exile during the past two decades.⁴⁶ No Swedish funds are channeled through central government authorities due to the political environment. In November 2012, Sweden pledged to double its foreign aid to Burmese civil society, focusing on building up democratic institutions and independent media.⁴⁷

Over the past few years, Internet freedom has become a priority throughout Swedish foreign, development, and trade policies. Sweden was a major supporter of the UN resolution for Internet freedom that was passed in July 2012.⁴⁸

Led by Foreign Minister Bildt, the Swedish government has also provided foreign assistance to Internet activists in a number of countries, and strengthened dialogue with companies on Internet freedom.⁴⁹ Rather than seeking a special set of Internet human rights, Sweden strives for deeper analysis of how freedom of expression and other human rights are to be applied in the Internet age. It encourages more extensive discussion on the topic between states, in international organizations, with civil society, and in the business world.⁵⁰

One of the major international initiatives Sweden has taken in this area was the establishment of the Stockholm Internet Forum on Internet Freedom for Global Development, which has taken place annually since April 2012.⁵¹ Another measure was the convening on February 29, 2012, of a panel discussion on freedom of expression and the Internet during the 19th session of the UN Human Rights Council. The panel, which had the active support of more than 60 countries, marked the first time this subject was discussed by the council.⁵² Some observers criticized the Swedish approach for paying insufficient attention to major activists such as Edward Snowden.⁵³ Revelations that Swedish government agencies have collaborated with U.S. and British signals intelligence agencies also have cast some doubt on the sincerity of the Swedish push for Internet freedom.⁵⁴

Foreign Minister Bildt was criticized by the leading Swedish press for not taking a stand for Internet freedom and against political repression in Turkey.⁵⁵ On the contrary, Sweden received both the Turkish president and prime minister in 2013, and Swedish prime minister Fredrik Reinfeldt visited Turkey. As one of the strongest supporters of Turkish membership in the EU, Sweden has developed an increasingly robust link with Turkey.

Marginalized Communities

The government's communication on democracy promotion titled "Freedom from Oppression" states that the most at-risk groups (including women; children; the disabled; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people; native or indigenous groups;

and HIV-positive individuals) are at the center of Sweden's work against discrimination in its foreign policy.⁵⁶ The government also emphasizes the importance of defending the defenders of human rights and democracy, such as journalists.⁵⁷

An example of Swedish policy is the government's decision in March 2014 to revoke its bilateral foreign aid (excluding research cooperation) to Uganda in response to the country's new antigay legislation. Swedish foreign aid minister Hillevi Engström stated that Swedish aid is not without conditions and that her government wished to send "a strong signal" to the government of Uganda that its actions will have consequences. Engström also said that other forms of aid will be used to support the LGBT community in Uganda.⁵⁸

The role of women is emphasized in Swedish foreign policy. An example is the international meeting in Stockholm in April 2014 focused on the lives of young women and girls in the developing world and their right to not be forced to wed at a young age. Organized and hosted by the Swedish government, the meeting convened parliamentarians from around the world to discuss how to protect girls under 18 from being wed.⁵⁹

In addition, the Stockholm Workshop on Combating Impunity for Sexual and Gender Based Crimes, held on May 20, 2014, and organized and hosted by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, focused on sharing experiences and building national partnerships among governments, prosecutors, and civil society organizations.⁶⁰ A special focus was placed on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where Sweden is a leading partner and funder of justice reform. Swedish support there is particularly focused on improving access to legal assistance to women and victims of sexual violence.⁶¹ Swedish support for countering gender-based violence also has contributed to three UN resolutions in the UN Security Council as well as to annual reports on the topic from the UN secretary-general.⁶²

In authoritarian countries such as Myanmar, Sweden gives priority to civil society organizations focused on furthering democratization and promoting greater pluralism. Among other things, Swedish aid supports groups working for LGBT rights in Myanmar.⁶³ In its country strategy for Myanmar, the Swedish government allocates a maximum of 750 million kronor (\$107 million) for the period 2013–17, targeting mainly women and ethnic minorities.⁶⁴

ENDNOTES

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