

Sweden's election: A vote free from meddling?



The Swedish election on 9 September was not accompanied by reports of the kind of foreign interference that has been cited in other recent elections. However, as [Elise M. Dermineur](#) explains, the country has a long history of foreign meddling in its election process dating back to the eighteenth century. She highlights that while it is common to think of foreign interference in elections as a distinctly recent problem, states have been using such tactics for centuries.

The results of Sweden's general election might very well generate a political crisis in the country. It [remains unclear](#) whether the 'Red-Green' bloc or the centre-right 'Alliance' will be able to lead a new government. Long coalition negotiations will likely take place over the coming weeks. Meanwhile, the nationalist Sweden Democrats have established themselves as the third force in Swedish politics, securing over 17% of the vote.

But despite the inconclusive nature of the result, there was at least one satisfying fact about the Swedish election: contrary to other elections we have seen in recent years, there were few reports of foreign powers interfering in the electoral process, although it is perhaps too early to tell whether any meddling took place at all.

And yet, Sweden has a long history of political corruption and electoral interference. In eighteenth century Sweden, the parliament was renewed every four years. Male members of the nobility, burghers, clergy and even the peasantry could cast a vote through wealth-weighted voting and/or indirect elections. In this so-called 'Age of Liberty' (1718-1772) that had replaced absolutism, not a single parliamentary election happened that did not suffer from foreign meddling. France, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Russia, and Prussia spent lavishly on bribes to help shape the result. Russia and Denmark also often enjoyed frightening their Scandinavian neighbours with threats of invasion if the results went contrary to their views and interests. They would frequently provide support to their favoured party to influence Swedish foreign policy and stir disunion within the kingdom.

One country in particular showed tremendous zeal in meddling in Swedish elections. Russia not only actively sought to use bribes to exert influence, but also adopted more coercive forms of intimidation, such as espionage and troop movements, to further its interests. In June 1751, for example, an enormous fire ravaged the city of Stockholm just a few weeks before the election was due. The Swedish Queen, Louisa Ulrika, witnessed the event first hand and [reported](#) to her mother in Berlin:

"In three different places, flames caused awful damage. The worry, the terror, the screams, the crying, and the confusion caught hold of everyone... It was clear that this fire was not due to chance but was a blow coming from a foreign hand."

All eyes rapidly turned to Russia. Louisa Ulrika [wrote](#) to her brother, the King of Prussia, Frederick the Great, that "such attacks are worthy of barbarians, and without being clairvoyant it is not difficult to guess at the culprit. God may one day reserve us vengeance for this, sword in hand!" The Swedish queen also reported to her brother that the crowd in the capital had cast blame on Russia for the fires, with many in Stockholm of the opinion that the Russian government was attempting to destabilise the country.

Nothing frightened Russia more than a strong and united Sweden. In fact, in this period, Russia felt the need to constantly assert its position on the European scene and grew increasingly paranoid over the pretensions of her neighbours. The Great Northern War (1700-1721) and the Russo-Swedish war in 1741-1743 – two occasions when Russia had been attacked by Sweden – had left a bitter taste. Supporting a pro-Russian party in Stockholm appeared therefore to be a logical strategy. Russia preferred to interfere in Sweden's politics rather than to have to face its troops on the battlefield.

Following the arson, several people were interrogated and even arrested. The public and the political elite seemed to have been convinced of Russian wrongdoing. To this day, it has not been established for certain that Russia was the mastermind behind the fire, although many elements pointed to this direction.

Today, Russia prefers using cyberattacks and email leaks to influence elections. No Russian U-boats have been spotted along the coast of Sweden this year. Stockholm has not been set on fire. But while the heightened attention paid to Russia's involvement in recent elections might convince us that this is a distinctly modern phenomenon – or at least one made more likely by modern technology – it is important to remember that states have been attempting to influence each other's elections for centuries, albeit via different methods.

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