

Sweden's right-wing government strengthens repressive state powers in the name of fighting crime

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Sweden's ruling right-wing coalition government is advancing a series of laws and proposals that collectively mark a historic assault on the country's long-standing protections for democratic rights.

One of the most significant measures is the proposal to lower the criminal age of responsibility from 15 to 13 years old—making Sweden an outlier not only in Europe but even compared to most US states. The reform would allow 13- and 14-year-old children to be prosecuted and incarcerated for certain serious crimes. The UN and UNICEF recommend 14 as a minimum age for criminal responsibility.

Although the bill has not yet been brought to a final vote in the Riksdag (Swedish parliament), it is widely expected to pass. The coalition relies on the Sweden Democrats—a far-right party with origins in the neo-Nazi milieu of the 1980s—whose support would guarantee a parliamentary majority for the measure. If adopted, the new age threshold is planned to come into force in the summer of next year.

In addition to this measure, several other proposals are currently moving through the legislative process—circulated for consultation and now advancing toward a parliamentary vote—each representing a significant expansion of state power. These include:

- The ability to expel non-citizens without a criminal conviction, permitting the police and Migration Agency to recommend deportation if an individual is deemed to have links to “organised crime.”
- The creation of new high-security juvenile prison units for children aged 13 to 17, designed to accommodate the lowered age of criminal responsibility.
- The introduction of so-called “visitation zones,” comparable to US-style stop-and-search areas, which would allow police to establish zones in which searches may be conducted without individualised suspicion.
- The use of anonymous witnesses in gang cases, a measure that sharply reduces a defendant's ability to confront or scrutinise their accusers.
- A major expansion of police access to encrypted digital communications, including broader wiretapping powers and potential real-time access to encrypted messaging. This initiative began under the previous Social Democratic government but is being taken further by the current coalition.

The major expansion of state repression in Sweden is unfolding against the backdrop of a lurch to the right across Europe. The ruling class of every political stripe is reshaping society around three interconnected priorities: (1) escalating the continent's direct

confrontation with Russia; (2) imposing sweeping austerity measures to finance rapid military rearmament amid deepening economic pressures; and (3) advancing its increasingly hardline, anti-immigrant “Fortress Europe” regime through the systematic promotion of the far right and the erection of authoritarian state structures.

Germany has normalised military operations in urban areas through large-scale domestic manoeuvres and is pursuing legal changes that blur the line between internal policing and external war, enabling army deployment against civilians in “special threat” situations. The EU's Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030 is accelerating rearmament, militarising infrastructure, and preparing industry and society for a war economy. Alongside this, governments are expanding censorship and punitive measures against dissent: the EU has sanctioned journalists, national authorities have intensified surveillance and communications controls, and courts have issued strike bans to discipline workers essential to wartime logistics. In Britain, hundreds of peaceful anti-war protesters have been arrested, police powers to ban demonstrations are expanding, and counter-terror laws are being used to detain political figures.

Sweden, historically, has stood out within Europe for its exceptionally strong protections for free expression and democratic rights. It was the first country in the world to abolish censorship and adopt a freedom-of-information law in 1766, and its constitutional framework has long guaranteed broad press freedom, open access to government records, and a wide latitude for public assembly. These traditions—rooted most recently in the major struggles of the Swedish working class in the early twentieth century, which forced through democratic reforms and expanded political rights—have long been under attack by governments of the right and left as Sweden has been transformed into an outpost of imperialist warmongering against Russia.

In 2010, it was a Swedish public prosecutor with close ties to the Social Democrats who helped initiate the politically motivated witch-hunt of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange by seizing on bogus allegations of rape. The Swedish state's persecution of Assange continued after the Social Democrats returned to power in 2014. As part of its accession to NATO, Stockholm deepened its collaboration with the authoritarian Turkish government in the name of combatting “terrorism.” Earlier this year, Swedish journalist Joachim Medin was held for seven weeks in prison in Turkey under conditions that strongly suggested Stockholm's complicity in his targeting.

The right-wing coalition argues that lowering the age of criminal responsibility will reduce gang-related crime. In reality, the sharp

escalation in violence over recent decades is bound up with a dramatic increase in social inequality, which is inseparable from the systematic destruction of public services, widespread privatisations, and sweeping tax cuts for the wealthy and big business implemented by successive governments.

Since the mid-to-late 2010s, criminal networks have become increasingly unstable and fragmented. Cocaine consumption—especially among the upper and upper-middle classes in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö—has surged over the past decade and a half, creating a lucrative market that fuels competition. Much of the violence arises from small, rapidly formed groups fighting over distribution routes and debts, with poor and often immigrant youth recruited as expendable couriers, lookouts and triggermen.

The proposal to lower the criminal age faces unusually strong opposition from Sweden's own state institutions and legal establishment. During the consultation process, a majority of agencies—including the National Police Authority, the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Prison and Probation Service—warned that incarcerating 13- and 14-year-olds would be ineffective and likely counterproductive. Police argued that gangs would simply recruit even younger children; child-rights groups such as BRIS condemned the measure as violating international norms and exposing vulnerable minors to long-term harm. Experts within the government's own review process noted that early incarceration increases the likelihood of reoffending and undermines rehabilitation. Despite this near-unanimous professional opposition, the government has pressed ahead, emboldened by a right-wing media climate fixated on "law and order."

Since Sweden applied for NATO membership in 2022, the domestic political climate has shifted sharply in a militarist, warmongering direction, narrowing the space for open debate on foreign policy. Peace advocates and anti-NATO voices report being marginalised or portrayed as naïve or "pro-Russian," a sentiment echoed by figures such as Anna Sundström of the Olof Palme Center, who noted that simply arguing for diplomacy now risks being dismissed as serving Russian interests. In December 2023, the government abolished a state peace fund that had financed peace organisations since the 1920s, signalling a declining tolerance for organised anti-war activism.

These developments have been accompanied by a significant expansion of surveillance powers under the rubric of countering "foreign influence," particularly Russian interference. Säkerhetspolisen (Säpo)—the Swedish intelligence agency—has repeatedly warned since 2022 that Russia, China and Iran are adopting more aggressive tactics in Sweden, and has expelled multiple Russian diplomats on espionage grounds. Security officials now emphasise the risk of domestic groups—ranging from extremist milieus to anti-government activists—being used as proxies in disinformation campaigns, prompting broader scrutiny of civil society.

In January 2023, the Riksdag adopted a new "foreign espionage" law that criminalises publishing or disclosing secret information that could harm Sweden's relations with international partners such as NATO, with penalties of up to four years in prison. Media organisations warned that the law could chill reporting on Sweden's cooperation with NATO by allowing foreign partners' sensitivities—such as Turkey's—to determine what may be safely published.

Sweden's integration into NATO has unfolded in tandem with a rapid militarisation of its security policy. Sweden's current defence plan foresees a 64 percent increase in military spending between 2022

and 2028, lifting the annual budget to around \$12 billion by the end of the period. Within weeks of announcing this trajectory, Stockholm approved its largest military aid package for Ukraine to date—\$287 million in a single tranche, more than all previous Swedish aid combined. Defence Minister Pål Jonson has described stepping up economic and military support for Ukraine, including more advanced weapons systems, as his "first priority." Sweden's arms industry is being positioned as a clear beneficiary: Saab, which produces the Carl Gustaf anti-tank weapon and Gripen fighter jets, has reported double-digit earnings growth and characterises the current rearmament cycle as a "multiple-year growth opportunity" lasting at least to 2030.

At the same time, NATO integration has coincided with a growing role for the military in domestic security. Swedish personnel are now embedded in NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre in Tallinn and its Strategic Communications Centre in Riga, while the re-established Psychological Defence Agency coordinates information-warfare cooperation and threat assessments alongside NATO partners. Domestically, the government has begun dismantling longstanding barriers between civilian policing and the armed forces. Following a surge in gang shootings and bombings in 2023, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson summoned the National Police Commissioner and the Supreme Commander to plan how the armed forces could assist police operations. Although Swedish law has historically barred military deployment for ordinary law enforcement except in counterterrorism cases, the government has signalled its intention to broaden these powers. A parliamentary majority has already indicated support for military assistance against organised crime, and a government commission is now examining how to integrate the police and armed forces under a revived "total defence" framework.

Collectively, these changes are inseparable from the political realignment that brought Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson to office in October 2022. The Moderates, Christian Democrats and Liberals govern only thanks to the parliamentary support of the Sweden Democrats, a party with roots in the neo-Nazi milieu of the 1980s and now the second-largest force in the Riksdag. Through the Tidö Agreement, the Sweden Democrats secured influence across all ministries. However, none of this would have been possible without the reactionary policies of the Social Democrats' "left" coalition, including the Left Party. This ex-Stalinist formation repeatedly justified its alliance with the pro-austerity, pro-war Social Democrats with the need to stop the far right.

The rightward lurch of official Swedish politics is part of the transformation of the entire Nordic region into a northern front in preparations for war with Russia. Finland, now a NATO member with a 1,300-kilometre border with Russia, is conducting large-scale exercises such as Lively Sentry 2025 with around 6,500 troops and 900 vehicles, explicitly designed to integrate lessons from the Ukraine war. Nordic governments together have already provided more than €20 billion in aid to Kiev, and Stockholm has agreed a multi-year deal to supply Saab Gripen fighter jets to the Ukrainian air force.



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