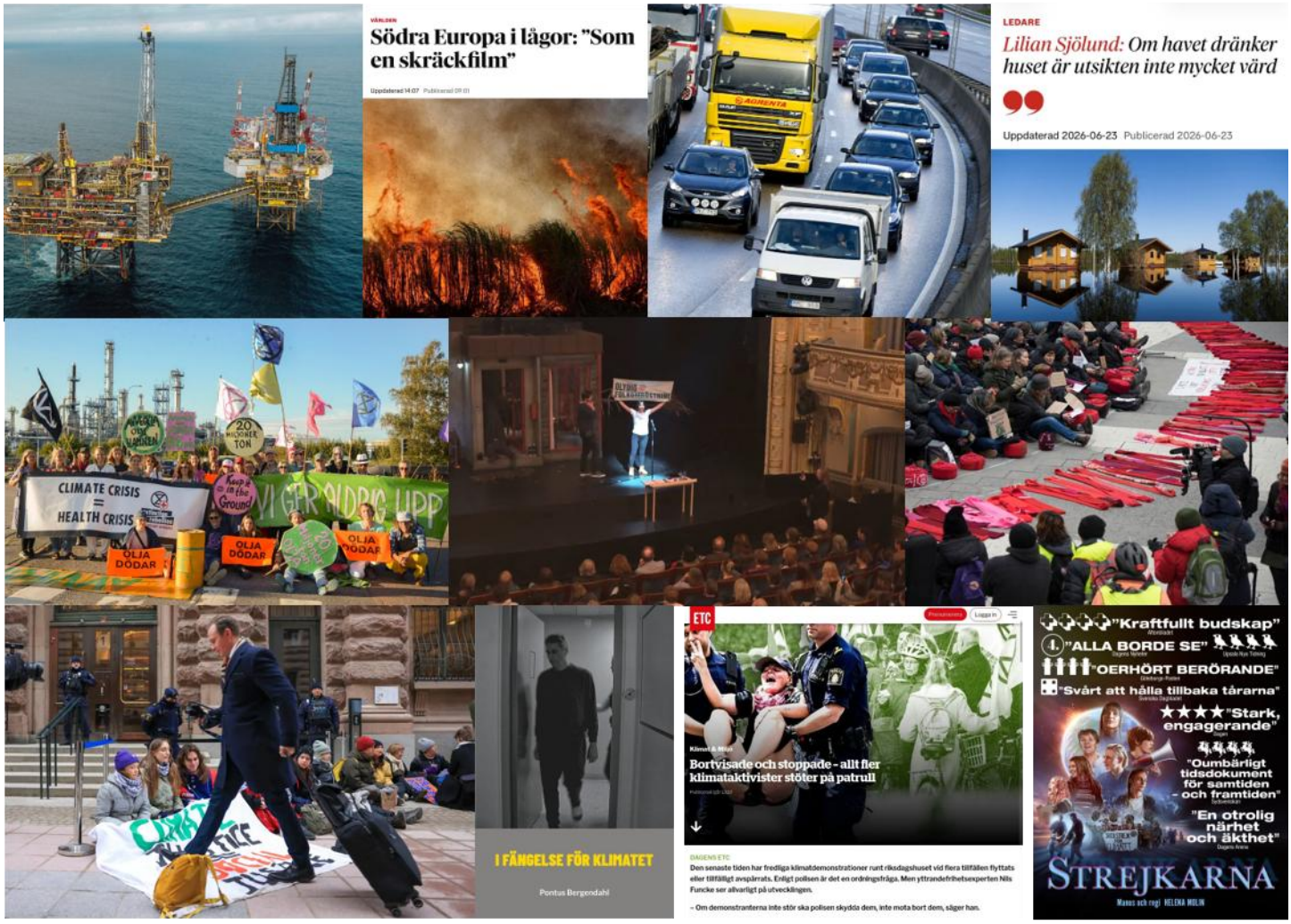
Blaming and Criminalising the Victims

Political Legitimation of Climate Change Crime Through Hate Crime and Democracy Crime

Fredrik von Malmborg



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Summary

Background

Climate change is a super-wicked problem, cutting across temporal, geographical and value related dimensions. It appears at the intersection of science, economics, politics, religion and human behaviour. The social and political context of climate change also makes climate politics emotional. Emotional politics and governance are not only *based on emotions* but designed to *invoke emotions*.

Growing powers of populist radical right parties around the world has led to more divisive and nasty politics and emotional governance of climate change, including structural and cultural violence through *nasty rhetoric* to discipline people. This is the case also in Sweden, a country that has long since been seen as a frontrunner in climate policy and a stronghold of liberal democracy. Sweden is also known as a country with a strong civil society that saw the dawning of a global climate justice movement, incorporating human rights and social justice in the discourse on environmental rights. This simultaneous backsliding in three related areas makes Sweden a relevant case of nasty politics with nasty rhetoric.

With a populist ethnonationalist party currently holding tangible powers in the national parliament, Swedish climate politics and politics in general have changed character over the last decade, particularly since the general elections in 2022. Long-term trends of decreasing greenhouse gas emissions are broken, with emissions rising due to policies based on climate denialism rather than climate science telling the world is in an acute climate emergency. This implies climate change crime according to the International Court of Justice. In addition, climate governance processes are violating norms and principles of governance in a liberal democracy. Actions are taken to purposefully demount accountability, legitimacy and justice. In line with the populist radical right's emotional governance and the processes of a culture war, the governing quartet of parties in power and some of their supporters are attacking their opponents in climate politics with hate speech and different forms of hard repression with the aim to silence them. As claimed in Swedish media, this can be seen as a threat to Swedish democracy and thus must be resisted.

Aims and methods

To properly build resistance to such systematic use of politically motivated hate speech and cultural violence, referred to as nasty rhetoric in political science, one need to better understand

its nature: in what contexts it is used, why and by whom, but also what the consequences are for people and society. So far, scholars have addresses bits and pieces, but no one has put the pieces together and analysed the whole picture. This report presents results and conclusions from a series of studies in an academic research project aiming to explore and explain the nature of nasty rhetoric. In doing so, the research combines empirical qualitative analyses of secondary data from reports in written and audio-visual media and primary data from political debates and interviews, with academic literature from a multitude of disciplines in medical and social sciences as well as humanities. My hope is to give food for thought and raise questions for further discussion among scholars, policymakers and civil society beyond Sweden about nasty rhetoric and how it can be resisted.

Results

Use of nasty rhetoric

The first part of the study analyses who uses nasty rhetoric, in what forms and why. It also addresses what makes people follow and expand hate speech. Since toxic language has been more common in Swedish politics in general, the study analyses the use of insults, accusations etcetera among climate deniers as well as pro-climate advocates.

It is found that leading populists right-wing politicians, including the prime minister, cabinet ministers and leading parliamentarians, systematically portray climate science as "a point of view", green politicians as "strawmen" that should be "killed", female climate journalists as "left pack" and "moron hags" that "will be raped", and the climate justice movement as "saboteurs", "totalitarian terrorists" and "a threat to Swedish democracy" that should be "sent to prison" and "executed". The pro-climate opposition is also using insults and accusations, not to silence the governing parties, but to reveal right-wing populist climate policy and politicians as a naked emperor. The use of nasty rhetoric is described metaphorically as *a double-edged sword*, aiming to silence opponents to the current paradigm shift in Swedish climate politics, while at the same time mobilising followers through conspiracy theories with fantasies and symbolic threats to expand the *weird kind of sport* that nasty rhetoric represents. People persuaded to follow and expand the use of nasty rhetoric seem to be influenced primarily by social processes, like getting accepted in a community, but also by ideology as well as dark personality traits. In common, they seem to lack empathy for others.

Harms to people

Many claim that hate speech is a threat to democracy, but they seldom explain how. Thus, such a claim is abstract. While nasty rhetoric can harm democracy, it is only because of harms done to the immediate targets, the real people. The second part of study thus analyses the harms of nasty rhetoric to people targeted.

It is found that target people and groups are harmed emotionally, cognitively and psychologically in different ways, with different behavioural responses. Scientists and journalists are harmed as persons for their professional identity, while climate activists are harmed for being activists, a concept which meaning is changing to 'being criminal'. While most scientists and journalists report angst, insecurity and fear of crime, making them withdraw from public debate or changing jobs, many climate activists desensitise the content of hate speech. They fear climate change more than hate speech and hate crime. But they also fear the message effect of nasty rhetoric, legitimising collective hate speech, and contributing to a growing culture of silence that makes people in general afraid to raise their voice. Climate activists are also harmed from hard state repression in the form of economic and legal sanctions following the message effect and the criminalisation of their right to protest and demonstrate. Radical activists react with anger and are considered to 'radicalise' by leading politicians, who want them to be prosecuted for terrorism. The crime victim discourse is immature and largely influenced by leading politicians in power who deny, attack, and reverse the victim and offender roles, claiming that victims of nasty rhetoric are the real criminals, and that the 'good people' are the real victims. The study broadens the analysis of harms of nasty rhetoric beyond politicians as targets and shows the importance of analysing crime victim discourses to avoid lumping victims together in public and policy debates on how to curb hate speech and hate crime. The report also highlights the links between climate change crime, hate crime and democracy crime.

Harms to democracy

The third part of study analyses the harms of nasty rhetoric to liberal democracy. It is found that politicians from the four parties in power, particularly Moderates and Sweden Democrats, use emotional governance with nasty rhetoric to polarise climate politics, constructing an ingroup and an outgroup of people with incompatible ideologies and moral. People in the outgroup are harmed with nasty rhetoric to eliminate them from public discussions, but also to strip them of human dignity. In the end, there will only be one ideology left, representing the thin ideology of radical right populists which corresponds to the 'Only Truth'.

Moreover, it is found that nasty rhetoric harms liberal democracy differently depending on how victims are harmed. While climate scientists, journalists and civil servants react with fear and become silent, reducing the flow of information to policy processes and social-political debates, climate activists tend to react with anger and are criminalised by the right-wing government, leading to further polarisation and increased state repression that reduces the civic space and possibilities for civil society organisations and concerned people to take part in policy debates.

In all, restricting the inflow of information and squeezing the civic space harm liberal democracy by making it difficult for the real people of Sweden to keep themselves informed about climate change and climate policy of the government and the Sweden Democrats. Restricting the inflow of information undermines the freedom of expression, free formation of opinion, peoples' scrutiny of power, collective agenda-setting and public deliberation by threatening the epistemic quality of deliberation and citizens' empowered inclusion in debates and decisions that affect them. Squeezing the civic space further undermines free formation of opinion, collective agenda-setting and public deliberation, as well as freedom to demonstrate. There are fewer places to meet and protest. In turn, this all contributes to undermining the democratic processes by corrupting political discussions and citizens' mutual empathy and respect for people and politics. When people are not allowed to express what they think, the spaces for protest are eroded, and informed and dignified political conversation are silenced by nasty rhetoric, liberal democracy is silenced. Liberal democracy is under threat.

Conclusions

The populist radical right's culture war on pluralist liberalism has increased the use of emotional governance in Swedish climate politics. Nasty rhetoric is employed as a tactic by the governing parties to polarise society in the 'good people' and the 'Others' on emotional grounds. Victims of Tidö climate politics and anyone that holds a different view than the parties in power on climate policy, or any other policy issue, are blamed and branded with an identity of the criminal 'enemy' and placed in the outgroup, and they should be ostracised and silenced. This governance style, blaming the victim to legitimise your own illegitimate politics, resembles the workings of fascists throughout history and is used also in other radical right populist countries around the world in the current "third wave of autocratisation".

Critics of poor climate policies and nasty rhetoric are denounced as a threat to democracy. Since a ban on nasty rhetoric would restrict the freedom of expression. The denial of crime, and subsequent reversal of the victim–offender roles is obvious, whereas politicians in power claim

that they, speaking for the 'good people', are victims of the crimes of 'evil' pro-climate advocates that must be punished. The alleged crimes referred to are fictional and symbolic, threatening the lifestyles of primarily white men wanting to drive big cars, fly and eat meat. Such symbolic threats invoke hate and aggression.

Cabinet ministers and other leading politicians from the governing quartet attacking scientists, civil servants, journalists, activists and other people for having wrong opinion is a clear sign that the government does not realise, or ignores, its responsibility to protect Sweden's fundamental rights and freedoms. When people are not allowed to express what they think, the spaces for protest are eroded, and informed and dignified political conversation are silenced by nasty rhetoric, liberal democracy is under attack. Sweden is turning autocratic.

The discourse on victims of nasty rhetoric is immature, negatively affecting the rationales for punishment of perpetrators, equality before the law for victims, and other legal safeguards for victims. In developing the crime victim discourse, reclaiming victimhood and shifting the burden of blame from victim to perpetrator, it is essential to acknowledge the finding and conclusion of this study that nasty rhetoric includes potentially criminal acts in a larger system of criminal acts performed by leading politicians, spanning from climate change crime to hate crime and democracy crime.

Keywords

Behaviour; Climate politics; Civic space; Criminalisation; Democracy; Emotional governance; Emotions; Green crime; Harm; Hate crime; Hate speech; Nasty politics; Nasty rhetoric; Polarisation; Psychology; Radical right populism; Radicalisation; Victimisation

About the author

Dr. Fredrik von Malmborg holds a PhD in industrial ecology (2000) from *KTH Royal Institute of Technology* in Stockholm, Sweden. In 2006, he was appointed docent (associate professor) in environmental technology and management at *Linköping University*, Sweden. In 2026, he was appointed docent in political science at *Linköping University*, showcasing his transdisciplinary expertise. From 2003 to 2005, he served as senior adviser in climate policy at the *Swedish Environmental Protection Agency*. From 2006 to 2023 he served as senior policy officer and deputy director in the *Government Offices of Sweden*, focusing on climate, energy, buildings and transport policy. He has also served as lead expert and strategist on sustainability finance in a multinational bank.

His research interests include environmental systems analysis and organising strategies for climate and sustainability in public and private organisations. He has studied organisational learning and organisational change from the use of (i) management tools such as ISO management systems and corporate sustainability reporting, and (ii) policy instruments such as carbon emissions trading. Since 2021, his research has focused on policy processes and policy change in domestic and EU climate politics, including strategies and tactics for policy advocacy, policy entrepreneurship and policy learning, and how these are aligned with or violate liberal and deliberative democratic norms and principles for public governance, such as legitimacy, accountability and justice.

He has published about 50 papers in academic journals, including high impact journals such as *Business Strategy and the Environment, Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management, Journal of Cleaner Production, Renewable & Sustainable Energy Reviews, Energy Research & Social Science, Energy Policy, European Policy Analysis, Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* and *Review of Policy Research*. He is also frequently publishing essays in Swedish newspapers and magazines, contributing to the public debate on climate justice and democracy.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Climate change – a super wicked problem

Could one imagine a more *wicked problem* than climate change? The scope, viable responses, and appropriate mechanisms and pathways towards achieving improvement regarding climate change are complex and uncertain, and appear at the intersection of science, economics, politics, and human behaviour. Wicked problems are inherently societal and cut across temporal, geographical and value related dimensions, for which, in pluralistic societies with diverse interests, traditions and values, there is seldom consensus on the problem and potential solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Hulme, 2009; Grundmann, 2016; Crowley & Head, 2017). The social context that frames climate change politics makes ideological, ethical and religious beliefs and worldviews important in public discourse and policymaking (Hulme, 2009; Incropera, 2015; Hornsey, 2021). Besides different views on solutions, the social context also impacts the perception of climate change as a problem at all, with the existence of climate change sceptics and deniers questioning that climate change takes place and thus the need for climate policy (Sharman & Howarth, 2017; Hultman et al., 2019; Lewandowsky, 2021; Vowles & Hultman, 2021a, 2021b; Ekberg & Pressfeldt, 2022; Marquardt & Lederer, 2022; Marquardt et al., 2022). Some deny the existence of climate change or that it is anthropogenically induced, others deny its consequences (Hobson & Niemeyer, 2012). Recognising the difficulties in agreeing on framing and formulating problems and viable solutions, climate change has even been called a super wicked problem (Lazarus, 2008; Levin et al., 2012).

In July 2025, the *International Court of Justice* (ICJ) published an advisory opinion outlining the legal responsibility and obligations of nation states to reduce climate change (ICJ, 2025). Importantly, ICJ claims that there are legal consequences for nation states that, by their acts or omissions, cause significant harm to the climate system, the environment, states and/or peoples and individuals, including future generations. Failure of a nation state to take appropriate action to protect the climate system from greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions, i.e. the crime, does not only include emitting GHGs *per se*, but also upholding policies that facilitate GHG emissions, e.g. finance of fossil fuel production, subsidies for fossil fuel consumption, the granting of fossil fuel exploration licenses or the provision of fossil fuel subsidies. In all, contributing to climate change is now criminalised in a legal sense.

1.2 Climate politics as politics of emotions

Politics, including climate politics, is emotional (Beattie et al., 2019; Shah, 2024). This is not a new phenomenon. It is long since known that emotions are important for shaping beliefs, values and political behaviour in policy processes (Brader & Marcus, 2013; Pierce, 2021; Fullerton et al., 2023, 2024). Emotions influence action tendencies because they inform an individual about a situation and prepare the body for a certain course of action (Frijda, 1986; Frijda et al., 1989). Emotions are modes of relating to the environment: states of readiness for engaging, or not engaging, in interaction with that environment (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Keltner et al., 2014).

Climate change is considered the most pressing topic for sustainability globally, and scientists as well as politicians claim that we are in a state of climate emergency. We are on the brink of an irreversible climate disaster with potential collapse of humankind and societies, closing in to the ceiling of the temperature corridor for human life (e.g. IPCC, 2023; Peñuelas & Nogué, 2023; Ripple et al., 2024). The witnessing of climate change events like more frequent and extreme rains, storms, floodings, landslides, heatwaves, droughts and wildfires, and their negative impacts on people, societies and economies all over the world make a lot of people emotionally affected (Brosch, 2021; Howe, 2021; Schneider et al., 2021). World leaders, including the UN Secretary General (UNSG) António Guterres and President of the *European Commission* Ursula von der Leyen, as well as climate activists talk about a climate emergency. The *World Health Organisation* (WHO) considers climate change to be a threat multiplier and is the biggest threat to human health (WHO, 2021, 2023). People like Greta Thunberg, the figurehead number one of the climate justice movements, find an emotionally and ideologically motivated identity in being climate justice activists, devoting their work or leisure time advocating for strong climate policy (Masson & Fritsche, 2021). Having worked with national, EU and global climate policy and governance as non-political policy officer and deputy director in the *Government Offices of Sweden* (GOS) for more than 18 years, I know that many colleagues in Sweden, the EU and globally started working with climate change to help save the world. It's a calling, and they are emotionally attached to climate policy.

Lack of climate action has led to the rise of climate justice movements, e.g. *Fridays for Future* (FFF) and *Extinction Rebellion* (XR), that merges environmental justice and social justice into climate justice (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014; Cassegård & Thörn, 2017; Sloan & Schmitz, 2025). As explored by Vegh Weis and White (2020), climate justice activists are so concerned with the

climate emergency and potential ecocide[1] that they raise their voices to leaders in politics and business to take urgent climate action here and now. Speaking partly for themselves but primarily for 'invisible' or 'silent victims of climate change (Spapens, 2014), such as ecosystems, non-human species, children and vulnerable people across the world, they engage in peaceful protests and sometimes acts of civil disobedience (cf. Berglund & Schmidt, 2020; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Kirsop-Taylor et al., 2023). In that sense, they evolve from victims-to-be to activists in the here-and-now, showing that "victims of crime should not be assumed or treated as passive, subordinate or powerless" (Green & Pemberton, 2017, p. 61).

In parallel with criminalisation of climate system harms, we are witnessing a "third wave of autocratisation" with rising powers of populist radical right[2] parties (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; V-Dem Institute, 2024, 2025, 2026; IDEA, 2025). On a global level, there are fewer liberal democracies than autocracies for the first time in over 20 years, and nearly three out of four people in the world now live in autocracies, which is the highest since 1978 (V-Dem Institute, 2025). Widespread climate denialism is a common theme in populist radical right politics (Sharman & Howarth, 2017; Hultman et al., 2019; Jylhä et al., 2020; Agius et al., 2021; Hornsey, 2021; Vihma et al., 2021; Ekberg & Pressfeldt, 2022;). The current wave of autocratisation experiences a rollback of climate policy in western countries. Using emotional rhetoric referring to past days and calling climate policy a threat to economic growth and people's freedom and way of life (Marquardt & Lederer, 2022; Marquardt et al., 2022; White, 2023; Vowles et al., 2024), populist radical right politicians in power are downplaying climate policy, both nationally and internationally (Buzogány & Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2022; Patterson, 2023; Cunningham et al., 2024; von Malmborg, 2024a; Förell & Fischer, 2025; Weise & Camut, 2025; Ergon, 2026). They want to make climate policy less ambitious and eventually scrap it. In the US, we find that the second Trump administration has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement and is cutting spendings on renewable energy while increasing finance to fossil fuels. In Europe, EU climate legislation adopted in 2023 has met severe drawbacks after the EU elections in 2024. After several decades

[1] Ecocide refers to unlawful or wanton acts, committed with the knowledge that they are likely to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment. The climate justice movement in the EU is advocating endorsement of a law of ecocide by the EU allowing the prosecution of offenders responsible for environmental damage 'comparable to ecocide' (Proedrou & Pournara, 2025).

[2] As discussed by Aktas (2024), there are many labels for populist parties to the right, e,g, 'fascist', 'neo-fascist', 'neo-Nazi', 'radical right', 'far-right', 'extreme right' 'nativist', 'populist', 'right-wing populist', 'populist radical right', 'nationalist populist', 'racist', 'anti-immigrant', 'anti-foreigner', or 'anti-establishment'. I use the terms 'populist radical right' or 'radical right' in short for denoting a party or parties, and 'radical right populism' to denote the ideology since I address populist parties at the radical, far-right end of the political spectrum. They are usually racist and ethno-nationalistic, with anti-immigration sentiments (Mudde, 2004). Some may be neo-Nazi or neo-fascist, I understand far-right extremism as violent, and is more appropriate for movements than formal parties. Populist far-right could be used as a synonym to populist radical right. In addition, the concept of 'populism' is not used traditionally used by individuals and movement labelled as populists. It is an analytical status attributed by external analysts (Freeden, 2017).

of emission reductions, GHG emissions are increasing in Sweden because of new climate policies since 2022.

The role of emotions for shaping Swedish climate policy was highlighted in the first party leader debate after the Swedish general elections in 2022. Analysing the strategic agency of the populist radical right in the iconoclastic transformation of Swedish climate policy since 2022, von Malmborg (2024a) identified what appears as systematic use of insults, accusations, denigration and in rare cases violence to discredit oppositional politicians, which are usual targets of hate[3] speech, but also to delegitimise and dehumanise new groups of 'enemies', i.e. climate activists, climate scientists and climate journalists. Since then, the use of hate speech by Swedish populist radical right leaders and supporters targeting climate justice activists, climate journalists and climate scientists has been reported (Brax, 2024; Forst, 2024; Bjerström, 2025; Mendy & Karlsson, 2025), but without a thorough analysis of the causes and nature of what seems to be politically motivated hate speech and hate crime. In all, climate politics and climate policy may not only be *based on emotions*. It can also be designed to *invoke emotions*.

1.3 A nasty culture war on climate policy

In both the US and Europe radical right populists have intentionally included climate policy in their civilisationist *culture war* to end what they call the 'left-liberal hegemony' (Buzogány & Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2022; Cunningham et al., 2024; Förell & Fischer, 2025; von Malmborg, 2024a, 2026; Weise & Camut, 2025). The concept of 'left-liberal' is used as a negative stereotype lumping together socialists, social democrats, social-liberals, greens, and sometimes liberal-conservatives.

As explained by Hunter (1991), the populist struggle to achieve cultural hegemony and legitimacy requires that there is an alleged 'enemy' to resist. A culture war is a metapolitical practice in which the fundamental dividing line is between (i) the orthodoxy of the radical right, which holds to a well-definable and transcendent authority based on the Only Truth, and (ii) the progressivism of liberalism, defined by the modern spirit of rationality, diversity, and justice (Hunter, 1991). The moral conflicts between these opposing ideologies are so large that arguments based on facts and logic will not convince the opposition and many voters. This makes radical right populists, rejecting ideological pluralism, to deliberately and systematically attempt to discredit and silence

[3] Hate refers to a strong, intense, enduring, and destructive emotional experience intended to harm or eliminate its targets (Fischer et al., 2018; Martínez et al., 2022a; Opotow & McClelland, 2007). Compared to hate, anger is a more short-living and constructive emotion posited as a necessary catalysing force that moves a person into action to change the offender after being targeted by perceived wrongdoings (Halperin et al., 2011; Fischer et al., 2018; van Doorn, 2018; Cantrell, 2019).

the opposition through pernicious polarisation of 'friends' vs. 'enemies', 'Us' vs. 'Them', ingroup vs. outgroup (Hunter, 1991; Mudde, 2017; Klein, 2020; Zulianello & Ceccobelli, 2020; Somer et al., 2022; Zeitzoff, 2023).

To polarise society and politics, radical right populists disseminate conspiracy theories and lies about the state of society (Mudde, 2017). A central tactic in silencing people in the outgroup is for radical right populists to delegitimise and dehumanise the people and groups considered not to fit into society through systematic soft and hard repression. Populist leaders use coarse, rude, and disrespectful language including hatred, threats and sometimes violence in their political rhetoric. The aim is to negatively stereotype, stigmatise, delegitimise, dehumanise and eliminate their opponents, physically, socially or symbolically (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013; Moffitt, 2016; Lührmann et al., 2020; Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020; Mudde, 2021; Zeitzoff, 2023).

To analyse such strategic and systematic use of hate speech and related violence for political purposes, scholars of political science, particularly political psychology, refer to the analytical concept of *nasty rhetoric* (Zeitzoff, 2023). It is characterised by divisive and contentious rhetoric with insults and threats containing elements of hatred and aggression that entrenches polarisation and 'us vs. them' narratives, designed to denigrate, deprecate, delegitimise, dehumanise and hurt their target(s) to make them silent (Kalmoe et al., 2018; Zeitzoff (2023). It covers hate speech as well as other kinds of 'hateful' and violent actions.

In the culture war on climate politics, advocates of strong climate policy, and journalists reporting about climate change and climate politics, are described by right-wing populists as 'enemies' to the nation, destroying life of the good and pure 'people'. As claimed by scholars, authors and in media, the increasing use of hate speech and violence to silence opponents can be seen as a threat to liberal democracy as well as climate change governance and thus must be resisted (Newell, 2008; Goodman & Morton, 2014; Pickering et al., 2020; Lindvall & Karlsson, 2023; von Malmborg, 2024b; Bjerström, 2025; Mendy & Karlsson, 2025). As a super-wicked problem, climate change governance requires pluralistic approaches to democratic governance.

In 2019, United Nations launched a strategy and plan of action on hate speech. In the foreword, UNSG António Guterres mentions that (UN, 2019):

> *This is not an isolated phenomenon or the loud voices of a few people on the fringe of society. Hate is moving into the mainstream—in liberal democracies and authoritarian systems alike. And with each broken norm, the pillars of our common humanity are weakened. Hate speech is a menace to democratic values, social stability and peace. /…/ Silence can signal indifference to bigotry and intolerance, even as a situation escalates and the vulnerable become victims.*

But prior to affecting liberal democracy, hate speech and more broadly nasty rhetoric does something to people targeted, emotionally, cognitively, socially and behaviourally (e.g. Matsuda, 1989; Mouffe, 1997; Waldron, 2012; Brown, 2015a; Cassese, 2021; Wahlström et al., 2021; Abuín-Vences et al., 2023; Renström et al., 2023; Ilse & Hagerlid, 2024). They are harmed and victimised by nasty rhetoric. To understand and counteract the impacts of nasty rhetoric on democracy, it is thus important to also analyse its harms to people.

1.4 Previous research

Hate speech is increasingly found online in social media, where perpetrators of such cyberhate can be anonymous (Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2015; Oltmann et al., 2020; Tom Tong, 2025). Social media has also reshaped the media landscape in fundamental ways that brings about novel avenues in the discursive climate to provide support for positions and actions of a certain group or movement (Wahlström et al., 2021). Internet and social media also speed up and expand hate speech (Miller & Vaccari, 2020).

Use of hate speech and different kinds of state repression as a tactics in strategic agency of radical right populists is well-known in policy domains such as migration and family policy, targeting personal and group identities based on ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, disabilities etcetera (see e.g. Jacobs & Potter, 2000; Yılmaz, 2012; Lutz, 2019; Peters, 2020; Olivas Osuna, 2021; Weeks & Allen, 2023; Askanius et al., 2024; Svatoňová & Doerr, 2024; Ilse & Hagerlid, 2025). For instance, members of the Jewish diaspora, the Muslim community and the LGBTQ+ communities in EU countries are harmed by online hate speech on an almost daily basis (Berecz & Devinat, 2017).

In comparison, its use in climate politics is somewhat different. Instead of targeting people for having 'wrong' personal and cultural identity based on skin colour, religion or sex, people and group are targeted for having 'wrong' political opinion on climate policy. This is not to say that climate policy is not related to cultural identity, but it is less so than gender issues, religion and ethnicity. Belief in the reality or otherwise of climate change has become a marker for cultural identities (Dunlap & McCright, 2008; Kahan et al., 2012), and it is not without reason the

populist radical right is waging a culture war on climate policy. To the radical right, politics is largely about cultural identity (Hunter, 1991; Short, 2016), which is why populist radical right parties in Europe frame politics on education "as a means of disseminating (conservative and nativist) culture and values, rather than as a means of redistributing opportunities" (Giudici et al., 2025, p. 1).

Nasty rhetoric has also been used to target radical activists in Sweden in other policy areas with much antagonism but compared to climate politics these are marginal in relation to scope and impact of the policy areas and the diversity of actors targeted, harmed and victimised. One such areas is agriculture and animal welfare, but in comparison to climate politics, hate speech and hate crime in this area do not include politicians. The conflict is mainly between animal welfare activists and the meat industry, food retailers and farmers (Schwartz, 2020), with farmers being the main victims (Ceccato et al., 2022). Violent protest has been used also by the radical left-libertarian movement in Sweden, for instance in the Gothenburg riots in 2001 (Wahlström, 2011; Jacobsson & Sörbom, 2015). Measures have been taken by Swedish governments since 2011 to intensify counteracting 'violence-affirming extremism' (Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020), including both 'hard' and 'soft' repression. In combination, hard and soft repression by the state is similar to nasty politics and nasty rhetoric.

Research on derogative language and hate speech in the climate change discourse initially addressed its use by singular political advocates and deniers of climate change in the framing of climate change policy (e.g. Knight & Greenberg, 2011; Eubanks, 2015; Sharman & Howarth, 2017; Bsumek et al. 2019; Nordensvärd & Ketola, 2022; Pandey, 2024). As for climate policy related cyberhate, Anderson and Huntington (2017) found that instances of incivil rhetoric were mainly used by right-wing people. Later, scholars analysed patterns in the use, finding that the climate justice movement has been particularly targeted, and that power dynamics circle climate denialism and misogyny in combination (Agius et al., 2021; Andersson, 2021; Park et al., 2021; Vowles & Hultman, 2021a; Miller & Bloomfield, 2022; White, 2022; Arce-García et al., 2023; Mede & Schroeder, 2024; Wahlström & Uba, 2024). Combining climate denial, misogyny and sexism, Donald J. Trump, Jose Bolsonaro and many other male politicians directed and instigated hate and treats towards Greta Thunberg in particular. Uncivil hate of climate sceptics is also targeting climate journalists, aiming to discredit individual journalists and newspapers but also to undermine the deliberative function of online user fora (Björkenfeldt & Gustafsson, 2023; Schulz-Tomančok & Woschnagg, 2024). More recently, some studies also report hate speech targeting climate scientists (Brax, 2024; Mendy & Karlsson, 2025).

Previous research portraits climate activists as 'radically kind' that use humour in digital activism to transform democracy (Pickard et al., 2020; Sloam et al., 2022; Chiew et al., 2024). For instance, Greta Thunberg turned the insults of then Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and then US president Donald J. Trump into humour, adding the Portuguese word 'pirralha' (Eng. brat) and "A very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future" to her X/Twitter profile (Vowles & Hultman, 2021a; White, 2021).

However, the scientific literature on hate speech related to climate change and climate politics provides little knowledge about the use and harms of hate speech as a political strategy and tactics in climate politics and governance. In addition, the concept of hate speech is often unclear. With the claims that hate speech and different sorts of violence is a threat to democracy, the lack of research in this area is worrisome.

1.5 Aims of the study

To properly build resistance to hate speech and related violence in climate politics and other policy areas, one needs to better understand the phenomenon. So far, scholars have addresses bits and pieces, but no one has put the pieces together and analysed the whole picture. My previous research indicates that hate speech etcetera is used systematically by political leaders as a tactic besides other tools in climate politics and governance (von Malmborg, 2024a), why nasty rhetoric is an appropriate analytic concept for an in-depth analysis of the nature of systematic hate speech and related violence in climate politics. Looking into the meso- and micro-level causes, motives and harms of hate speech, hate crime and hard state repression, I give an account of the ebb and flow of nasty rhetoric.

For the purpose of this study, I refer to hate as *a strong, intense, enduring, and destructive emotional experience intended to harm or eliminate its targets physically, socially, or symbolically* (Fischer et al., 2018; Martínez et al., 2022a; Opotow & McClelland, 2007). Hate crime refers to a family of legislation (Jacobs & Potter, 2000) that includes "reporting statutes, enhanced penalties where an offence is motivated by bias, civil rights laws and new substantive offences" (Ray, 2018, p. 160). In general, it can be defined as "a crime motivated by prejudice and discrimination that stirs up a group of like-minded people to target victims because of their membership of a social group, religion or race" (Peters, 2022, p. 2326). In comparison, there is a spectrum of definitions of hate speech, reflecting the jurisprudence in different polities (Brown, 2015a; Assimakoupoulos et al., 2017; Hietanen & Eddebo, 2022). In this study, I refer to hate speech as "the deliberate and often intentional degradation of people through messages that call for, justify and/or trivialise violence

based on a category (gender, phenotype, religion or sexual orientation)" (Sponholz, 2018, p. 51, my translation). As such, hate speech is not restricted to speech acts, but also encompasses, e.g., image-based communication and can be unintentional (Waldron, 2012).

Following the line of Toulmin (2012, p. 1) in his study of the use of arguments, the aim of this report is to "raise problems, not to solve them; to draw attention to a field of inquiry, rather than to survey it fully; and to provoke discussion rather than to serve as a systematic treatise". My intention is to provide food for thought and further discussion among scholars, policymakers and civil society in Sweden and beyond on nasty rhetoric, and that such a discussion can contribute to better understanding of the general nature of nasty rhetoric in climate politics and other policy areas.

The study sets out to fill but also identify new gaps in the scholarly understanding of nasty rhetoric in climate politics. Swedish climate politics is used as a case study. Drawing attention to under-researched fields of inquiry of great interest to scholarly as well as public debates, the report explores and explains the nature of nasty rhetoric: in what context it is used, why and by whom, and what the consequences are for people and society – the harms and victims of nasty rhetoric. The latter is particularly important since previous research has focused only on the use and content. Given that nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics is found to be part of a strategy for radical change of policy and governance (von Malmborg, 2024a), analysing the crime victim discourse is key for understanding harms and victimisation of nasty rhetoric. More specifically, the report addresses different research questions related to three subareas of inquiry to understand the nature of nasty rhetoric (Table 1).

Table 1. Research questions regarding the nature of nasty rhetoric in climate politics

Subarea	Research question
Use of nasty rhetoric	R1: Who uses nasty rhetoric, in what forms and in which fora?
	R2: Is there a difference in types of hate and threats and level of aggression depending on who is using it and for what reason?
	R3: Why are people using nasty rhetoric in the first instance?
	R4: Why are some people following suit to expand the use of nasty rhetoric?
Harms of nasty rhetoric to people	R5: Which are the routes for victimisation in nasty rhetoric
	R6: How are different target groups and people harmed by nasty rhetoric? Are there differences in target group victimisation?
	R7: How do victims of nasty rhetoric react emotionally and behaviourally? Are there differences in emotional and behavioural reactions among different target groups?
	R8: How resilient are different groups of victims?
Harms of nasty rhetoric to society and democracy	R9: How do harms on people harm society and democracy? Are there differences in democracy harms from differences in emotional and behavioural harms on different target groups?
Crime victim discourse	R10: How are perpetrators and victims of nasty rhetoric described and discussed, and what actions are taken to curb nasty rhetoric?

The research questions are addressed with a mixed method approach, combining qualitative empirical analyses of secondary data from reports in written and audio-visual media and primary data from political debates and interviews, with academic literature from a multitude of disciplines in medical and social sciences as well as humanities. My point of entry into the subject is from political science, wanting to understand nasty rhetoric as a tactic in politics, how and why it is used, but also its consequences for democracy. But the subject of hate speech and related violence is transdisciplinary.

To comprehensively understand nasty rhetoric, one must draw on research and theory on hate speech and hate crime from research other disciplines than political science, e.g. philosophy, rhetoric, law studies, criminology, sociology, media and communication studies, social psychology, psychology, psychiatry and neurobiology (cf. Zeitzoff, 2023). This is particularly the case when analysing harms to victims of nasty rhetoric. So far, research on victims of nasty rhetoric has focused on politicians (cf. Zeiftzoff, 2023). But in the case of climate politics, victims are also found among scientists, activists and journalists (Brax, 2024; von Malmborg, 2024a; Bjerström, 2025; Mendy & Karlsson, 2025). In this study, I also find civil servants among the victims.

While the study focuses on recent developments in Swedish climate politics, the empirical case is illuminating for scholars, policymakers and civil society beyond Sweden. Sweden has long since been considered an international role model in climate politics (Matti et al., 2021; Widerberg et al., 2024; Ergon, 2026). Sweden has also been considered a strong bastion of liberal democracy (Boese et al., 2022; Silander, 2024). In the nexus of climate politics and democracy, Sweden has also seen the rise of strong social movements advocating ambitious climate policy (de Moor et al., 2020). Analysing phenomena such as nasty politics and nasty rhetoric in a country that until recently experienced large societal consensus and policy leadership on climate politics provides important knowledge for understanding the agency and negative effects of populist radical right politics in general.

1.6 Outline of the report

The report is outlined as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework of the analysis, describing the theories on (i) nasty politics and rhetoric, including factors explaining use and causes of hate speech and state repression, (ii) criminology and victimology of climate change crime, hate crime and related democracy crime. Section 3 presents the method and materials used to analyse nasty rhetoric in the case of Swedish climate politics, including ethical reflexions on data management and anonymity, while section 4 presents the context of the case study, with focus on the far-right turn in Swedish politics and its related paradigm shift in climate policy leading to climate change crime. Results of the empirical case study, addressing (i) why and how nasty rhetoric is used, (ii) how it harms people, and (iii) how it harms democracy, are presented in sections 5–7. Section 8 analyses and discusses the results addressing the research questions and the more general question about the nature of nasty rhetoric. It also reflects on the use of nasty rhetoric in relation to climate change crime, identifying a system of criminal acts perpetrated by the state. Finally, section 9 draws conclusions.

2. Theoretical frameworks

Analysing the nature of nasty rhetoric with Swedish climate politics as an empirical case, the harms of climate change and the criminalisation of failure to combat climate change serve as a point of departure. Nasty rhetoric is used by those who are responsible for climate change crime and targeted towards those who protest the crime. The first subsection thus presents and reflects upon green criminology, more specifically climate change criminology.

The theoretical framework used to analyse the use of nasty rhetoric (section 2.2) draws on Zeitzoff's (2023) works on nasty politics, but also stand-alone research on hate speech in philosophy, sociology, communication studies, social-psychology, psychology and neuroscience, e.g. what is hate speech, why and how is it used, what factors explain its use and why some people are following in expanding hate speech?

A framework to analyse harms of nasty rhetoric to real humans (section 2.3), is developed from research on hate speech, hate crime and state repression in philosophy, law studies, criminology, victimology, psychology and sociology. The analysis of harms to democracy uses a framework that draws on research in political science, political philosophy, sociology, media studies and law studies (section 2.3).

2.1 Green criminology

Analysing the victims of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics, a certain strand of critical criminology may be of interest – *green criminology*. Green criminology has emerged as a certain sub-discipline of criminology and differs from traditional criminology in many senses. Harms to ecosystems involve both direct or primary harms to ecosystems as victimisation of the natural world and secondary effects on species that live within an ecosystem. Thus, green criminology draws attention to a wider set of victims than traditional forms of criminology have typically addressed, and thus explores and explains a broad set of ways in which behaviours of humans and their institutions and organisations harm the ecosystems, non-human species and humanity and how these different beings are made victims of human development (Lynch, 2006; South & Bernie, 2006; Beirne & South, 2007; Brisman & South, 2013; South, 2014; Nobles, 2019).

Ecocide is a particular kind of environmental crime, often related to climate change (South, 2014; White, 2018). It refers to unlawful or wanton acts, committed with the knowledge that they are likely to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment (Proedrou & Pournara, 2025). With climate change, focus has changed from single companies to large

multilateral corporations and even nation states as offenders of environmental crimes (Brisman & South, 2013; Ruggiero & South, 2013; Kramer, 2014; White, 2011, 2018).

2.1.1 Climate change harms

The *United Nations* (UN) established the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC)[4] in 1988 with the purpose of regularly assessing science related to climate change. Since then, IPCC has presented six assessment reports synthesising the state of knowledge on the causes, processes and consequences of climate change as well as how societies can mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Knowledge of the impacts and harms of climate change is convergent (IPCC, 2023). Climate change leads to rising sea levels and more extreme weather events affecting all regions around the world, but in different ways. In some regions heavy rainfall and flooding are becoming more common, while others are experiencing more extreme heat waves and droughts. Climate change happens much faster than previously predicted (IPCC, 2023) and animal and plant species are struggling to cope. Biodiversity is responding to climate change, with direct impacts such as changes in the behaviour and lifecycles of animal and plant species, species abundance and distribution, community composition, habitat structure and ecosystem processes. Climate change is also leading to indirect impacts and harm to biodiversity through habitat fragmentation and loss, over-exploitation of land and water areas, pollution of air, water and soil, and the spread of invasive species. Indirect impacts may be more damaging than the direct impacts due to their scale, scope and speed, and they will further reduce the resilience of ecosystems to climate change and their capacity to deliver essential eco-system services such as climate regulation, food, clean air and water, and the control of floods or erosion.

As for harm to people and societies, climate change gives rise to human health effects. Climate change may not create many new health threats. Rather, existing effects will be exacerbated and more pronounced, like (i) increases in heat-related mortality and morbidity, (ii) increases in the risk of accidents and impacts on human well-being from extreme floods, fires and storms, (iii) changes in impact of diseases from vector-, rodent-, water- or food-borne disease, and (iv) changes in seasonal distribution of allergenic pollen species, range of virus, pest and disease distribution. WHO considers climate change to be a global 'threat multiplier' (WHO, 2023). It increases vulnerability to food insecurity and human illness/disease, undermines development

[4] https://www.ipcc.ch/

and stability, increases the risk of domestic and international conflict, and contributes to statelessness due to loss of land, rights, and security.

People living in low-income areas with poor infrastructure, and population groups with lower incomes and assets, are more exposed to climate impacts but have less capacity to face them (IPCC, 2023). For instance, women may be disproportionately impacted by climate change and are at a disadvantage when expensive adaptation measures are required. At the same time, women are key actors in adaptation and more generally sustainable practices. Unemployed and socially marginalised people are among the most vulnerable to climate risks. Older people, disproportionately affected by reduced mobility or health impediments, will result in a higher share of the population being vulnerable to climate change impacts.

People will also be affected by climate change due to impacts on the productivity and viability of all economic sectors, with further implications on food and freshwater production, transportation, energy, infrastructure, buildings, forestry, tourism, insurance and banking, and labour markets.

In addition, climate change has also already started to have an impact on displacement and migration. Although climate is only one of several drivers of displacement and migration, many countries on their path towards sustainable development are among the most affected. People living there often depend heavily on their natural environment, and they have the least resources to cope with the changing climate.

2.1.2 Climate change victimology

From a victimology perspective, climate change raises several challenges, e.g. identifying potential victims (Cao & Wyatt, 2016; White, 2018). The concept of victimisation is much broader for green criminologists than it is for other criminologists (Lynch, 2006). The impacts on ecosystems, non-human species, humans, humanity and societies, all of which are considered living beings that can be harmed and victimised, are vast and global. In addition, many victims are 'invisble' or unable to speak of their suffering (Spapens 2014). This is obvious for non-human species and ecosystems, but also for vulnerable groups of humans, e.g. poor countries, lower classes, indigenous people, women and children (White, 2018). Their vulnerability increases since these groups are often discriminated in policy processes, where they are unheard in public consultations on new climate legislation, and their perspectives on victimhood are neglected (von Malmborg, 2024a, 2024b). In this sense, victims of climate change can be seen as 'imagined victims', in whose name the more abstract justifications (such as deterrence or upholding the rule of law) are justified (Walklate, 2017; Schwöbel-Patel, 2018).

Advocacy for combating climate change has led to a merger of environmental justice and social justice into what is labelled climate justice (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014; Sloan & Schmitz, 2025). Environmental movements, traditionally 'speaking' for the environment in policy and social-legal processes, have been complemented with new climate justice movements, e.g. FFF and XR, sometimes engaging also in human rights issues (Cassegård & Thörn, 2017). As explored by Vegh Weis and White (2020), climate justice activists have concluded they must do something to stop climate change, and they see themselves as spokespersons speaking on behalf of potential victims of an escalating climate change emergency. They speak for themselves but primarily for those who do not have a voice, particularly children, and people in poorer countries, advocating urgent action to mitigate and adapt to climate change (cf. Martiskainen et al., 2020; Kirsop-Taylor et al., 2023). In that sense, they evolve from victims-to-be to activists in the here-and-now, showing that some victims can take an active role.

Climate policy addresses (i) climate change mitigation through reducing GHG emission, (ii) climate change adaptation to avoid effects of future climate change events such as flooding, droughts and wildfires, and (iii) loss and damage from previous and current climate change events. With climate justice, green criminology and victimology should address harms and victims related to all sides of climate change. As addressed by Davies (2014, 2018) and particularly von Malmborg (2024a, 2024c), the climate justice discourse broadens the perspective on victimisation beyond harms of climate change itself. Policies or measures to mitigate climate change may have negative social or economic impacts on vulnerable groups of people in a local community, a region, a country or globally. An illustrative example is that countries in the Global South were not included in the consultation on new EU legislation to decarbonise international shipping, despite the fact that companies and employees in the Global South were found to be hit the hardest economically according to the impact assessment of the European Commission (von Malmborg, 2024c). This highlights the importance of integrating cultural criminology with green or rather climate change criminology and vice versa, addressing topics such as (a) the contestation of space, transgression, and resistance; (b) the way(s) in which crime is constructed and represented by the media; and (c) patterns of constructed consumerism. (cf. Brisman & South, 2013; Brisman, 2014).

2.1.3 Criminalisation of climate change

The social, ethical and economic reasons for combating climate change have been guiding principles for climate policy for decades. But the legal responsibility and obligations of nation states to reduce climate change was outlined only recently in an advisory opinion by the

International Court of Justice (ICJ). In response to a request by the General Assembly of the UN (Resolution 77/276), ICJ (2025, p. 2), concludes that:

> *Customary international law sets forth obligations for States to ensure the protection of the climate system and other parts of the environment from anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. These obligations include the following:*
>
> *a) States have a duty to prevent significant harm to the environment by acting with due diligence and to use all means at their disposal to prevent activities carried out within their jurisdiction or control from causing significant harm to the climate system and other parts of the environment, in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities;*
> *b) States have a duty to co-operate with each other in good faith to prevent significant harm to the climate system and other parts of the environment, which requires sustained and continuous forms of co-operation by States when taking measures to prevent such harm.*

And, importantly, ICJ claims that there are legal consequences for nation states that, by their acts or omissions, cause significant harm to the climate system, the environment, states and/or peoples and individuals, including future generations. Applying the well-established rules on nation state responsibility under customary international law, ICJ (2025, p. 3) concludes that:

> *A breach by a State of any obligations [in relation to climate change mitigation] constitutes an internationally wrongful act entailing the responsibility of that State. The responsible State is under a continuing duty to perform the obligation breached. The legal consequences resulting from the commission of an internationally wrongful act may include the obligations of:*
>
> *a) cessation of the wrongful actions or omissions, if they are continuing;*
> *b) providing assurances and guarantees of non-repetition of wrongful actions or omissions, if circumstances so require; and*
> *c) full reparation to injured States in the form of restitution, compensation and satisfaction, provided that the general conditions of the law of State responsibility are met, including that a sufficiently direct and certain causal nexus can be shown between the wrongful act and injury.*

Contributing to climate change is criminalised in a legal sense. According to ICJ, failure of a nation state to take appropriate action to protect the climate system from GHG emissions, i.e. the crime, does not only include emitting GHGs *per se*, but also upholding policies that facilitate GHG emissions, e.g. finance of fossil fuel production, subsidies for fossil fuel consumption, the granting of fossil fuel exploration licenses or the provision of fossil fuel subsidies. The advice of

ICJ has later been approved by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR)[5] and the Supreme Court of Sweden[6].

2.2 Nasty politics with nasty rhetoric

Analysing partisan leaders' strategic and systematic acts of hate speech and other hateful and threatening acts for political purposes, targeting political opponents, scholars of political science refer to the concepts of *nasty politics* and *nasty rhetoric* as broad analytical concepts. Nasty politics refers to the phenomenon when politicians systematically and strategically use "a set of tactics […] to insult, accuse, denigrate, threaten and in rare cases physically harm their domestic opponents" (Zeitzoff, 2023, p. 6). Such opponents can include "political parties, partisans, ethnic groups, police and security services, immigrants, judges, businessmen, companies, journalists, members of the press, NGOs, government officials, military, business groups, or other domestic political opponents broadly construed" (Zeitzoff, 2023, p. 9).

Nasty rhetoric, central to nasty politics, is characterised by divisive and contentious rhetoric with insults and threats containing elements of hatred and aggression that entrenches polarisation and 'us vs. them' narratives, designed to denigrate, deprecate, delegitimise, dehumanise and hurt their target(s) to make them silent (Kalmoe et al., 2018). According to Zeitzoff (2023), nasty rhetoric covers hate speech as well as hate crime (Whillock & Slayden, 1995; Chetty & Alathur, 2018; Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021; Vergani et al., 2024), but also other kinds of 'hateful' actions. In that sense, nasty rhetoric is also linked to emotional governance.

2.2.1 Emotional governance in a culture war

The populist radical right refers to a culture war on climate politics. Or, rather climate politics is included as one of the battlefields in a civilisationalist culture war on what they claim to be a 'left-liberal hegemony' (Stewart, 2020). The moral conflicts between the populist radical right and opposing ideologies and parties are so large that the battle cannot be won with arguments based on facts and logic and require and 'enemy' to fight emotionally to gain hegemony (Hunter, 1991). Entrenching an 'us vs. them' narrative, populists, be they left or right, refer to a homogeneous 'people' as an ingroup, as a counterpoint to the 'elite', the outgroup. This draws on poststructuralist theories of hegemonic discourses, that every concept, all meaning making, is defined in a process of constitutive antagonism (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). To Laclau and Mouffe, antagonism refers to all possible meanings of a concept that are excluded when one meaning

[5] https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-233206%22]}

[6] https://rattspraxis.etjanst.domstol.se/sok/publicering/aa549249-8d8a-4cda-9c03-6e7a764a6c18?domstolskod=HDO

become hegemonic. Both the 'inside' and the 'outside' are constituted simultaneously and they are dependent on each other. But given that there are always several contingent meanings, their configurations are arbitrary and the result of given historical power configuration.

Political sentiments are often emotional and affective, determined by viscerally experienced sentiments and a physically imagined sense of rightness or wrongness. Political persuaders, particularly populists, use language or images to affect emotions, perceptions of knowledge, belief, value, and action (Shah, 2024). This aligns with notions of charismatic leadership and persuasion that stress pathos as more important in political rhetoric than logos and ethos respectively (Weber, 1921; Olson, 2020).

Emotional rhetoric is central in reproduction of structural power and power relations between 'us' and 'them' and key in a Foucauldian sense of *emotional governance* (Foucault, 1977; Mathiesen, 1978; Durnová, 2018). Emotional governance includes techniques of surveillance, control, and manipulation for leaders to discipline people and govern their emotions with *emotion rules* in cultural and institutional processes (Hochschild, 1983). Paying attention to collective emotions as patterns of relationships and belonging (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022), it "affords individuals with a sense of what is regarded as appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and the circumstances in which certain emotions (e.g. fear, hatred, and contempt) become acceptable" (Crawford, 2014, p. 536). As described by Foucault (1977), families, neighbours and people at workplaces are often manipulated to perform monitoring in the social discipling taking place in emotional governance, which makes structural, symbolic and cultural violence central tactics (cf. Galtung, 1969; Inhetveen, 2017).

Emotional governance is used more or less explicitly by leaders in *emotional regimes* to create and maintain, from the top down, cementing emotions and emotion rules (Hochschild, 1983; Wettergren, 2012; Flam, 2024), which aim to give individuals a sense of what is considered appropriate (right) and inappropriate (wrong) thoughts and behaviour and the circumstances in which certain emotions become acceptable. As described by Foucault (1977) and Mathiesen (1978), families, neighbours and people at workplaces are often manipulated to perform monitoring in emotional governance. Recent comparative studies show that liberal democracies, totalitarian states and authoritarian states have different emotional regimes (Verbalyte & Ulinskaitė, 2024) but that cementing emotions like fear, anger, shame and pride are present in all types of political regimes.

To challenge the *status quo*, partisans, political parties or social movements must counteract the dominant cemented emotions in an emotional regime by defining *subversive counter-feelings* directed

at the opponents (Wettergren & Jamieson, 2006; Wettergren, 2012; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017) They must emotionally reinterpret and normatively reformulate specific aspects of social 'reality', demanding new, obligatory and dominant emotions and emotional rules for their members, their opponents and other relevant aspects of reality. Such subversive counter-feelings often include hatred, distrust and contempt, creating dissatisfaction with the prevailing system.

Social psychology research defines hate as a strong, intense, enduring, and destructive emotional experience, intended to harm or eliminate its targets physically, socially, or symbolically (Opotow & McClelland, 2007, Fischer et al., 2018). It also finds a causal relationship between hate and aggression in terms of aggressive tendencies and hurting behaviour experienced towards specific individuals and entire outgroups (Martínez et al., 2022a, 2022b).

Anger is another feeling often directed at opponents. It is less aggressive than hate. While hate is a destructive force, anger is a constructive force, which makes a person wanting to change the opponents, not hurt or eliminate them (cf. Martínez et al., 2022a, 2022b). Since anger is normally reserved for those in power, a countermovement and its members who challenge the current situation must reclaim the right to feel and show anger. This can be problematic in liberal democracies and creates an increased risk of state repression, including violence, in more repressive regimes or contexts (Inhetveen, 2005; Wettergren, 2012). Inhetveen (2005) claims that culturality is a central characteristic of violence, which means that what is considered a violent act is always open to interpretation. But violence is also tightly connected with power, which implies that certain meanings of violence can be propagated and used politically, which may also influence further violent actions (Inhetveen, 2005, 2017).

Injustices in the system can create destabilising feelings of cynicism and resignation, while moral outrage and anger, but also hope, defined as "the emotion of future possibility, distinct from self-confidence, faith and trust" (Wettergren, 2025, p. 133), can create cohesion and mobilise more members.

2.2.2 Nasty rhetoric as political tactics

As hate speech and hate crime are well-known concepts in criminology and victimology, as well as the public debate, it may seem unnecessary to invent new concepts such as nasty rhetoric. But analysing systematic hate speech and hate crime as an integrated tactic in political processes such as agenda-setting, policy formulation and policy implementation, adds political and ideological perspectives to the understandings of hate speech and hate crime as provided in other disciplines, e.g. sociology, psychology, criminology, victimology and communication studies. Analysing nasty rhetoric puts hate speech in relation to other tactics and tools of (nasty) politics and governance,

e.g. political advocacy, state budgeting, and governance of state authorities and state-owned companies. Hate speech is one tool in the toolbox used by politicians to silence political opponents. To exemplify, climate scientists can be silenced by accusations of being biased and too emotional (hate speech), budgetary cuts to climate science, and/or policies restricting scientists' freedom of expression. A more comprehensive analysis of different tools used to silence critics to the degradation of Swedish climate policy is provided by von Malmborg (2024a).

Nasty rhetoric can be used in "campaign rallies, speeches, via social media or face-to-face in debates or in actual violent confrontations" (Zeitzoff, 2023, p. 6). In that sense, nasty rhetoric covers offline and online hate speech (the latter often referred to as cyberhate) as well as hate crime (Whillock & Slayden, 1995; Chetty & Alathur, 2018; Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021; Vergani et al., 2024). Zeitzoff (2023) has proposed a typology of nasty rhetoric (Table 2), to which I have added economic and legal violence (sanctions), e.g. state repression, increasingly used against climate justice activists in Europe (Berglund et al., 2024; Forst, 2024a). Reference can be made to state measures to counteract violence-affirming extremism, which include both 'soft' and 'hard' repression (Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020). While hard repression involves economic and legal violence and force to control or crush oppositional action, soft repression includes nonviolent means such as silencing activists or marginalising oppositional ideas, e.g. through ridicule, stigma, and other kinds of hate speech (Ferree, 2004). In combination, soft and hard repression by the state is very much the essence of nasty politics and nasty rhetoric (cf. Earl, 2011, 2013).

Table 2. Typology of nasty rhetoric

Type of nasty rhetoric	Type of repression	Description	Level of aggression
Insults	Soft	Name-calling, including ridicule, hyperbole and caricature, that influences how people make judgement and interpret situations and could sometimes include dehumanising and enmity rhetoric.	Hate (psychological violence)
Accusations	Soft	Blaming opponents of doing something illegal or shady, or promulgating conspiracy theories about opponents, e.g. through hyperbole, caricature, exclusion or ejection.	Hate (psychological violence)
Intimidations	Soft	Veiled threats advocating economic or legal action against an opponent, e.g., that they should get fired, be investigated or sent to prison.	Threat (psychological violence)
Incitements	Hard	The most aggressive type of rhetoric includes people threatening or encouraging sometimes fatal violence against opponents. If the statement is followed, which happens, it implies physical harm to, or in the worst case, death of opponents.	Threat (psychological violence)
Sanctions	Hard	Denunciation, detention, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP), arrest, fines, imprisonment	Economic and legal violence
Physical violence	Hard	Assault, beating, rape, murder.	Physical violence

Modified from Zeitzoff (2023).

Since nasty politics and nasty rhetoric are umbrella concepts used in political science, scholarly understanding of the phenomena would inevitably draw on studies of hate speech and hate crime in other disciplines, e.g. to identify and explain motives, consequences and causalities (cf. Zeitzoff, 2023; von Malmborg, 2025). This is particularly the case when analysing harms to victims of nasty rhetoric. So far, research on victims of nasty rhetoric has focused on politicians (cf. Zeiftzoff, 2023). But in the case of climate politics, victims are also found among scientists, activists and journalists (von Malmborg, 2024a).

Based on the work of Mouffe (2013), Chang (2019) and Olson (2020) show that hate speech, and implicitly nasty rhetoric where hate speech is used systematically to silence the targets, is not only about what is conveyed explicitly by use of language. As such, hate speech, be it stand-alone or systematically used in nasty politics, is not restricted to speech acts or the written language, but also encompasses, e.g., image-based communication with photos, pictures and videos (Bleiker, 2018). Some politicians, such as Donald Trump, also use gesture to ridicule and caricature his political opponents (Goldstein et al., 2020). Political persuaders, particularly populists, use language or images and sometimes the absence of language, e.g. rejection to take interviews with certain journalists, and exclusion or ejection of certain groups from public meetings, to affect emotions, perceptions of knowledge, belief, value, and action (see e.g. Mendoza-Denton, 2020; Shah, 2024). Thus, a statement, image or action that is not overtly hateful, aggressive or violent can also be an expression of nasty rhetoric. The notion of 'nasty' in nasty rhetoric is thus about the inherent message sent in the communicative act – a message of division, supremacy, retribution, dehumanisation and excommunication. Nasty rhetoric is not only directed towards specific individuals, the immediate victims, but extends to the entire outgroup of people and organisations that are labelled as 'enemies' to the ingroup. It has a *message effect* that target people and society in general negatively (cf. Bell & Perry, 2014; Hagerlid, 2020; Marwick, 2025; Ilse & Hagerlid, 2024). The motive behind the act is aimed at more than just the individual victim. Nasty rhetoric is directed against people or groups of people to keep in line with the emotion rules and prevent them from participating in the public and democratic discourse. They should refrain from expressing opinions that do not agree with those of the perpetrator or perpetrators (cf. Hochschild, 1983; Wettergren, 2012; Crawford, 2014; Flam, 2024).

Analysing nasty rhetoric in the case of climate politics may lead us to think of political rhetoric and environmental rhetoric, where emotional rhetoric is used instead of or in combination with rational reasoning to persuade opponents and the public (e.g. Myerson & Rydin, 1996; Higgins, 2008; Kuypers, 2009; Dryzek & Lo, 2015). Walsh (2016) argues for use of more emotional

rhetoric in climate-science debates, sine it would bring "more sensitivity to the political frame within which every debate takes place and how that frame shapes deliberation" (p. 1). However, nasty rhetoric is designed to invoke emotions, both among followers and targets, and aligns with notions of persuasion that stress pathos rather than logos and ethos (Olson, 2020). Populist rhetoric operates in a world where it is not required for "every statement be logically defensible" (McBath & Fisher, 1969, p. 17). On the contrary, populist rhetoric can be rather incoherent (Slotta, 2020) and purposefully using vague concepts (Fridlund, 2025). Nasty rhetoric is not about persuading opponents in a public or political debate or deliberation with facts and logic, it is about using hate speech and sometimes violence to scare opponents to silence in the debate in line with the political theory of German Nazi philosopher Carl Schmitt (Schmitt, 1926, 1932; Mouffe, 1997).

Nasty rhetoric works holistically, where different types and expressions of nasty rhetoric do not happen in isolation, but tend to happen together and not necessarily sequentially (Zeitzoff, 2023). More threatening and aggressive rhetoric happening alongside less aggressive rhetoric. In other words, more overt forms of hate can go hand in hand with implicit, subtle forms that link up to more overt forms, but also somewhat hide and disguise (cf. McIntosh, 2020). Research in social psychology finds a causal relationship between hate and aggression in terms of aggressive tendencies and hurting behaviour experienced towards specific individuals and entire out-groups (Stephan & Stephan, 2017; Martínez et al., 2022b). What starts with different expressions of hate (insults and accusations) is linked to different forms of threats (intimidations and incitements), one more aggressive than the other, and further to psychological, economic, legal or physical violence.

Actions like denunciation, detention, strategic lawsuits against public participation with arrest, fines and imprisonment, performed by the state to dehumanise people it considers to less 'human', not part of the 'people', are usually not considered as violence, as violence is somehow thought of linked to physical harm of the body. But sociology of violence distinguishes between *direct, structural, symbolic* and *cultural violence* (Galtung, 1969, 1990; Bourdieu, 1984; Inhetveen, 2017), including phenomena in which no physical access of nameable actors to victims of violence can be observed. Analytically, violence is no longer considered only as direct physical interaction causing physical harm, like direct violence, that also not only hurts the body physically, but also the person, the self. While framing *structural violence* as unequal power relations causing "the difference between the potential and the actual" realisation of peoples' needs and wants (Galtung, 1969, p. 168), cultural violence is defined as any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimise violence in its direct physical or indirect structural form (Galtung, 1990). *Symbolic violence* built into

a culture does not kill or harm like direct violence or the violence built into the structure. Instead, it represents the subtle and often unnoticed forms of domination that are exerted through social norms, values, and cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, symbolic and cultural violence is used to legitimise either or both direct and structural violence, as for instance in the acts of imperial colonisers in the 15th to early 20th centuries and the German nazis in the 1930s and 40s, but also President Trump and the MAGA movement in the contemporary USA.

Deprecation, i.e. insults and accusations to make claims about action, may be a precursor to more targeted violent rhetoric and action, and act as a provocation and incitement to addressees and bystanders as much as emotional sentiments that wound the targets of a speech, text, picture or video. As stated by Klemperer (2002, p. 15), "words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all", which has also been described as the *banality of evil* (Arendt, 1971). As for violence, "speech can and does inspire crime" (Cohen-Almagor et al., 2018, p. 38; Schweppe & Perry, 2021). As stated by Maria Ressa, Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 2021:[7] "Online violence does not stay online. Online violence leads to real world violence". Thus, hate speech and nasty rhetoric can also be seen as a type of 'terrorism' or trigger event of terrorism, i.e. any intentional act directed against life or related entities causing a common danger (Chetty & Alathur, 2018; Piazza, 2020a, 2020b). In the event of nasty rhetoric instigated by politicians in power, we can speak of 'state terrorism' (cf. Zeitzoff, 2023).

As for nasty politics and rhetoric as a precursor of political violence, Piazza (2020b) analysed terrorism and hate speech data for about 150 countries globally in the period 2000–2017. He found that hate speech by political figures boosts domestic terrorism, defined as "the deliberate, premeditated use of violence, or the threat of violence, by nonstate actors that is politically motivated and is intended to influence a wider audience beyond individuals affected directly by the attack" (Piazza, 2020b, note 1). Such domestic terrorism is mediated through increased political polarisation caused by political hate speech (cf. Klein, 2020). Donald Trump is a well-known user of nasty rhetoric targeting several groups in society, promoting hatred and violence (McIntosh, 2020; Valcore et al., 2023), for which he has been called "insulter in chief" (Vargiu et al., 2024). He is not the only world leader accused of publicly denigrating people beyond politicians for their racial, ethnic or religious identities, or for their political opinions (Piazza, 2020a, 2020b), but he actively incited violent riots at the storming of Capitolium on 6 January 2021 (Zeitzoff, 2023), and he violates numerous democratic norms such as legitimacy and

[7] Interview in *Swedish Television*, 10 December 2021.Quote at 1:04:03. https://bit.ly/36rVAyf

accountability in delivery and content of his speeches (e.g., Jamieson & Taussig, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2020).

2.2.3 Nasty rhetoric and the populist radical right

Populist radical right parties have increased their votes in every election to national parliaments in Europe since the 1980s and autocratisation is increasing (Mudde, 2017, 2021; V-Dem Institute, 2024, 2025, 2026; IDEA, 2025). Ideologically, right-wing populism is seen as a thin-centred ideology largely lacking in content beyond its distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005; Abts & Rummens, 2007). It is often combined with sets of ideas from ethnonationalism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Nasty rhetoric is an important tactic in the populist radical right political ideology, discourse, strategy and style to gain control over peoples' thoughts (cf. Olivas Osuna, 2021). Radical right populists are antiliberal and defies pluralism of ideas. As analysed by Mouffe (2013), the political strategies of the contemporary radical right draws largely on the writings of Nazi philosopher Carl Schmitt (1926, 1932), about the tension between the liberal logic on 'difference' and the democratic logic on 'equivalence', implying that unitary equality and equity can never be fulfilled without a possibility of inequality and inequity. Equality and equity can only be fulfilled in democracies, for the people that belong to a specific polity, the demos. From this analysis, Schmitt argued for authoritarian rule and that pluralism of ideas would shatter people and the state. Thus, Schmitt claimed, is democracy only for a homogeneous people, where the state must differentiate between 'friends' and 'enemies', and potentially 'eliminate or eradicate heterogeneity'. The right-wing populist answer to a crisis of liberal democracy is authoritarian 'democracy' where everyone thinks the same. There must be a cultural hegemony with a new set of emotion rules.

The workings of the radical right were analysed by Antonio Gramsci in his texts on the rise of fascism and the reasons why it gained ascendency within Italian political society (Gramsci, 1971). Analysing fascist Italy, he explains how the cultural hegemony of the rulers creates emotional rules that are transferred to the dominated, who in turn interpret and accept these as 'common sense'. It has later been revealed that Gramsci's anti-fascist texts have been influential to the 'radical right Gramscianism' and its strategies to gain cultural hegemony through a culture war, a metapolitics (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Pasieka, 2022; Bures, 2023; Worth, 2024). Every concept, all meaning making, is defined in a process of constitutive antagonism, where all possible interpretations are excluded when an interpretation becomes hegemonic. The radical right uses populism to shape a hegemonic discourse based on cultural identity, not on class.

Following the path of Schmitt and with theories of Gramsci, radical right populists use rhetoric, narratives and discourse based on emotional appeals to the homogenous good 'people' (the popular) as the ingroups and the exclusion of corrupt and evil 'elites', the outgroups who are routinely blamed and scapegoated for perceived grievances and social ills (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2016; Hunger & Paxton, 2022). Emotional narratives of 'disaster' or 'anxiety' are important for the success of radical right populists (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022). These refer to a fictional fantasy of a constant crisis, rather than an actual crisis of the nation, caused by long-term mismanagement by a corrupt 'elite' (Ketola & Odmalm, 2023; Abraham, 2024). Radical right populist leaders like Donald J. Trump portray themselves as the saviour of the nation and the people, and they claim that the 'elite', sometimes referred to as 'Anti-Christ" should be punished for their crimes against the 'people' (Mudde, 2017). The enemy is punished in a sort of iconoclasm, being silenced from taking part in pluralistic and free-spirited discourse as well as destruction of symbolic institutions of pluralistic liberal democracy, e.g. independent science, independent media and civil society. It erases their ability to express themselves or even the memory of them from history (Prusac-Lindhagen, 2024). Iconoclasm in antique Egypt, Greece, and Rome often manifested itself in the destruction of' body parts for various senses – eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and hands – on statues of past leaders (Minor, 2024).

The notion of 'people', the central tenet of populism, is constructed and sustained through the stories of peoplehood told by political leaders (Smith, 2003), often linked to an emotional response (Koschorke & Golb, 2018). While sometimes talking the language of the 'people' – an "expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543) – populists are not responsive to popular will. Their thin ideology is based on a unitary and non-pluralist vision of society's public interest – the 'Only Truth' or the 'Ultimate Goal' – that one or more self-appointed leaders or ideologists are the only rightful interpreters of. Thus, the 'public interest' is a putative will of the 'people' (Arato & Cohen, 2017; Bitonti, 2017; Caramani, 2017; Mudde, 2017), systematically presenting misinformation (Törnberg & Chueri, 2026). Individuals' interests or rights may be sacrificed for the good of society (Popper, 1945). They thus act on their own will and invite their audience to identify with them (White, 2023).

In relation to disseminating conspiracy theories about the state of society, radical right populists also use nasty rhetoric with coarse, rude, and disrespectful language (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013; Moffitt, 2016; Lührmann et al., 2020; Mudde, 2021; Zeitzoff, 2023; Törnberg & Chueri, 2026). By using nasty rhetoric and attributing negative characteristics to certain people or groups with cultural identities that distinguish them from the perceived normative sociocultural group, the populist radical right delegitimises and dehumanises the unwanted people – *The Others*. Hereby

they are also creating the 'people', those who fit in. This process of *othering* was and is central to the imperialist West's colonisation of countries in Africa, Asia and America, but also to the imperialist aspirations of the German, Italian and Japanese fascists during the 1920s to 40s (Fanon, 1963; Said, 1978). It is also central to populists' creation of 'the people' (Laclau, 2005). The result of this process shaping an ingroup and an outgroup is a forced exclusion of the Other, that can be seen as an antonym of belonging. Where belonging implies acceptance and inclusion of the 'people', otherness implies intolerance and exclusion. It affects how people perceive and treat people who are part of the 'normal' *ingroup*, compared to those who belong to the 'abnormal' *outgroup*. This 'Us vs. Them' thinking about people and human relationships denies the humanity of some people. Consequently, 'the Others' are seen as less worthy, without dignity, and with less respect.

At the individual level, the othering plays a role in creating prejudice against people and groups. On a larger scale, it can also play a role in the dehumanisation of entire groups of people, which can then be leveraged to drive change in institutions, governments, and societies. It conveys an image to followers in the ingroup that the opponent is inferior, insensitive to punishment and free game. Hatred towards the outgroup is normalised, which can lead to persecution of marginalised groups, denial of rights based on group identities, or even acts of violence against others (Jacobs & Potter, 2000). According to Herman Goering, this permeated Nazi Germany's propaganda machine. With violence and threats of violence, you can easily control the people.

In all, populist politics is very much about emotional governance through storytelling (Polletta et al., 2011) where the "core populist narrative about good people reclaiming power from corrupt elites is rooted in evocative stories drawing on mythical pasts, crisis-driven presents, and utopian futures" (Taş, 2022, p. 128). Populism is less about great ideas and more about spinning a good yarn containing heroes, villains and plotlines promising change (Nordensvärd & Ketola, 2021). The deprecation used by radical right populists is a perlocutionary message and permission to hate because the identity and related 'threats' posed by people with that identity to the safe, clean, Arcadian, white world the speaker cherishes (Valcore et al., 2023).

2.2.4 Personalities behind nasty rhetoric

A common explanation for the expanding hatred, threats and violence against the outgroup is that the perpetrators project and compensates for their own fear, anxiety, and frustration derived from unprocessed trauma in adolescence (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995; Beck, 2000; Brosschot & Thayer, 2004; Zappulla et al., 2014; Macatee et al. 2015; Ruscio et al., 2015; Di Maggio et al., 2017; Lievaart et al., 2017; Ray, 2018). Such pathological worry – thinking of the

worst in a variety of circumstances, attributing hostile intentions to others and interpreting situations in the worst possible way, with cognitive distortion as a mediator – is a positive predictor of peoples' expression of aggression and hatred (Pace et al., 2018). However, new interdisciplinary research shows that such an explanatory model of hate does not provide the whole truth. Of course, it happens that people express hatred as a projection of their fear, but that is not the main explanation for the phenomenon in general. Recent findings converge that motives can be found on different levels and that any plausible explanation should be based on a systems approach (Dunbar, 2022a; Zeitzoff, 2023; Nai & Maier, 2024; Walther & Rice, 2025).

On the macro-level, usually studied in political science, philosophy, law studies and communication studies, institutional, ideological and political motives are addressed. Meso-level motives are analysed in sociology, anthropology, social psychology and increasingly criminology and victimology, addressing the role of social relations and culture. Micro-level motives and causes are analysed in psychology and psychiatry, and most recently neurobiology, addressing personality traits and their relations to (mal)functions of the brain.

2.2.4.1 Motivation

From a political science perspective, nasty rhetoric is a tactic used systematically to strategically entrench polarisation and political divides between ingroups and outgroups. The aim of the ingroup perpetrators is to denigrate, deprecate, delegitimise, dehumanise and hurt their political enemies in the outgroup to make them silent (Zeitzoff, 2023). In short, research in political science and communication studies suggests that some politicians use nasty rhetoric with hate speech and hate crime (i) to grab media attention and attention of targeted groups, (ii) to be persuasive and strike an emotional chord and solidify ingroup members, and (iii) pave the way for democratic breakdown by silencing opponents or alleged enemies (see e.g. Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Schulz et al., 2020; Dimant, 2023; Zeitzoff, 2023). This suggests that there is something rational behind the use of nasty rhetoric.

Recent research in political psychology indicates that, compared to mainstream politicians, populist politicians score higher on dark triad personality traits, i.e. Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Visser et al., 2017; Nai & Maier, 2018, 2024; Nai & Martínez i Coma, 2019; Galais & Rico, 2021; Pruysers, 2021; Hofstetter & Filsinger, 2024), and that they are more inclined to systematically engage hate speech and hate crime. Machiavellian individuals are cynical, manipulative and lack morals. Typical narcissists are exhibitionists who are arrogant, exploitative and entitled, with oversized egos, while at the same time, their self-esteem is vulnerable, and they are highly sensitive to criticism. Finally, non-pathological psychopathy

features low levels of empathy, conscientiousness and anxiety, along with high levels of impulsivity and thrill-seeking behaviour (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Furnham et al., 2013). This is in line with sociological and historical research suggesting similar character structures, psychological functions, social relations and mechanisms to produce subjectivities of neoliberal capitalism and contemporary radical right populism (Hamburg, 1991; Kohut, 2011; Lacan, 2002; Short, 2016; Weintrobe, 2021; Alemán, 2024; Pavón-Cuéllar, 2024; Slobodian, 2025).

Psychopathological factors can also influence followers in nasty rhetoric (Nai et al., 2023). Different persuasive strategies work on different personalities, and persuasive appeals that are tailored to one's personality are more effective (Hirsh et al., 2012). A recent study by Isom and Hubbard (2025) suggests that dark triad traits may predispose white people to certain beliefs and perceptions. They suggest an association between these personality components and trust in conservative media, which is known to increase white peoples' feelings of habitus angst (Isom et al., 2021) and increase political divides (Klein, 2020). Findings of Isom and Hubbard (2025) also suggest that the pre-dispositional influence dark triad traits may play in the intricate associations between habitus angst (such as white victim ideology), radical right extremist beliefs, media, orthodox norms (such as patriarchal gender normative beliefs), and negative outcomes, including online aggressive behaviours. The current results suggest dark triad traits play a substantial, though varied, role within these complex relationships. Neuropsychiatric research finds a possible relationship of human aggression to traumatic central nervous system injury and neurobiology (Dunbar, 2017, 2022b). Abnormalities in brain function, structure and biochemistry in the fear learning system of prefrontal cortex, hippocampus and amygdala can lead to difficulties in regulating social emotional action (Andrewes & Jenkins, 2019; Harnett et al., 2020; Allwood et al., 2022).

Sociologists argue that the expansion and continuation of hate speech by followers cannot be fully explained by pathological personality traits. The production and propagation of hate messages on social media are not individual acts, not uncorrelated, not disorganised, but part of various social processes and systems (Walther, 2025). It is found that the motive for nasty rhetoric is not only to explicitly do emotional harm to the targets or to mobilise fellow offenders. Mobilised followers spread hate and threats in social media for reasons of social gratification, such as (Walther, 2025):

- acquiring social approval to fit in,
- getting attention and admiration to sustain social support, and
- entertaining each other and sharing in the fun of disparaging other people.

Cheng et al. (2017) found that you don't have to be evil to become a troll and post denigrating, deprecating or dehumanising messages on social media. They found two triggers that can turn anyone into an online troll: being in a bad mood and seeing other people posting hostile messages. When 'evil' political leaders use nasty rhetoric, the darkness of denigration and deprecation seep into the mainstream and become normalised, *habitualised*, in the collective. The opportunity to participate in a collective that allows people to feel good about themselves by being superior to others can, for many, be almost too good to resist (Cheng et al., 2017). Szanto (2018) argues that affective intentionality of hatred:

- has an indeterminate affective focus leading to a collectivisation of the targets,
- is short of a determinate affective focus, where haters derive the extreme affective powers of the attitude not in reaction to any specific features or actions of the targets or from some phenomenological properties of the attitude but, rather, from the commitment to the attitude itself, and
- involves a certain negative social dialectic, robustly reinforcing itself and becomes entrenched as a shared habitus in a commitment to hate with others.

This aligns with analyses of hate speech effects using the ritual model of communication, illustrating a reinforcement of racist attitudes and disparate treatment of minorities that occurs with the repetitive use of hate speech (Calvert, 1997).

Changes in the media landscape, with increasing use of social media, has enabled a constant and decentralised use of myths and imageries that essentialise and reify socio-cultural conflict (Doerr, 2017). Hence, populist radical right groups use social media to diminish the distance between political leaders and individuals, often by enabling a normalisation of behaviours and attitudes that would not be considered acceptable in the physical world, as online information is often non-censored and non-hierarchical (Bjola & Pamment, 2019; Helbing et al., 2019). Anderson and Huntington (2017) found that incivility in online climate debates was mainly used by right-leaning people. Through social media, radical right populists can prey on an already precarious sociopolitical context by deepening efforts to misinform and disinform citizens, communities, organisations, and voters (Agius et al., 2021; Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022).

2.2.4.2 Normalisation

Being exposed to hate speech not targeting yourself reduces people's ability to recognise the offensive character of such language (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). Through a process of *desensitisation*, empathy is replaced by intergroup contempt as a dominant response to others. The greater the

desensitisation of the individual towards hate speech, the greater the persuasive capacity of the message and the prejudice towards the group targeted by hatred. In short, the individual becomes desensitised, normalises hate speech, and transforms it into resentment, increasing prejudice and violence towards the subjects of hate (Soral et al., 2018). Salmela and von Scheve (2018) suggest that behavioural impacts in the spectrum of desensitisation and radicalisation differ between political-ideological groups. Referring to partially different emotional opportunity structures and distinct political strategies at exploiting these structures, they suggest that right-wing populism is characterised by *repressed shame* that transforms fear and insecurity into resentment and hatred against perceived 'enemies' of the precarious self (Salmela & von Scheve, 2018). Left-wing populism, in turn, associates more with *acknowledged shame* that allows individuals to self-identify as aggrieved and humiliated by civil libertarian and neoliberal policies and their advocates. The latter type of shame holds emancipatory potential as it allows individuals to establish bonds with others who feel the same, whereas repressors remain in their shame or seek bonds from repression-mediated defensive hatred.

While personality traits, related to neuroanatomy and neurotransmission of biochemical agents in the expression of hate speech and hate crime affects affective dysregulation of individuals, ascription to a bias ideology has an impact on social cognition and social bonding of perpetrators of hate speech and hate crime. What drives people to follow and expand hatred, threats and violence against the outgroups is a combination of sociocultural processes, culture and ideology, and psychopathological and neurobiological factors. The former factors influence social cognition and sociocultural ties of perpetrators, while the latter involves the sequencing of specific brain-behaviour processes that mobilise aggressive urges and direct these impulses against specific individuals, groups or institutions. Ideologically, Dellagiacoma et al. (2024) has found that people adhering to right-wing authoritarianism are more likely to produce online hate than people with a more social liberal orientation. Dunbar (2022a) describes four archetypes of followers in hate and violence (Table 3).

Table 3. Typology of hate crime perpetrators

Archetype	Description
Willing followers	Minimal ideology and low arousal who join haters for self-affirmation
Calculated believers	Marked by strong ideological motives and low-affect dysregulation
Labile bigots	Affect-dysregulated perpetrators of violence with low ideological motives
Violent extremists	Highly ideological offenders with high affect dysregulation and impulsive neurobiological status

Based on Dunbar (2022a).

2.3 Harms to people

Focusing on politicians' use of nasty rhetoric against political opponents, Zeitzoff (2023) and other political scientists have analysed only the impacts of nasty rhetoric on politics and democracy, not on people as victims. But prior to affecting politics and democracy, as well as society at large, nasty rhetoric with hate speech does something to the targeted people. Research in psychology, social psychology, sociology and philosophy have found that hate speech negatively affects the targets' psychological and physical health, invades their autonomy, impedes their personal development, assaults their dignity, and supresses them (see e.g. Matsuda, 1989; Jacobs & Potter, 2000; Boeckmann & Turpin-Petrosino, 2002; Leets, 2002; Waldron, 2012; Brown, 2015a; Chakraborti, 2017; Walklate, 2017; Chetty & Alathur, 2018; Ray, 2018; Roseman et al., 2018; Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021; Farrell & Lockwood, 2023; Ilse & Hagerlid, 2024; Vergani et al., 2024). Consequently, hate speech laws have been adopted on the grounds that it (i) constitutes group defamation, (ii) is an instance of negative stereotyping or stigmatisation of vulnerable minorities, (iii) is in an incitement to racial or religious hatred, or a threat to public order, (iv) is a dignitary crime that subjects its victims to humiliation or degradation, (v) it is a violation of human rights, such as rights against harassment and/or discrimination, and (vi) is intrinsically wrong independent of its effects (Seglow, 2016; Ray, 2018).

To understand the impacts of nasty rhetoric on politics and liberal democracy, it is important to analyse harms to the real people that are hurt (Matsuda, 1989), the emotions it provokes, how individuals perceive this type of messages, and how their self-image and status in society, and their behaviours are affected and how the crime victim discourse evolves. Since the theory of nasty rhetoric lacks these perspectives, the analytical framework developed for this study draws from multidisciplinary research on harms and victimisation of hate speech, hate crime and state repression. Before presenting and reflecting upon different types of harm, more general perspectives on victimisation are presented as a yet another theoretical frame.

2.3.1 Crime victim discourse

Crime victim discourse is gaining greater prominence in political and public debates in areas such as racist, religious and misogynist hate speech and hate crime (Hansen Löfstrand, 2009; Tham et al., 2011; Mythen & McGowan, 2017; Atak, 2022; Glad et al., 2024; Ilse & Hagerlid, 2024). The concept refers to "the historically, socially, and culturally specific assumptions, expectations, attitudes, and ways of talking (and thinking) about crime victims that exist in society at a given time" (Hansen Löfstrand, 2009, p. 121). The crime victim discourse increases in importance because it can affect traditional legal principles such as rationales for punishment, equality before

the law, and other legal safeguards (Hansen Löfstrand, 2009; Tham et al., 2011). The traditional presentation of victims as essentially powerless and passive is recognised by victimologists as potentially damaging (Moriarty, 2008; Green & Pemberton, 2017). Given that nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics is found to be part of a strategy for paradigmatic change, an iconoclasm, of policy and governance (von Malmborg, 2024a), understanding the crime victim discourse is important also in the field of climate politics, a new area of hate speech and hate crime.

2.3.2 Culture and victimisation

Contemporary victimology considers that definitions of victims in society are culturally dependent, and recent developments have made criminal and legal processes factor in the interests of victims (Mythen & McGowand, 2017). Victims are emerging to play a more important role in the politics and practice of criminal justice, as an intellectual subject in their own right and as a significant source of change within criminology (Moriarty, 2008; Rock, 2017). Influenced by insights from feminist victimology, policymaking is often driven by victims and victim groups (Rock, 2017; Walklate, 2017), heralding the *revolt of the client* (Haug & Sussman, 1969).

Politicisation of the victim in society has made the concept of resilience more prominent in political, media and policy circles. The impact of crime, the victimisation, is now considered a balance between the severity of injury and the level of resilience, where the latter is a resource to help cope with harm, as well as a "form of agency that reminds that the victims of crime should not be assumed or treated as passive, subordinate or powerless" (Green & Pemberton, 2017, p. 61). Cultural victimisation is of particular importance in research on nasty rhetoric in climate politics since radical right populists are waging a culture war on the 'left-liberal conspiracy' and ambitious climate policy. Climate scientists, climate justice activists and climate journalists are all victimised on cultural grounds. Belief in the reality or otherwise of climate change has become a marker for cultural identities (Dunlap & McCright, 2008; Kahan et al., 2012).

The cultural victimisation from nasty rhetoric also touches upon the relevance of analysing the politics of climate change and climate policy, and the overall harms caused by the state–corporation nexus setting the rules of the market and to what extent climate change shall prevented. As climate change criminology pioneer, Rob White puts it, "[t]o address corporate harm, then, requires a political understanding of class power and a rejection of formally legal criteria in assessing criminality and harm. As such, it implies conflict over definitions of conduct and activity, over legitimacy of knowledge claims, and over the role and use of state instruments and citizen participation in putting limits on corporate activity" (White, 2018, p. 97). As identified

by von Malmborg (2024a), the use of nasty rhetoric in contemporary Swedish climate politics is very much part of the conflict over definitions of conduct, legitimacy of knowledge claims and citizen participation in the public policy debates. The harms analysed in this study are not the harms of climate policies or climate change, but the harms caused by hate speech and related violence used by leading state representatives and their supporters in the policy processes to avoid policies that prevent climate change.

2.3.3 Is there an ideal victim?

Theory of victimology has traditionally considered the importance of intent, and the moral and ethical corollaries of the experience of injustice (Green & Pemberton, 2017). Almost two decades prior to victimology became a discipline on its own, Christie (1986) made the concept of an ideal victim popular. Contrary to the lay-people concept of the 'perfect victim, the ideal victim is an analytical concept to study the use and reification of stereotypes suggesting that some persons or categories of individuals more readily than others are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim when hit by a crime.

As suggested by Christie (1986, p. 21), an "ideal victim is (i) weak and vulnerable, (ii) carrying out a respectable project, (iii) in a place no one can blame her for, (iv) abused by a bad and strong offender, and (v) abused by an unknown offender, with no relation to the victim". In addition, the victim must (vi) "be weak enough not to become a threat to other important interests" to establish the identity as an ideal victim (Christie, 1986, p. 21). Victims and offenders are interdependent. "Ideal victims need – and create – ideal offenders" (Christie, 1986, p. 25). The more ideal a victim is, the more ideal becomes the offender. The more ideal the offender, the more ideal is the victim.

But the notion of an ideal victim has been criticised, e.g. with regard to domestic violence or international criminal law (Duggan, 2018; Schwöbel-Patel, 2018) and has made victimology recognise that the decision regarding what is and is not a 'crime' and how 'victims' and 'victimhood' are conceptualised often reflects political power and interests. Bosma et al. (2018) expands on Christie's 'ideal victim' by addressing not only the characteristics of the victim and the victim–offender relationship, but also on victim's sense of threat and subsequent coping, and society's interests and values at the time of victimisation.

Sometimes perpetrators deflect blame and responsibility (Gruber, 2023). Ryan (1970) coined the phrase *blaming the victim* as a phenomenon when a crime victim or victim of any wrongful act is held at fault for the harm done to them. Feminist criminology has found that such victim blaming is common in domestic violence targeting women (see e.g. Harsey & Freyd, 2020;

Harsey et al., 2024). The concept of *DARVO* (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender roles) has been developed to describe how perpetrators of interpersonal violence question the victim when confronted with their abusive behaviour (Freyd, 1997). When used, a perpetrator denies or minimises the harms of any wrongdoing, attacks the victim's credibility, and reverses the roles of victims and offenders such that the perpetrator assumes a victimised position and declares the victim to be the true perpetrator.

2.3.4 Emotional and cognitive harms

Being intimidated as a strawman or just a little girl, being denied to interview a politician or to participate in an open meeting, being accused of extremism, sabotage and terrorism, being threatened with detention, deportation, rape, assault or murder, or being prosecuted in a strategic lawsuit affect people emotionally and cognitively (see e.g. Cassese, 2021; Wahlström et al., 2021; Abuín-Vences et al., 2023; Renström et al., 2023).

Nasty rhetoric is designed and used to evoke feelings and harms the victims emotionally in different ways (Chang, 2019; Olson, 2020), ultimately to denigrate and delegitimise them. Previous studies have reported that victims of nasty rhetoric react emotionally with fear, unrest, discomfort, resentment, feelings of vulnerability, humiliation, shame, frustration, angst and sometimes anger (e.g. Lazarus, 1991; Calvert, 1997; Lang et al., 2000; Stephan et al., 2009; Fernández et al., 2015; Chang, 2019; Wagner & Morisi, 2019; Olson, 2020; Hagerlid, 2021; Allwood et al., 2022; Cowan & Hodge, 2022; Glad et al., 2024). Threats of different kinds of violence tend to scare the victims. When victims perceive belittlement, they often feel humiliated, a self-conscious emotion (Fernández et al., 2015), combined with shame and embarrassment. The humiliated state can also make the victim feel anger, annoyance, or irritation, which are not self-conscious emotions (Frijda et al., 1989).

Anger is often seen as a prototypical protest emotion, posited as a necessary catalysing force that moves a person into action after being targeted by perceived wrongdoings (Cantrell, 2019). Fear and angst, in turn, evoke psychic trauma and feelings of distrust, suspicion and insecurity (Hagerlid, 2020; Allwood et al., 2022; Glad et al., 2024). Dreißigacker et al. (2024) reports that victims of online hate speech exhibit a more pronounced feeling of insecurity outside the Internet, while victims of other forms of cybercrime do not differ in this regard from non-victims. Victims of offline hate speech did not show the same sense of insecurity, indicating that insecurity rise from the uncontrollable spread of hatred on the Internet reaching its victims even in protected private spheres.

Emotions influence cognitive processing, which varies depending on which emotions are elicited by a certain stimulus (Izard, 2010). Research in political communication proposes that emotional and cognitive effects provoked by hateful messages will not depend so much on the content of the message itself as on the ideological affiliation of the receiver with that of the sender (Crawford & Brandt, 2020). This makes great sense in nasty politics, where nasty rhetoric is used to mobilise ingroup followers and dehumanise outgroup members in pernicious polarisation. Abuín-Vences et al. (2022) found that more negative emotions are detected in progressive audiences when the hate speech is contrary to their ideology, while conservatives show less negative emotion in all cases. This is a consequence of normative pressure and outgroup cognitive biases.

Recent research provides evidence that exposure to hate speech can predict posttraumatic stress disorder and depression symptoms (Wachs et al., 2022; Wypych & Bilewicz, 2024). Both effects were mediated by acculturation stress and were significant after controlling for experienced discrimination.

2.3.5 Harms to peoples' dignity and self-respect

To Waldron (2012), the attacking of peoples' dignity is the principal harm of hate speech, thus nasty rhetoric, and must be taken seriously. Compared to more direct, first-order harms to psychological and physiological health, harm to a person's dignity is a second-order harm (Simpson, 2013). Expressions of nasty rhetoric are designed to demonise, dehumanise and delegitimise people in the outgroup, with the aim of silencing and eliminating them. This means eroding the targets' dignity, i.e., "their social standing, the fundamentals of basic reputation that entitle them to be treated as equals in the ordinary operations of society" (Waldron, 2012, p. 5). This erosion of dignity, by some considered social respect (Pelser, 2015), is done by promoting social hierarchies based on cultural identity (Bousquet, 2022):

- first, by constituting discrimination that deny the target people and groups equal status and the full privileges of citizenship, and
- second, by enacting discriminatory norms that promote enmity animus against targeted groups.

Critics of the dignity approach argues that there are many sources of citizens' dignitary status besides speech (Seglow, 2016). In addition, it is claimed that from a legal perspective, the dignity approach leaves us balancing hate speakers' dignity against the dignity of victims. Seglow thus argues that a central part of the harm of hate speech is that it assaults the victim's self-respect.

Individuals have moral reasons to respect themselves for their agency, and their entitlements. In a liberal democracy, freedom of expression should not be interpreted "as an individual liberty, but as a collective enterprise which serves the interests of speakers and the receivers of speech" (Seglow, 2016, p. 1103). Hate speech undermines the self-respect of its targets in both the agency and entitlement dimensions and is thus a direct harm which cannot be compensated for by other sources of self-respect.

More recent studies argue that the conception of 'violation of respect' treats a person as a means rather than an end in themselves (Andrejević et al., 2025). For instance, respect is commonly conceived of as acknowledgment of the equal moral status of all human beings, which is denied when people or groups are stripped of equal opportunities or rights. However, not all discrimination is adequately explained as solely violations of respect. The concept of dignity allows us to appreciate the specific humiliations and degradations of, e.g., a caste society or structurally racist societies, where some people are treated as "untouchable". As shown by Andrejević et al. (2025), dignity differs from respect because dignity uniquely involves considerations about whether the treatment involves humiliation. While the erosion of dignity includes feelings of humiliation, it may cause further emotional harm to victims of hate speech and nasty rhetoric such as fear, doubt and anger.

2.3.6 Behavioural responses

Emotions are important to personal and political behaviour because they are modes of relating to the environment: states of readiness for engaging, or not engaging, in interaction with that environment (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Keltner et al., 2014). Emotions are likely to influence action tendencies because they inform an individual about a situation and prepare the body for a certain course of action (Frijda, 1986; Frijda et al., 1989). Hence, emotions can influence physiological behaviour, such as fleeing, freezing or fighting (Izard, 2010). When targeted with hate speech and threats post-terror, survivors of the terrorist attack on Utøya island, Norway, not only reacted emotionally, but also behaviourally by withdrawing socially and politically (Glad et al., 2024). More recent studies have explained how emotions play an important mediating role in the associations between threat and behaviour (Martínez et al., 2022b, 2023).

People react to threats in different ways depending on the nature of the threat. Threats to worldviews, values and identity, i.e. symbolic threats (Stephan & Stephan, 2017), predicts hatred which in turn predicts aggressive tendencies and hurting behaviour (Martínez et al., 2022b). In comparison, threats to safety, goals or resources, i.e. realistic threats (Stephan & Stephan, 2017), also give rise to strong negative emotions, but rather anger and dislike than hate and disgust (cf.

Martínez et al., 2022b). Anger predicts tendencies of wanting to change or restore the (unjust) situation (Halperin et al., 2011; Fischer et al., 2018; van Doorn, 2018). If we consider a person or a group to be malicious, we hate them, but if we consider them to act maliciously, we get angry. We can forgive someone acting maliciously if they change behaviour (Halperin et al., 2011, 2012; Fischer et al., 2018; van Doorn, 2018). In all, psychological research on hate and anger, and the respective behavioural tendencies from these emotions, finds that hate is a destructive force, aiming to eliminate an interpersonal or outgroup target, while anger is a constructive force, aiming at restoring or changing the situation and the target, either through coercion aimed at the anger-eliciting perpetrator, or more prosocial behaviours focused on the victim (Halperin et al., 2011, 2012; van Doorn et al., 2014; Martínez et al., 2022a). The stronger emotional reactions to symbolic threats, facilitating hate and aggression, may be explained by the strong emotionality with which people endorse values, moral convictions and worldviews (Skitka et al., 2005; Pretus et al., 2022).

Exposure to derogatory language can lead to political radicalisation and deteriorates intergroup relations. The increased presence of hate speech in one's environment creates a sense of a descriptive norm that allows outgroup derogation, which leads to polarisation and the erosion of existing anti-discriminatory norms (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). Moreover, it seems that preexisting attitudes towards an outgroup is strengthened by hate speech, indicating that hate speech can increase polarisation in society (Schäfer et al., 2022). Renström et al. (2023) found that individuals reacting to threats with hate or more aggressive emotions, are more prone to affective polarisation and intergroup differentiation with increased reliance on stereotypes. Bilewicz and Soral argue that through basic psychological dynamics, societies become more accepting of derogatory language and less accepting of religious, ethnic, sexual and political minorities groups.

In addition, frequent and repetitive exposure to hate speech delivered by people having ideas aligned with your own reduces people's ability to recognise the offensive character of such language (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). Through a process of 'desensitisation', where individuals gradually learn to ignore these messages, empathy is replaced by intergroup contempt as a dominant response to others (Soral et al., 2018). After desensitisation, people in the ingroup are less sensitive to hate speech and more prejudiced towards the outgroup than their counterparts in the control condition (Soral et al., 2018). This aligns with analyses of hate speech in communication studies, illustrating a reinforcement of racist attitudes and disparate treatment of minorities that occurs with the repetitive use of hate speech (Calvert, 1997).

Neuropsychiatric research finds a relationship of human aggression to traumatic central nervous system injury and neurobiology (Dunbar, 2017, 2022). Neuroimaging of traumatised individuals, particularly people that have developed post-traumatic stress disorder, show abnormalities in brain function, structure and biochemistry in the fear-learning system of prefrontal cortex, hippocampus and amygdala (Andrewes & Jenkins, 2019; Harnett et al., 2020), with physical changes in prefrontal cortex and amygdala leading to difficulties in regulating social emotional action.

But Salmela and von Scheve (2018) suggest that behavioural impacts in the spectrum of desensitisation and radicalisation differ between political-ideological groups. Referring to partially different emotional opportunity structures and distinct political strategies at exploiting these structures, they suggest that left-wing populism largely associates with acknowledged shame that allows individuals to self-identify as aggrieved and humiliated by civil libertarian and neoliberal policies and their advocates. Acknowledged shame holds emancipatory potential as it allows individuals to establish bonds with others who feel the same, whereas repressors remain in their shame or seek bonds from repression-mediated defensive hatred.

Summarising research on harms of hate speech and hate crime in neurobiology, psychology, sociology, victimology and political science, table 4 presents a typology of harms of nasty rhetoric to people.

Table 4. Typology of (social-)psychological harms of nasty rhetoric to people

Type of harm	**Types of response**		
Emotional	Anger	Angst	Doubt
	Fear	Frustration	Hate
	Insecurity	Resentment	Self-hate
	Shame	Vulnerability	Worry
Cognitive	Confidence	Desensitisation	
Psychiatrical	Anxiety	Depression	PTSD
Social psychological	Alienation	Lower dignity	Lower self-respect
Behavioural	Counterattack	Resilience	Resistance
	Robustness	Self-policing	Self-control
	Withdrawal (professional, social, political)		

Based on Frijda et al. (1989), Matsuda (1989), Lazarus (1991), Matsuda (1993), Frijda & Mesquita (1994), Calvert (1997), Lang et al. (2000), Stephan et al. (2009), Izard (2010), Keltner et al. (2014), Green & Pemberton (2017),

Wagner & Morisi (2019), Jämte & Ellefsen (2020), Allwood et al. (2022), Cowan & Hodge (2022), Wachs et al. (2022), Renström et al. (2023), Dreißigacker et al. (2024), and Glad et al. (2024).

2.4 Harms to liberal democracy

The overall aim of nasty rhetoric is to silence members of the outgroup in political processes and discussions in society. Hate speech evocates feelings and do emotional harm to outgroup targets. Being emotionally harmed, victims of hate speech and hate crime are also harmed cognitively, normatively and behaviourally (e.g. Cassese, 2021; Wahlström et al., 2021; Abuín-Vences et al., 2023; Renström et al., 2023). Depending on how victims respond behaviourally, e.g. freezing, fleeing or fighting (Frijda, 1986; Frijda & Mesquita, 1994), democracy can be harmed in different ways.

Liberal democracy is also harmed from the restriction of liberal human and civil rights that follow nasty rhetoric, humiliating people with the aim to silence and eliminate them from society, stripping them of equal human rights (Tsesis, 2009; Simpson, 2013; Andrejević et al., 2025). Nasty rhetoric used by populists disqualifies the liberal democratic conception of the public interest based on coexistence and aggregation of various political visions and of various stakeholders in a political society (cf. Rawls, 1993). While ideational pluralism is central in liberal democracy (Lijphart, 1977), populists are ideologically strongly negative to pluralism (Bitonti, 2020). To get rid of pluralism, nasty rhetoric is used to perniciously polarise politics and society, then to eradicate the outgroup to gain cultural hegemony. In that sense, the pernicious polarisation ignited by radical right populists can be seen as a tactic to reach autocracy or totalitarianism. This makes some scholars and law practitioners consider hate speech to intrinsically fail to respect cultural diversity and thus being fundamentally anti-democratic (Brown 2015a).

Based on studies of nasty rhetoric targeting oppositional politicians, Zeitzoff (2023) argues that nasty politics and nasty rhetoric may have some positive effects to democracy since it provides a tactic for marginalised groups and politicians to exercise power. However, he claims that the negative impacts are more detrimental. Without specifying relations and causalities, Zeitzoff particularly mentions that nasty rhetoric:

- violates a core principle in liberal and deliberative democracy – pluralism of ideas – leading to pernicious polarisation;
- erodes democratic policy processes;

- makes good politicians withdraw or retire, giving room for nastier politicians to take their places;
- heightened risks of actual political violence; and
- makes people more cynical of democracy and less willing to vote and participate.

As for nasty politics and rhetoric as a precursor to political violence, Piazza (2020b) analysed terrorism and hate speech data for about 150 countries globally in the period 2000–2017. He found that hate speech by political figures boosts domestic terrorism, mediated through increased political divides caused by hate speech (cf. Klein, 2020). Donald Trump is a well-known user of nasty rhetoric targeting several groups in society, promoting hatred and violence (Ross & Rivers, 2020; Valcore et al., 2023). He is not the only world leader accused of publicly denigrating people beyond politicians based on their racial, ethnic or religious backgrounds, or for their political opinions (Piazza, 2020b), but he actively incited violent riots at the storming of Capitolium on 6 January 2021 (Zeitzoff, 2023), and he violates numerous democratic norms such as legitimacy and accountability in delivery and content of his speeches (e.g., Jamieson & Taussig, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2020).

Previous research focuses on politicians' use of nasty rhetoric targeting oppositional politicians. Nasty rhetoric in climate politics does not only target oppositional politicians, but also climate scientists, climate journalists and climate justice activists for their political opinions and their professional work (von Malmborg, 2024a, 2024b; Bjerström, 2025; Mendy & Karlsson, 2025). This study finds that also civil servants and people in general worried about climate change are targeted.

Going beyond nasty rhetoric between politicians, research on hate speech and hate crime targeting journalists and scientists indicate that nasty rhetoric restricts the flow of scientific information to society, which may invoke knowledge resistance in society (Strömbäck et al., 2022). This poses grave challenges for the functioning of liberal and deliberative democracies, e.g. by restricting (i) freedom of expression, (ii) free formation of opinion, (iii) public deliberation, and (iv) citizens ability to evaluate public policy, hold politicians accountable and make informed votes (Tenove, 2020; Wikforss, 2021; Pawelec, 2022). It also undermines democratic processes by corrupting political discussions (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Dahl, 1998), and the legitimacy of the democratic system as such (Lago & Coma, 2017; Pawelec, 2022). In all, political hate speech breeds general mistrust in politics (Mutz & Reeves, 2005) and feeds political intolerance, defined as the support or willingness to denounce basic democratic values and the equal rights of people belonging to a defined outgroup in a particular society (Oates & Gibson, 2006). This is

considered one of the most problematic phenomena in democratic societies as it paves the way for democratic breakdown (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Democracy scholars highlight the need for strong civil society organisations and civic education as an important effort to defend liberal democracy against ongoing autocratisation (Lührmann, 2021; Mudde, 2021; Silander, 2024; V-Dem Institute, 2024, 2025, 2026). As reported by von Malmborg (2024a), the Swedish government has taken measures to reduce financial support to civic education and civil society organisations, in parallel to the attacks on climate justice activists. Thus, reduction of the civic space may also be a key harm of nasty rhetoric on democracy.

In all, drawing on the literature on emotional, behavioural and democratic harms of nasty rhetoric and more generally hate speech and hate crime, targeting oppositional politicians as well as other kinds of outgroups victims, a framework with typologies for analysing democracy harms of nasty rhetoric is developed (Table 5), which is used in this study.

Table 5. Framework for analysing harms of nasty rhetoric to liberal democracy

Element of nasty politics and rhetoric	**Emotional harm**	**Harms to personal dignity**	**Behavioural response of victims**	**Social and political effect**	**Restriction of human rights in liberal democracy**	**Restriction of peoples' roles in liberal democracy**	**Change in peoples' views of liberal democracy**	**Grand effect on liberal democracy**
Disaster narrative defining enemy	Fear, insecurity	Undermining human dignity	Professional withdrawal	Dualistic polarisation	Restriction of civic space	Evaluation of public policy, scrutiny of power	Corrupt processes	Breakdown of liberal democracy
Hate speech, threats, denigration	Fear, depression, anxiety	Undermining self-respect and self-esteem	Social and political withdrawal	Delegitimisation and dehumani-sation of victims	Free formation of opinion	Public deliberation to shape ideas	Political cynicism and intolerance	Autocratisation
Physical violence	Anger	Doubt of personal identity	Resistance		Freedom of expression		Mistrust in politics	
Economic and legal state repression			Radicalisation		Undermining equality		Lower willingness to vote	
					Undermining justice		Undermining legitimacy of liberal democracy	
							Undermining political accountability	

2.5 Criminalisation of hate speech

The harms of hate speech and nasty rhetoric to people and liberal democracy have led to calls for a ban or restriction globally (cf. Tsesis, 2009; Waldron, 2012). Ever since the 1960s, laws restricting freedom of speech to curb hate speech and hate crime has risen in liberal democracies (Bleich, 2011; Brown, 2015a), though without a common approach on what hate speech is and the threshold which needs to be met for legal regulation to be permissible (Seglow, 2016; Alkiviadou, 2018; Brudholm & Johansen, 2018; Sheppard et al., 2021).

2.5.1 Scholarly debates

The question of banning hate speech and implicitly nasty rhetoric has long been and is still analysed and debated in legal studies, criminology, political science and philosophy, with focus on hate speech related to religion, ethnicity, gender and sexual identity (see e.g. Yong, 2011; Bleich, 2011; Waldron, 2012; Brudholm, 2015; Howard, 2017; Enarsson & Lindgren, 2018; Howard, 2019; Mchangama & Alkiviadou, 2021; Bousquet, 2022; Hietanen & Eddebo, 2022).

As discussed by Brown (2015a), there are both proponents and opponents of hate speech law, all of which are using principled arguments that may be in conflict. From arguments pro and con hate speech law, he suggests a list of morally relevant features to be analysed in discussions on hate speech law (Brown, 2015a, p. 6):

> *liberty (negative and positive), health (psychological and physiological), autonomy (formal and substantive), security (objective and subjective), non-subordination, the absence of oppression, human dignity, the discovery of truth, the acquisition of knowledge, self-realization (in its various incarnations), human excellence, civic dignity, cultural diversity and choice, recognition of cultural identity, intercultural dialogue, participation in democratic self-government, and being subject only to legitimate rule.*

These are the sorts of fundamental rights, vital interests, and basic human goods and values that, according to Brown (2015a) are, or should be, matters of deep and enduring concern to all human beings, and thus being promoted and protected by the state whatever ideology they adhere to. However, 'freedom of expression' and 'equality' are not explicitly mentioned as they are included in other features. Protecting freedom of expression is needed to protect liberty, autonomy, security, non-subordination, absence of oppression, participation in democratic self-government, and being subject only to legitimate rule. Similarly, protection of substantive equality is a basics for protecting features such as non-subordination, absence of oppression, civic dignity, and recognition of cultural identity. The multitude of legal reasons to criminalise hate speech reflects the variety of moral considerations and objections which have been raised against hate

speech. Trying to make some progress in understanding the wrongness of hate speech, Seglow (2016) suggests three classes of moral arguments, claiming that hate speech can be considered: (i) intrinsically wrong, and/or (b) directly harmful and/or (c) indirectly harmful (where harm is a wide, generic category).

Much of the scholarly debates circle the compatibility or conflict between different moral features and whether a specific hate speech law would conflict with a specific feature, e.g. freedom of expression. To scholars of legal philosophy adhering to the 'dignity approach', hate speech does indeed promote the deliberative and expressive interests underlying free expression, but these interests are outweighed by hate speech's proclivity to erode the dignity of its targets (Waldron, 2012; Bousquet, 2022). The persistence of hate speech is incompatible with the liberal duty to preserve the equal dignity of all citizens. In liberal democracies, it is the obligation of the state to ensure that all citizens retain equal consideration in decision-making, equal recognition as human agents capable of making and executing plans for their lives, and equal opportunity to participate in the cultural, professional, and political spheres (Bousquet, 2022). Expressions of nasty rhetoric are designed to dehumanise people in the outgroup, eroding the fundamentals of basic reputation that entitle the targets to be treated as equals in the ordinary operations of society. Thus, scholars in philosophy of law claim that attacking of peoples' dignity is the principal harm of hate speech (Waldron, 2012; Bousquet, 2022).

Brudholm (2014) argues that we should hesitate or even abstain from classifying hate crime as a human rights violation, and that doing so is compatible with taking both hate crimes and human rights seriously. Following this line of thought, Howard (2019) argues that we must show that agents have moral duties to refrain from the conduct in question to justify criminal prohibition of hate speech and thus nasty rhetoric. He proposes five moral duties as a basis for banning hate speech: (i) a duty not to threaten, (ii) a duty not to harass, (iii) a duty not to offend, (iv) a duty not to defame, and (v) a duty not to incite wrongdoing. Howard's suggestion echoes the classical harm-based liberal moral principle of John Stuart Mill (1859, p. 13):

> *That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.*

But this kind of liberal harm-principle is essentially unremarkable in the modern western world, where the liberal tradition apparently is under increasing threat from libertarians and populist radical right movements. Reviewing and analysing both efforts to regulate and to define hate

speech in legal, paralegal, and tech platform contexts, Hietanen and Eddebo (2022, p. 454) arrive at four possible modes of defining hate speech:

1. Teleological definition, where the intentionality and tendency of the speech act towards certain ends is in focus;
2. Pure consequentialist definition, which focuses on the effects of the speech act alone;
3. Formal definition, which builds on the essential character of the speech act and the ideas involved; and
4. Consensus or relativist definition, where any speech act can become denoted hate speech by fiat.

To balance institutional suppression of hate speech and the liberal democracy freedom of expression, Hietanen and Eddebo suggest that outright prohibitions of specified ideas are implemented for clear reasons, rather than ambiguous suppressions of a vague category of speech acts. Explicit lists with clearly specified axiological reasons for the suppressions can at least, in principle, be targeted by rational arguments. In addition, they claim that any consequential definition must be agreed on internationally (e.g., through the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights), since, they argue, we should not have to rely on big tech platforms to restrict their own activities.

2.5.2 Legal action to end nasty rhetoric

In parallel to the scholarly debate, legislation to curb hate speech, often by restricting freedom of expression, has risen in liberal democracies since the 1960s (Bleich, 2011). Consequently, legislation has been adopted around the world that criminalises hate speech and implicitly nasty rhetoric into hate crime. In most cases, such legislation focuses on racist, religious, gender or identity-related hate speech and hate crime, but in some cases, hate speech and hate crime based on differences in ethics and political opinion, criminalising also threats to democracy (Bleich, 2011; Brown, 2015a; Howard, 2017; Alkiviadou, 2018; Mchangama & Alkiviadou, 2021). Despite differences, the legislation is justified by the additional harm, the 'signal nature' of these offences and the way they instantiate structures of inequality and exclusion of people with 'unwanted' cultural identies (Ray, 2018). However, current legislation lacks a common approach on what hate speech is and the threshold which needs to be met for legal regulation to be permissible (Alkiviadou, 2018; Brudholm & Johansen, 2018).

In the EU, relevant legal acts are the European Convention of Human Rights, the European Union Framework Decision on Racism and Xenophobia, and the Additional Protocol to the

Cybercrime Convention of the Council of Europe. Referring to the case law of the ECHR, Howard (2017) claims that nasty rhetoric, hate speech and freedom of expression related to religion should not be restricted except when offenders incite to hatred and violence and there is an imminent danger that violence will follow or where it stops people from holding or manifesting their religion. Based on quantitative and qualitative analyses of the ECHR case law, Mchangama and Alkiviadou (2021, p. 1008) argue that both the ECHR and the European Commission have "adopted an overly restrictive approach to hate speech, which fails to provide adequate protection to political speech on controversial issues". In comparison, they find that EU member states "have adopted more convincing approaches of hate speech, providing a robust protection of free speech while leaving room for the State to curtail the most extreme forms of non-violent hate speech" (Mchangama & Alkiviadou, 2021, p. 1008). Most European countries focus on specific categories of victims of hate speech, while others take a more generic approach (Bengtsson Mueller & Evans, 2024). Recently, the European Commission (2021) proposed to extend the list of EU crimes to all forms of hate crime and hate speech, whether because of race, religion, gender or sexual identity. But the list does not include hate speech and hate crime fuelled by differences in political opinion on non-identity related policy issues such as climate change.

Besides criminalising the act of hate speech, the European Commission signed in 2016 a code of conduct with large tech companies such as Meta, Twitter/X, YouTube and Microsoft including a series of commitments to combat the spread of illegal hate speech online in Europe. In January 2025, the Commission and the European Board for Digital Services presented a revised code of conduct, which has also been integrated into the EU Digital Services Act (DSA). According to the Commission, Code of Conduct+ will strengthen the way online platforms deal with content that EU and national laws define as illegal hate speech. The integrated code of conduct will facilitate compliance with and the effective enforcement of the DSA when it comes to risks of dissemination of illegal content on their services. In 2025, the DSA was firmly criticised by US Vice President J.D. Vance for being antidemocratic, restricting freedom of speech. Since then, the Commission has fined some US tech companies for violating the legislation, and more fines may come.

In 2024, the EU adopted a directive to prevent strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP). The aim is to provide safeguards against manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings in civil matters with cross-border implications brought against natural and legal persons on account of their engagement in public participation, e.g. human rights activists.

3. Method and materials

The case of Swedish climate politics is informative for several reasons. Increasing media coverage of the phenomenon in newspapers, magazines and radio programmes of toxic language in the public climate debate indicates that it is a growing concern in Sweden and Swedish public policy. More importantly, as a case study to provide insights and knowledge of relevance for an international audience, Sweden is currently undergoing several changes in politics and governance noticed also by scholars internationally. Sweden has until recently been considered:

1. a stronghold of liberal democracy since World War II, able to develop and maintain a green and equitable welfare state, but is now showing signs of autocratisation and the end of Swedish exceptionalism regarding radical right populism (e.g. Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019; Widfeldt, 2023; Gustavsson, 2024; Silander, 2024; Avellan et al., 2026; CLUE, 2026),
2. an international role model in climate policy and governance, but is currently implementing new policies increasing GHG emissions, making the government conduct climate change crime (Duit, 2016; Matti et al., 2021; SCPC, 2024; Widerberg et al., 2024; Ergon, 2026), and
3. the home of strong social movements advocating ambitious climate justice policy, particularly with Greta Thunberg and FFF (de Moor et al., 2020), which are now increasingly criticised and threatened (Berglund et al., 2024).

But as reported by several scholars, the change of government in autumn 2022 has made the image of Sweden as a role model crack (Berglund et al., 2024; Silander, 2024; Widerberg et al., 2024; Ergon, 2026). Since the entering office of the so-called Tidö parties (further described in section 4), Sweden is undergoing a process of populist radical right autocratisation (Avellan et al., 2026; CLUE, 2026), Swedish climate policy is denounced, and civil society is under threat. Related to all these changes we find nasty rhetoric.

3.1 Qualitative case study

There are several studies on the use of hate speech and nasty rhetoric, less on victimisation and emotional and behavioural harm of hate speech, none of nasty rhetoric. Most of these studies are quantitative, resulting in rather dry and soulless presentations of political hate speech and nasty rhetoric (see Vergani et al., 2024, for a review of the research). Victims, harmed emotionally, are represented as dots, lines and digits in graphs and tables (cf. Tham et al., 2011; Hagerlid, 2021). Such norms have been increasingly criticised for being "restrictive, inhibit the development of

knowledge and excise much of what it is to be human from our learning, teaching and research" (Gilmore et al., 2019; p. 3).

Trying to really understand the nature of nasty rhetoric, the aim of this study is not to quantitatively analyse how many male, female and non-binary politicians from left to right that use nasty rhetoric. Nor is it to quantitatively analyse how many male, female and non-binary climate scientists, climate justice activists and climate journalists that have been targeted by nasty rhetoric, or how many that reacted in different ways (cf. Hagerlid, 2020). Nasty rhetoric aims at evocating feelings and emotionally hurting its targets, making people afraid (Chang, 2019; Olson, 2020). It aims at demonising and dehumanising people (Cassese, 2021; Wahlström et al., 2021), making them change behaviour, silence and disappear from the political conversation.

While previous research indicates that nasty rhetoric is particularly a practice of the right-wing and radical right populists, I do not prejudice and rule out in advance that climate advocates do not use nasty rhetoric or any form of divisive and derogative language. The study thus explores the use of nasty rhetoric by politicians and their supporters *from all quarters*, climate advocates and climate sceptics alike. The study focuses primarily on the use of nasty rhetoric from early 2022 and onwards, when it became a topic in Swedish media.

Acknowledging the human emotional dimensions of nasty rhetoric, I follow the tack of Matsuda (1989) and Glad et al. (2024) and analyse the use and harms of hate speech and nasty rhetoric qualitatively. I report who said what and let victims talk with their own words and stories. Thus, I engage emotions and behavioural responses of different victims. I hope to explore harms of nasty rhetoric in a way that affectively engages and absorbs the readers so that learning about nasty rhetoric and how it hurts its victims happens almost unknowingly through emotions (cf. Parker, 2014; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014; Page, 2017). Serving a "living dish" (Dubois, 2025, p. 1), I hope that readers could feel, or at least imagine, the pain, fear, angst and anger that comes with being harmed by nasty rhetoric – being dehumanised, loosing human dignity and equality.

The main victims of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics identified and reported are climate scientists, climate justice activists and climate journalists (von Malmborg, 2024a; Bjerström, 2025; Mendy & Karlsson, 2025). In this report, *climate scientists* refer to academic researchers from multiple disciplines studying the causes and effects of global warming, those developing technologies to mitigate and adapt to climate change, as well as those studying responses, actions, policies and measures (including political, economic, technological, discursive, social and behavioural) taken or that could or should be taken by politicians, business leaders, economists, public organisations, social organisations and people to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Climate justice activists refer to people who, organised in climate movements or unorganised, participate in the public debate advocating a need for urgent action to mitigate and adapt to the climate change emergency (cf. Martiskainen et al., 2020; Kirsop-Taylor et al., 2023). Many of them refer to the anthropogenically induced climate change and the resulting climate emergency as ecocide. Activists are often labelled radical in the sense that they engage in strenuous or risky confrontative activities to advocate exogenous change of the state and industry, from writing and speaking, via legal demonstrations to disruptive civil disobedience and illegal but non-violent action (cf. Berglund & Schmidt, 2020; Berglund, 2025). Swedish climate justice activists are non-violent and less radical than the American radical environmental movement in the 1990s and early 2000s including *Earth First!, Earth Liberation Front* and the 'Unabomber' who engaged in sabotage, property destruction and arson (Zeitzoff, 2026). Finally, *climate journalists* refer to journalists that report on climate change, climate science, climate action and climate politics in news media.

Nasty rhetoric is not only directed towards specific individuals, the immediate victims, but is likely to extend to the entire outgroup of people and organisations advocating more ambitious climate policy. It has *message effects* that target people and society in general negatively (cf. Bell & Perry, 2014; Hagerlid, 2020; Marwick, 2025; Ilse & Hagerlid, 2024). In Sweden, hate crimes are considered message crimes, with a motive to target more than just the immediate victim. Hate and threats are directed broadly towards people or groups of people to prevent them from participating in the public debate. They should refrain from expressing opinions that do not agree with those of the perpetrator or perpetrators.

The analysis is qualitative, exploring, illustrating and interpreting how victims are self-reportedly affected emotionally and behaviourally by nasty rhetoric, and how this affects democracy. The latter since it is brought up by several victims themselves. Being aware of the critique of assessing emotions elicited by political speech based on self-reports, which address emotions produced implicitly at a pre-conscious level and thus often unreliable (Smith, 2020), I consider self-reported emotional effects accurate for the purpose of this study. The paper explores types of experiences and reactions; it does not explain causal relationships. Following the perspectives of Avi Brisman on theory of green-cultural criminology, and of Anna Durnová on understanding emotions in politics, the analysis aims at interpreting and giving meaning to nasty rhetoric and the consequences thereof (Brisman & South, 20213; Brisman, 2014; Durnová, 2018).

3.2 Interpretation with metaphors

To go beyond the stories, I use an interpretative approach to understand the nature of nasty rhetoric (cf. Durnová & Zittoun, 2011; Durnová, 2018). More specifically, I use frames and metaphors to make sense and produce an emotional image of why and how it is used, how victims are harmed, and how it affects society, politics and democracy. While a frame refers to the way users or victims of nasty rhetoric identify and legitimate their ideas, reactions and behaviours, a metaphor refers to symbolic expression that embodies a particular frame (cf. von Malmborg et al., 2023). A frame guides individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" events and conditions around them (Goffman, 1974, p. 21), which are used as a "strategic and deliberate activity aimed at generating public support for specific policy ideas" (Béland, 2011, p. 11). Metaphors are utilised to reinforce certain frames through certain applications. Metaphors are used to achieve "certain communication goals within particular contexts rather than being predetermined by bodily experience" (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 247). Metaphors involve the conjunctions of whole semantic domains in which a correspondence between terms or concepts appears. These can be deciphered from comparing with pre-existing attributes or constructed by creation of new meaning beyond previously existing similarities (Cornelissen, 2005).

Use of metaphors have strengths as well as weaknesses in that one attempts to understand one experience in terms of another constructed experience. This is not just limited to the literal use of metaphors: on the contrary, metaphors are a human way of thinking that even colours science. As claimed by Morgan (1986), all social science theories and their models are metaphorical in their nature. Every metaphor is at its core normative because it promotes one point of view over another. Often metaphors are hard to get rid of and become a sort of prison of mind. Still by seeing theories and models as metaphors, we become aware that one theory is not enough to describe reality (Morgan, 1986). Reflecting on his own theory of imaginisation of organisations, Morgan (2016, p. 1029) argues that "most current approaches in social science are overly-focused on the study of abstracted metonymical constructs", why they will have difficulty dealing with the multidimensional complexity we now face. Instead, a more "flexible use of metaphor[s] can help us engage and understand the multidimensional and paradoxical nature of organisational life" (p. 1029). This can be stretched to understanding the nature of humans, politics and society.

I therefore use metaphors to organise and analyse the results and make sense of why and how nasty rhetoric is used, how people harmed react and what happens to democracy. As will be shown, users of nasty rhetoric have different purposes with its use, and people are harmed in different ways. So are society and democracy. The metaphors used are not independent

discourses but should be understood as direct embodiments of political behaviour as they crystalise the meaning of different behaviours. The metaphors are justifications and embodiments of frames as something tangible.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Data on the use of insults, accusations etcetera in different fora was collected from secondary written and audio-visual material in official policy documents, political debates, newspapers, magazines, blogs, television, radio, social media etcetera. Data on emotional and behavioural harms as well as democracy harms draws on mixed method materials, using both primary and secondary data. Secondary data was collected from written and audio-visual sources such as newspapers, magazines, blogs, radio, podcasts etcetera. It also uses primary data from interviews, further described below. A list of sources of secondary data is available in Annex A.

Due to its wide reach and possibility of anonymity, social media provides important fora and channels for conveying hate speech and nasty rhetoric (Benkler et al., 2018; Olson, 2020; Agius et al., 2021; Tom Tong, 2025). As analysed by Vowles and Hultman (2021b), the *Sweden Democrats* (SD) is extensively using a troll army on social media to spread misinformation and cyberhate. However, the anonymous use of nasty rhetoric of SD and others on social media platforms such as X/Twitter, Facebook or TikTok are not systematically analysed in this study. This choice was made deliberatively because of the anonymity problem. The study does not particularly want to identify which kinds of insults, accusations etcetera are used or to what extent, but which persons and organisations actively taking part in the climate policy debate that send them, in which contexts and they are targeting.

3.3.1 Data on use of nasty rhetoric

Secondary data on the use of nasty rhetoric was identified through Boolesk searches in Retriever Mediearkivet[8], the largest media archive in the Nordic countries covering more than 1 000 newspapers, magazines etcetera. Searches were made in April 2024, December 2024, October 2025 and April 2026, using different truncated terms in Swedish, translations of which are presented in Table 6, in combination with 'climate', such as climate AND hate, climate AND threats, climate AND crime, and climate AND populism. Some terms, like antidemocratic, sabotage/saboteur and terrorism/terrorists, were included since such accusations on climate activists were widely discussed in national media in late 2023 and early 2024.

[8] https://www.retrievergroup.com/sv/product-mediearkivet

I also screened programmes in television, radio and podcasts, searching webpages of state-owned and privately owned national television and radio using the search terms 'climate politics' and 'climate activism'. As for blogs, videos (YouTube) and social media, posts on the largest pro-climate, libertarian and radical right extremist accounts from January 2022 to July 2025 were screened and analysed. The search terms chosen, addressing particularly hateful and threatening words, may have restricted identification of more normal kinds of rhetoric. However, the written data sources often put the use of nasty language in context, which makes it possible to also analyse sequencing of rhetoric and if nasty rhetoric was used alone or together with less nasty language.

Table 6. Search terms for articles, editorials and op-eds

Accus*	Delegitim*	Journalis*	Populis*	Terroris*
Activis*	Democra*	Legitima*	Radical right	Sweden Democrats
Aggress*	Demon*	Liar	Repress*	The Cry #
Antidemocratic	Elit*	Liberal	Roadblock	Threat*
Climate	Hate	Nazi	Sabot*	Violen*

The Cry, in Swedish "Klägget", is foul language for the "elite", used by populists as well as advocates of deliberative democracy, see e.g. www.klagget.nu

Editorials, op-eds and articles in newspapers, magazines and blogs commenting climate policy related hate speech and state repression were found in left, green, social democrat, liberal, conservative and radical right media. In total, 420 editorials, op-eds, news articles, blogs, social media posts, TV programmes, and radio programmes were identified. Of these, a qualitative analysis of the contents condensed the sources to 141 pieces, showing, reporting or discussing the use of hate speech and hard state repression in Swedish climate politics between June 2021 and April 2026 (Table 7).

Nasty rhetoric is usually emotional and affective, but emotions are not always contained in the written or spoken language itself but can be triggered by it and be used to anticipate a phenomenon (Chang, 2019; Olson, 2020). Nasty or uncivil rhetoric conveying hate or threats can also be expressed visually (Bleiker, 2018), where radical right populism deploys a range of visual images to portray its ideas, such as Pepe the Frog memes (Bedford, 2017). In attacking climate activists, radical right populists also use memes of Greta Thunberg showing emotions to distinguish 'rational men' from 'emotional women' (White, 2022). Thus, subtle expressions of nasty rhetoric, e.g. refusal to give interviews, photos and videos of rhetorical actions were also identified.

Table 7. Sources of secondary data on use of nasty rhetoric

Type of media	Media source	No. of sources
Newspapers and magazines	***Sub total***	***111***
	Neutral	2
	Business	2
	Left-green	22
	Social democrat	23
	Liberal	46
	Conservative	13
	Radical right	3
Blogposts	***Sub-total***	***7***
	Personal	1
	Left-green	5
	Libertarian	1
Podcasts	***Sub-total***	***2***
	Liberal	2
Social media	***Sub-total***	***8***
	Independent	1
	Left-green	1
	Conservative	4
	Libertarian	1
	Radical right	1
National television	***Sub total***	***9***
	Public service	6
	Private	3
National radio	Public service	***4***
All media		**141**

To identify relevant political debates, I screened all debates in the Riksdag archive from January 2022 to August 2024. I found one party leader debate and twelve interpellation debates, where members of the Riksdag debate with the responsible minister. These are video recorded and transcribed and available at the Riksdag webpage. In all, 13 debates on climate policy and related issues were held from November 2022 to May 2024. In addition, two party leader debates and one debate of top candidates for the 2024 EU elections sent in Swedish public service television and radio were found.

In these altogether 154 pieces of written, visual and audio-visual material, different expressions of insults, uncivil hate and threats and actual violence were identified and coded in relation to the

typology of nasty rhetoric (see Table 2). Each expression was also coded with reference to sender, partisanship (or organisational belonging if not a politician) of the sender, position in the party/organisation of the sender, target, the context (if it was a firsthand expression or a response to a previous civil or uncivil rhetoric), and finally forum used for communication. Coded data is provided in Annex B.

3.3.2 Data on harms of nasty rhetoric

Secondary data on harms to people, society and democracy of nasty rhetoric was also identified through Boolesk searches in *Retriever Mediearkivet*. Searches were made in April 2024, December 2024, October 2025 and April 2026, using different truncated terms in Swedish, translations of which are presented in Table 8 and 9 respectively, in combination with 'climate', such as climate AND hate, climate AND threats, climate AND crime, climate AND victim, and climate AND polarisation. I also analysed programmes in radio discussing hate speech, hate crime and increasing legal repression of climate activists, searching webpages of state-owned and privately owned national television and radio using the search terms 'climate politics' and 'climate activism'. As for blogs, videos (YouTube) and social media, posts on the largest pro-climate, civil libertarian and radical right extremist accounts from January 2022 to April 2026 were screened and analysed.

Table 8. Search terms for articles, editorials and op-eds addressing harms to people of nasty rhetoric

Activis*	Aggress*	Anger	Antidemocrat*	Anxi*
Crim*	Dehuman*	Delegitim*	Democra*	Depressi*
Disappear*	Emotion*	Fear*	Hate*	Insecur*
Journalis*	Polaris*	Politic*	Repressi*	Sabot*
Scien*	Terror*	Threat*	Violen*	

Table 9. Search terms for articles, editorials and op-eds addressing harms to democracy of nasty rhetoric

Activis*	Aggress*	Antidemocrat*	Civi*	Dehuman*
Democra*	Delegitim*	Demonis*	Dignity	Fear
Free speech	Freedom	Informat*	Hat*	Insecur*
Journalis*	Media	Polaris*	Politic*	Press
Radical right	Repressi*	Space	Threat*	Violen*

Secondary sources reporting or commenting harms to people of nasty rhetoric in climate politics were found in left, green, social democrat, liberal, conservative and radical right extremist media. In total, 293 editorials, op-eds, news articles, blogs, podcasts, social media posts, videos, television and radio programmes were identified. Of these, a qualitative analysis of the contents condensed the sources to 125 pieces, showing, reporting or discussing harms and responses to nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics between June 2021 and April 2026 (Table 10).

Table 10. Sources of secondary data on harms to people of nasty rhetoric

Type of media	Media source	No. of sources
Newspapers and magazines	***Sub total***	***103***
	Neutral	7
	Left-green	24
	Social democrat	24
	Liberal	32
	Conservative	13
	Radical right	3
Blogposts	***Sub-total***	***7***
	Personal	1
	Journalistic normative	1
	Left-green	4
	Libertarian	1
Podcasts	***Sub-total***	***5***
	Liberal democratic	4
	Psychology	1
National television	***Sub total***	***6***
	Public service	3
	Private	3
National radio	Public service	***4***
All media		**125**

* This blog describes the hate and threats and reactions of a climate activist that lost her job due to her activism. It contains several sections describing the process. It also links all articles in Swedish and international press about the case.

Secondary sources reporting or commenting harms to society and Swedish democracy of nasty rhetoric in climate politics were found in left, green, social democrat, liberal, conservative and radical right extremist media. In total, 274 editorials, op-eds, news articles, blogs, podcasts, social media posts, videos, television and radio programmes were identified. Of these, a qualitative

analysis of the contents condensed the sources to 116 pieces, showing, reporting or discussing acts of nasty rhetoric and related harms to Swedish democracy between June 2021 and April 2026 (Table 11).

Table 11. Sources of secondary data on harms to democracy of nasty rhetoric

Type of media	Media source	No. of sources
Newspapers and magazines	***Sub total***	***91***
	Neutral	2
	Left-green	20
	Social democrat	20
	Liberal	40
	Conservative	9
	Radical right	4
News agencies	***Sub-total***	***2***
Blogposts	***Sub-total***	***6***
	Personal	1
	Business	1
	Left-green	3
	Libertarian	1
Podcasts	***Sub-total***	***5***
	Trade union	3
	Liberal democratic	2
National television	***Sub total***	***9***
	Public service	6
	Private	3
National radio	Public service	***2***
All media		**116**

Additional data on harms and behavioural responses of victims, including how they cope with nasty rhetoric and what support they get from others, as well as their views on democracy harms was collected during the preparation of a written appeal to end hate speech and hate crime in political and public debates to which I contributed. The appeal was signed by 74 scientists, journalists and writers who provided personal testimonies of hate speech victimisation and published in Sweden's largest newspaper Dagens Nyheter in autumn 2024.

To follow up these short testimonies, I interviewed seven climate scientists, four of which also being climate activists, three climate journalist and 19 climate activists (not being scientists) about their experiences of hate speech and hate crime victimisation (Table 12). These 29 interviews were made from August 2024 to July 2025. Ten people were interviewed in person, while 19 were interviewed in two group interviews. One group interview was made with scientist activists; another one was made with core group activists during a workshop discussing how the climate justice movement can develop to get more impact. Interviewees were asked about their experiences of hate speech and different kinds of threats, the emotional impacts thereof, how they reacted behaviourally, what further impacts of hate speech they see in society and for democracy, and what kind of support they have got before and/or after being victimised. They were also asked why they engaged in the climate debate, and how they perceive the current right-wing government's policies.

Table 12. Interviewees

Victim group	Code	Role	Gender	Cross-group membership	Type of interview	Interview period
Scientists (including scientist activists)	S1	Professor climate policy	Male	-	Personal	Dec 2024
	S2	Professor climate science	Male	-	Personal	June 2025
	S3	Assoc. professor environmental science	Male	-	Personal	Dec 2024
	SA1	Assoc. professor sustainability	Female	MR, SR	Personal	Jan 2025
	SA2	PhD psychology	Female	MR, SR, XR, ÅV	Group	Nov 2024
	SA3	PhD psychology	Male	XR, SR	Group	Nov 2024
	SA4	PhD psychology	Male	XR	Group	Nov 2024
Journalists	J1	Climate journalist public service	Female	-	Personal	Aug 2024
	J2	Climate journalist news paper	Female	-	Personal	June 2025
	J3	Climate journalist news paper	Female	-	Personal	July 2025
Activists	A1	Member of XR	Male	ÅV	Personal	Feb 2025
	A2	Member of ÅV	Male	-	Personal	June 2025
	A3	Member of MR	Female	-	Personal	Mar 2025
	A4–A19	16 members of XR, MR, FR, SR, ÅV, RTF	Female, male, non-binary	XR, MR, FR, SR, ÅV, RTF	Group	Jan 2025

The activists interviewed (both scientists and non-scientists) includes a spokesperson for *Restore Wetlands* (ÅV)[9], founders of *Extinction Rebellion Sweden* (XR)[10] and *Scientist Rebellion Sweden* (SR), members of *Mothers Rebellion* (MR) and *Fathers Rebellion* (FR), and founders of *Reclaim the Future* (RTF)[11]. Several activists interviewed are members of more than one organisation or take part in actions organised by another group. Four of the activists are full-time activists, on leave from their ordinary jobs, with expenses covered by crowdfunding.

The different climate movements have different views on the best strategy for exogenous social change, but they are all confrontative rather than collaborative when it comes to change as they argue for disruptive rather than incremental change. All but MR and FR use civil disobedience in their activism and can be considered radical (cf. Kirsop-Taylor et al., 2023; Berglund, 2025; Köhler et al., 2025). ÅV, formed in 2022, is the most radical movement and acts as a so-called radical flank organisation (Simpson et al., 2022; Zeitzoff, 2026), using the full playbook of modern disruptive tactics: blocking major motorways, trespassing airports, jumping on stage at major live TV events such as talent and entertainment shows, disruptions at sporting events, throwing soup at high profile paintings, and engaging in guerilla wetland restoration attempts (Rogers et al., 2025). But ÅV is non-violent and far less radical than the American environmental movement 20–30 years ago (Zeitzoff, 2026). Formed in 2018, XR with subgroups are doing street marches and actions at public agencies, sit-ins with singing, and providing info material on climate change. RTF was formed in 2023 as a breakout group from XR and collaborate with Greta Thunberg and FFF in blocking oil harbours. In addition, both RTF and FFF use their right as shareholder to raise issue of climate action at annual group meetings of large Swedish corporations. MR was formed in 2022 and has deliberatively chosen another strategy than ÅV, XR, SR, RTF and FFF. Their actions are peaceful and calm, and they avoid creating disturbances that could get people angry. They usually sit down with signs in town squares or by a building with prior authorisation by police, singing, playing classical music and reading poetry during the actions. Inspired by MR, FR was initiated by fathers some years later.

In this written, visual and audio-visual material, I identified and coded different emotional and behavioural responses to insults, hate, threats and different sorts of violence (economic, legal, physical, psychological) in relation to the typology developed from previous research on effects

[9] https://aterstallvatmarker.se/

[10] https://extinctionrebellion.se/

[11] https://tatillbakaframtiden.se/

of hate speech and hate crime in neurobiology, psychology, sociology, victimology and political science, outlined in section 2.3.6 (see Table 4).

In addition, emotional and behavioural harms were coded related to the professional roles of victims to analyse if they were victimised as people doing their job or as people showing political stance in their free time, as private persons. Describing potential differences in victimisation, behaviour and resilience on these grounds is important as a basis for providing support to victims. To understand the cultural influence on victimisation, secondary data from media is also used to analyse on a meta-level how the crimes and victims of nasty rhetoric in climate politics are constructed in media and thus how the (cf. Brisman & South, 2013; Brisman, 2014).

As for harms to democracy, the data collected was coded in relation to the typology developed from democracy theory in combination with previous research in political science, sociology, philosophy and media studies on effects of nasty rhetoric, hate speech and hate crime on democracy as outlined in section 2.4 (see Table 5).

3.4 Ethical considerations

The issue of research ethics is about researchers doing their best to avoid harm. Research ethics in Sweden is regulated by EU law and guided by the European code of conduct for research integrity (ALLEA, 2017) and the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (VR, 2024). The latter provides more specific guidelines regarding risks and safeguards in research involving humans, including online data. They open for deviations from requirements on information to participants, consent and anonymity if (i) risks of participants are low, (ii) expected value of the research is high, and (iii) obstacles for getting consent are high. The Swedish guidelines are more consistent with the practice of ethical reflexivity in social science, i.e. an ongoing collegial discussion on research ethics (von Unger, 2016).

As for processing of personal data and anonymity, both the European codex and the Swedish ethical guidelines refer to the EU's general data protection regulation (GDPR) (EU, 2016), which aims to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of natural persons, in particular their right to the protection of personal data. GDPR allows for exceptions to the general requirements for the processing of personal data if data is collected for (i) archiving purposes in the public interest, (ii) statistical purposes, or (iii) scientific or historical research purposes. It is emphasised that restrictions in the rules for processing personal data can be made as far as they are "necessary and proportionate in a democratic society to safeguard public security, including the protection of human life especially in response to natural or manmade disasters, the prevention, investigation

and prosecution of criminal offences or the execution of criminal penalties, including the safeguarding against and the prevention of threats to public security, or of breaches of ethics for regulated professions, other important objectives of general public interest of the Union or of a Member State" (EU, 2016, p. 14).

As stressed by von Unger (2016), research ethics raises questions about *what damage for whom?* This study is part of a research project on democratic legitimacy in climate politics, where previous studies have shown that Tidö parties' climate politics violate fundamental principles in a liberal democracy such as legitimacy, accountability, the right to justification and both procedural and distributional justice (von Malmborg, 2024a, 2024b). A key issue for ethical reflection in this case study thus concerns the public interest in knowing how leading politicians act, analysed in a more systematic way than journalists have done. This study analyses data published separately in the daily press, radio, television, blogs, political debates etc. By systematic analysis, I have identified a general pattern in the pieces provided by secondary data. The results show that Tidö politicians use hate and threats, but also economic and legal repression, in a systematic way to silence people and groups with opposing political views. Does it hurt to mention leading politicians by name?

After reflexive discussions with colleagues in my university, including scholars in research ethics, it is deemed to be of great public interest to disseminate knowledge that the PM and other cabinet ministers and leading politicians in the Riksdag actively express politically motivated hatred and threats towards different groups of people. Their acts normalise toxic language and invite their supporters to spread the hateful tone in the public debate. These acts harm real people and are a threat to Swedish democracy. Whether it is criminal or not in a legal sense is unclear, but it could be tried in court.

In all, GDPR allows me to report possible breaches or threats to public security without anonymising the perpetrators. Naming politicians shall be considered as acting in a legitimate interest. Ethical reflexivity also concluded that potential harm to leading politicians from naming them in this paper is low. The people named are elected politicians and have spoken publicly in their capacity as politicians. It is in the interest of voters to know how they express themselves and how they act, not least since the consequences of their actions are a threat to Swedish democracy and thus public security. The results of my study constitute an important basis for voters to be able to hold accountable the politicians who are elected to lead Sweden.

In all, names of individual persons uttering insults, accusations etcetera are mentioned if they themselves, as official, politically elected or appointed persons, have chosen to use hate speech or hate crime in public and are identified in publicly available news media or social media. Non-

politically elected or appointed persons are anonymised. The choice to publishing the names of Swedish politicians also follows international practice. Several research papers have been published about Donald J. Trump and his nasty rhetoric. What message would it convey if researchers did not mention his name?

4. Case study context

Providing a context for the study, this section presents the far-right turn in Swedish politics and the resulting paradigm shift in Swedish climate politics. The battle on climate policy has been fought in Sweden for more than a decade, predominantly by climate denying radical right populists and libertarians, sometimes in collaboration (Hultman et al., 2019; Jylhä et al., 2020; Vihma et al., 2021; Vowles & Hultman, 2021a, 2021b; Ekberg & Pressfeldt, 2022; von Malmborg, 2024a; Vowles et al., 2024). The current right-wing Tidö government in Sweden, consisting of a liberal-conservative troika of the conservative *Moderates* (M), the *Christian Democrats* (KD) and economic (pseudo)liberal *Liberals* (L), but informally led by the populist radical right party SD, is in the midst of executing an iconoclastic paradigm shift of Swedish climate politics, with negative impacts also on Swedish democracy in general (cf. von Malmborg, 2024a; Ergon et al., 2025; Förell & Fischer, 2025; Ergon, 2026). This backlash is combined with the witnessing of uncivil rhetoric, where radical right populists, right-wing politicians and other climate sceptics employ hate speech and sometimes hate crime aiming to polarise and divide climate politics into two camps (von Malmborg, 2024a).

4.1 A populist radical right turn in Swedish politics

Over the past two decades, the *Sweden Democrats* (SD), a populist ethnonationalist party, has grown steadily and increased their votes in every election. In 2006, they gained 2.9 % of the votes, a doubling compared to the 2002 elections. In the 2010 election, SD of 5.7 % of the votes and won seats in the Swedish Riksdag, and in the 2014 election the party received 12.9 %, which made it clear that Sweden was no longer exceptional in the Nordics, not having had an electorally successful radical right-wing party (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019). However, SD had little direct influence on Swedish politics, since all other parties in the Riksdag rejected to collaborate or negotiate with SD.

The 2022 elections to the Riksdag marks a shift of Swedish democracy. Then, SD won 20.5 % of the votes and 73 out of 349 seats, becoming the second largest party in the Riksdag after the *Social Democrats* (S). This progress made SD gain formal powers in the Riksdag, holding the chairs in the committees of justice, labour market, foreign affairs and industry, and having direct influence over the government in most policy areas. Bargaining on who was to form a government for the 2022–2026 term resulted in the *Tidö Agreement* (Tidö parties, 2022) between SD, M, KD and L. SD supports the Tidö government, under the condition that SD takes part in decisions in six policy areas to undergo a rapid paradigm shift: climate and energy, criminality,

economic growth and household economy, education, migration and integration, and public health; of which criminality, migration and climate change are deemed the most important (Rothstein, 2023). SD holds no seats in the cabinet but has political staff in the prime minister's (PM) office within the GOS. According to the Tidö Agreement, SD holds tangible powers but is not accountable for the government's decisions. In all, the Tidö quartet holds majority with 176 seats in the Riksdag, while the opposition, consisting of S, the social-liberal *Centre Party* (C), the *Green Party* (MP), and the *Left Party* (V), holds 173 seats.

When formed in 1988, SD was extremist and violent rooted in neo-Nazism, but with the election of current party leader Jimmie Åkesson in 2005, SD tried to show a more respectable façade to gain legitimacy (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019; Widfeldt, 2023; Enocksson, 2025). Other factors explaining the rise and growth of SD are (i) the decline of class politics in Sweden, (ii) a processes of post-politics with a convergence caused by a double move toward the centre by both S and M during the Alliance government, leaving voters confused about policy alternatives, and (iii) the growing salience of socio-cultural politics, particularly the politicisation of the immigration issue, and (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019).

The refugee migration wave in 2014–2016, in which Sweden next to Serbia and Kosovo received most asylum seekers per capita in the EU, led Sweden to radically shift its migration policy (Sager & Öberg, 2017). An interim legislation with focus on deportability came out of a context discursively discussed as one of a 'crisis', a 'systems collapse' where Sweden had 'reached its limits', built on racist and nativist concerns that influenced all parties in the Riksdag but C, MP and V. In the beginning of the migration wave, some weeks before the elections in 2014, then PM Fredrik Reinfeld (M) appealed to the Swedish people to "open their hearts" to migrants, showing a liberal attitude to migration. In the following elections, the ruling Alliance government lost power and a red–green government of S and MP was formed. After losing the election, M turned back to its more conservative origin, with a more restrictive position on migration as well as a revitalised focus on their traditional policy domains such as economics, law and order, security and defence (Enocksson, 2025). This did not help in the 2018 elections, which gave S and MP continued trust to govern. In the meantime, SD continued to combine populism, anti-pluralism and authoritarianism with nativism – the longing for a homogenous nation state – and propose populist and illiberal policies in many areas, primarily migration but also social, justice and environmental policy (Hellström, 2023). Yet, other parties refused to negotiate with SD, treating it as pariah. The future party leader of M, Ulf Kristersson, promised in a televised meeting with a well-known survivor of Auschwitz, who had long since warned about the

creeping assimilation in Sweden to the radical right extremist rhetoric and politics, to never ever collaborate with SD.

After the elections in 2018 something happened. The former liberal–conservative Alliance between M, C, L and KD was broken, with C taking a more social-liberal position in most policy areas than M, KD and L who turned more conservative and neoliberal, becoming more restrictive on migration, more tough on law and order, more vocal on Sweden joining NATO, and more vocal in advocating nuclear power (Enocksson, 2025). C had always had a completely different positions on climate change, climate policy and energy policy, advocating renewable energy, whilst M, KD and L are obsessed with nuclear power as the one and only solution to reduce GHG emissions. This became obvious during the implementation of the energy policy agreement met by S, M, MP, C and KD in 2016. V did not support it because it focused too much on nuclear power, while L and SD did not give support because of too little focus on nuclear power. In 2018, just before the elections, KD party leader Ebba Busch announced their support of new nuclear power, a position which was not agreed in the party according to KD's energy policy spokesperson.[12] This led to both M and KD leave the agreement in early 2019. In 2019, Busch also announced ending the quarantine for SD, that KD was willing to negotiate with SD. Shortly after, also Kristersson announced that he was willing to negotiate with SD, rhetorically claiming that "SD is a party like the others".[13]

But according to recent studies of the Swedish radical right, SD is not a party like others. SD combines populism, anti-liberalism and authoritarianism with ethnonationalism – the longing for a homogenous nation state – and propose populist and illiberal policies in many areas, primarily migration but also social, justice and environmental policy (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019; Hellström, 2023; Widfeldt, 2023). SD tends to "sacralize their core ideas and predominantly employ virtue ethical justification strategies, positioning themselves as morally superior to other parties" and assign essentialist value to their key political concepts (Vahter & Jakobson, 2025, p. 793), which makes them sharply contrast with the moral composition of the rest of the political spectrum adhering to liberal or deliberative perspectives on democracy. In other words, parties claiming that SD is just like other parties are loathing the norms of liberal and deliberative democracy as much as SD, who hail Victor Orbán's Hungary, the worst example of

[12] Article in green magazine *Sveriges Natur*, 21 January 2020. https://www.sverigesnatur.org/aktuellt/striden-om-karnkraften/#:~:text=Den%2010%20december%202019%20l%C3%A4mnade%20%28M%29%20och%20%28KD%29,energi%C3%B6verenskommelsen%20togs%20den%2014%20augusti%202018%2C%20inf%C3%B6r%20valet

[13] Article in business newspaper *Dagens Industri*, 4 December 2019. https://www.di.se/nyheter/kristersson-efter-historiska-motet-sd-ar-ett-parti-som-andra/

autocratisation in the world (Meléndez & Kaltwasser, 2021; Mudde, 2021; Boese et al., 2022; Silander, 2024; V-Dem Institute, 2024, 2025), as a role model of democratic governance.

In June 2025, Jimmie Åkesson rhetorically made an official excuse for SD's previous antisemitism in what can be seen as an attempt to show a respectable façade towards the new party leader of L, paving the way for their support of Åkesson as a potential PM after the elections in 2026. Party leaders of M, KD and L are cheering, while critics say that such an excuse is only legitimate if and when SD turns away entirely from all kinds of racism, pointing to the fact that other leading SD politicians claim that SD has the same ideology today as in 1988.[14] As described in a recent white book on antisemitism commissioned by SD, printed in only 100 copies and not available online, SD politicians have changed their language, but not their ideological roots.[15]

There are good indications of the Tidö parties were all taking a more autocratic stance before the elections in 2022. One important factor is the role of *Timbro*, a libertarian thinktank owned by the *Confederation of Swedish Enterprise*. Timbro is a member of the *Atlas Network*, an international network of libertarian thinktanks that has orchestrated libertarian autocratisation of many democracies around the world. Several studies show links between both ideology and political agency of radical right populists around and libertarian philosophy and neoliberal capitalist economics and the 'There is no Alternative' (to capitalism) narratives used to support it (Bakker, 2003; Short, 2016; Goldwag, 2017; Séville, 2017). Looking at the Tidö government, the current Swedish PM and current minister of justice, both from M, used to work at Timbro. The former CEO of *Timbro*, Benjamin Dousa, responsible for nasty rhetoric campaigning towards climate activists and journalists, was recently appointed Swedish minister of development aid and trade. Eight other Tidö ministers, including the climate minister, were educated at the *Sture Academy*, Timbro's cutting-edge education in libertarian ideology, politics and opinion formation. But as claimed in a recent analysis of the history of the Swedish radical right, the turning of M, KD and L towards radical right populism is in many ways a turning back to their origins, where particularly M had many leading members sympathising with the German nazis (Enocksson, 2025). The close ties between Timbro and the populist radical right have become more obvious since Timbro and SD's thinktank Oikos published a joint draft of a programme for a Tidö government after the 2026 elections, *Tidö 2.0* (Danieli & Hallén, 2025).

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[14] Editorial in *Dagens Nyheter*, 28 June 2025, https://www.dn.se/ledare/lilian-sjolund-sd-bad-judarna-om-ursakt-nar-sager-partiet-forlat-till-muslimerna/

[15] Commentary in *Dagens Nuheter*, 1 July 2025, https://www.dn.se/kultur/ola-larsmo-sverigedemokraterna-slapper-vitbok-men-overger-aldrig-sina-rotter/

Reviewing the Tidö government's first years in power, *Civil Rights Defenders* (CRD, 2023), *United Nations Association of Sweden* (UNAS, 2023) and Gustavsson (2024) identify several signs of autocratisation in Sweden and reasons for concern related to the strong influence of SD on the government and demounting of Swedish democracy. Such concerns have been raised also by democracy scholars (Widfeldt, 2023; Silander, 2024; von Malmborg, 2024a, 2024b; Ardin & Irving, 2025; Ardin, 2026; Avellan et al., 2026) as well as the *Civil Liberties Union for Europe* who describes Sweden as a 'slider' (CLUE, 2026).[16] Due to the success of SD in the elections 2018 and 2022, and particularly its success in setting the agenda for the Tidö government, Sweden is currently one of the strongholds of radical right populists in the EU (Widfeldt, 2023). But the success of SD is dependent also on the agency of the other Tidö parties, particularly M, who legitimised SD as a political party despite (or thanks to) its radical right nativist populist stance since its close relationship to neoliberal capitalism.

Accusing Swedish established media of being 'left-liberal' propaganda centres, SD and other nationalist right-wing groups have built their own ecosystem of digital media news sites, blogs, video channels and anonymous troll accounts in social media, which did not have to relate to the rules of press ethics (Vowles & Hultman, 2021b). Thus, they have been able to bring about novel means of direct interaction among people and create discursive opportunity for their propaganda to gain visibility, reactions (resonance) and popular legitimacy for their thoughts and activities in the public sphere (cf. Koopmans and Olzak, 2004; Caiani & Kröll, 2015; Wahlström et al., 2021). Normalising knowledge resistance, manipulation, and nasty rhetoric is central to their strategy of structural policy entrepreneurship to change Swedish politics and governance (von Malmborg, 2024a).

It was recently revealed to the public by Swedish news media that SD's communications office, inspired by Donald J. Trump and directed by SD party leader Åkesson, runs a 'troll factory'. Using anonymous 'troll accounts' in social media, SD has deliberately and systematically spread misinformation and conspiracy theories to shape opinion, manipulate voters and incite outgroups by spreading insults, hate and threats.[17] Åkesson has confirmed that SD use and will continue to

[16] In comparison, V-Dem Institute and International IDEA has not yet reported autocratisation in Sweden despite several reports of others, including colleagues at the University of Gothenburg analysing the changes in detail. The indicators used by V-Dem Institute to analyse autocratisation around the world are rather coarse due to data collection requirements and thus fail to identify signs of autocratisation before institutions are demounted.

[17] See e.g. article in leftish newspaper *Dagens ETC*, 26 August 2022, https://www.etc.se/inrikes/haer-aer-sd-s-hemliga-trollarme-faar-order-av-aakesson, and undercover journalistic programme in national television *TV4*, 7 May 2024, https://www.tv4play.se/program/cd339dace9a80bb132d9/kalla-fakta-undercover-i-trollfabriken

use 'troll accounts', particularly on TikTok, to avoid getting public accounts reported and closed due to their frequent use of hate and threats.

Not only anonymous internet trolls, but leading politicians from all Tidö parties use such hateful and threatening rhetoric. It is used as a tactic alongside other traditional measures of autocrats, such as more politicised governance of public service, decreased financial support to public service, public education and civil society organisations, manipulation of information and decreased transparency in policymaking (von Malmborg, 2024a, 2024b). Similar findings of means for autocratisation in Sweden, in a more general sense, have been reported elsewhere (CRD, 2023; UNAS, 2023; Ardin, 2026; Gustavsson, 2024; Silander, 2024). In early June 2025, the Tidö government took another step towards autocratisation when presenting a bill to the Swedish Parliament (Riksdag) proposing a change to the Swedish constitution that power is transferred from the Riksdag to the government in times of crises, letting the government decide what is a crisis. A few parliamentarians and the largest newspapers were very critical, since the proposal includes no mechanisms from stopping the government to abuse the law, e.g. to use the military against antagonistic protesters as done by President Trump in California.[18]

4.2 Paradigm shift in Swedish climate policy

4.2.1 From climate policy role model…

Sweden was among the first countries in the world to introduce carbon dioxide taxation on fossil fuels. This was done as early as 1992. The tax was given a pronounced environmental steering effect and was not just about generating revenue for the state treasury. Since joining the European Community in 1995, later the EU, Sweden has been a driving force for an ambitious climate policy in the EU and the UN. Swedish governments have argued that the EU should have ambitious climate targets in both the short and long term, and that the targets should be accompanied by policy instruments that enable the targets to be achieved. Sweden was an early driving force for the EU to introduce a GHG emissions trading scheme (EU ETS). When it turned out that the supply of emission allowances was greater than demand, the EU developed a mechanism on Sweden's initiative to hold back the number of allowances on the market. In this way, prices are kept at a level that makes it profitable for companies covered by the EU ETS to implement emission reduction measures together. Sweden has also played a central role in the

[18] News article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 10 June 2015, https://www.dn.se/sverige/regeringen-vill-ha-mer-makt-vid-kriser-avser-andra-grundlagen/; Editorial in *Dagens Nyheter*, 14 June 2025, https://www.dn.se/ledare/lilian-sjolund-gor-inte-riksdagen-maktlos-vi-klarar-kriser-utan-undantagstillstand/; Editorial in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 18 June 2025. https://www.svd.se/a/kw91Ok/oppna-inte-for-maktmissbruk-i-kris

development of a so-called carbon border adjustment mechanism that, in simple terms, imposes a climate tariff on certain goods imported into the EU from countries with a less ambitious climate policy than the EU's.

During the period 1990–2024, Sweden's domestic emissions of GHG decreased by almost 40 percent (Figure 1). This is primarily an effect of the carbon dioxide taxation and the expansion of district heating with an increased share of biofuels, but also our high proportion of fossil-free electricity. A result of large-scale expansion of hydropower and nuclear power. Fossil-free, but not without impact on the environment and people. In many other countries, coal, oil or natural gas are used to make electricity, heat and steam for industry and heating our homes. During the same period, the connection between economic growth and increases in emissions in previous decades was broken. GHG emissions per unit of GDP, the GHG intensity, decreased. This is usually seen by economists as clear proof that economic growth does not have to lead to increased environmental destruction. In 2022, Sweden's domestic GHG emissions amounted to 45.2 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents, which corresponds to approximately 0.2 per cent of the world's total emissions.

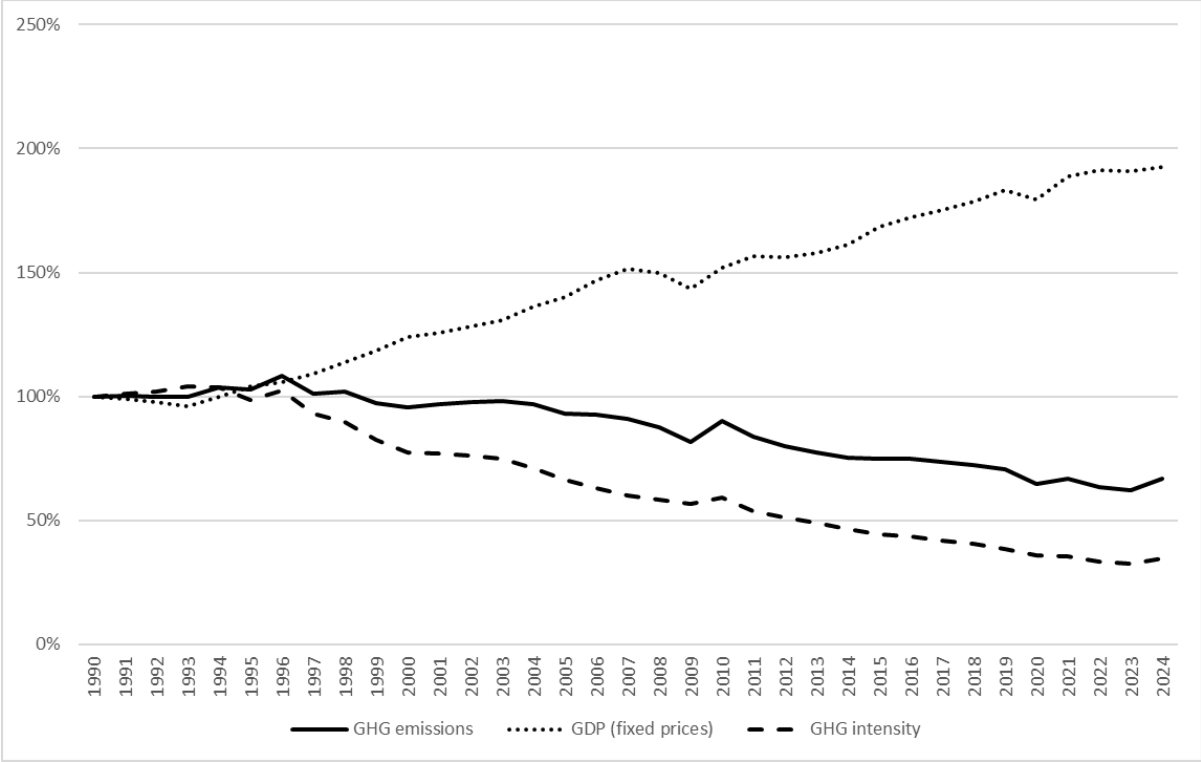

Figure 1. Indexed development of GHG emissions, GDP and GHG intensity (GHG/GDP) in Sweden 1990–2024 (Index 100 per cent = 1990). Data sources: SWEPA and Statistics Sweden

To facilitate comparison with other countries, each Swede emits the equivalent of 4.5 tonnes carbon dioxide equivalents per capita and year. This is lower than the global average for annual GHG emissions per capita, about 6.1 tonnes per capita per year. These figures do not give the whole picture. It is based on emissions in Sweden, and does not include emissions from agriculture, forestry and other land use. This is how emissions are reported according to the UN and EU frameworks. We also live in an open economy, with both imports and exports of why. The *Swedish Environmental Protection Agency* (SWEPA) therefore reports how large GHG emissions Sweden gives rise to, regardless of where they occur in the world. In 2023, consumption-based GHG emissions amounted to 88 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents, of which 67 per cent occur in other countries because of Swedish consumption. Converted to per capita emissions, the consumption of every Swede corresponds to about 8.4 tonnes per capita per year, of which households account for about three-fifths and the remainder comes from public consumption. The EU average is around 8 tonnes per capita per year. Some may think that Sweden's emissions are low, but to meet the UN 1.5 degree target, average global emissions as an approximate benchmark need to be no more than 1 tonne per capita per year in 2050, and significantly lower than today's levels already by 2030.

To further strengthen Swedish climate policy, the Swedish Riksdag adopted in 2017 with support of all parties but SD a new climate policy framework, including:

1. A *Climate Act* with a legally binding target that Sweden should have net-zero GHG emissions by 2045, as well as interim targets;
2. A requirement in the Climate Act for the government to present to the Riksdag a *Climate Action Plan* (CAP) with policies and measures to reach the targets, at the latest the calendar year after national elections; and
3. Establishment of the *Swedish Climate Policy Council* (SCPC), an independent and interdisciplinary body of climate scientists, to evaluate the alignment of the government's policies with the 2045 climate target.

4.2.2 ...to climate change criminal

The long-term trend of emissions reductions made a U-turn when the Tidö government supported by SD entered office in 2022. The fact that Swedish GHG emissions are relatively low in a global perspective is often used by climate sceptics as a counterargument against Sweden having an ambitious climate policy. Why should we, who have such low emissions, continue to reduce our emissions at high costs? If Sweden emits more would not increase climate change, which if it exists and is caused by humans, would only benefit Sweden.

Financed by the oil and gas industry, Atlas Network and Timbro have orchestrated lobbying in Sweden and world-wide for decades[19], to initiate climate denying movements and cast doubt on climate science and climate policy, influence politicians, and attack climate activists (Ekberg & Pressfeldt, 2022; Walker, 2023). Timbro also approached SD to make them take on a more sceptical position on climate change and climate policy. Initially championing environmentalism, being an important ingredient in 'blood and soil' narratives of social-nationalists, SD and other populist radical right parties began to deny climate change in the 2010s (Jylhä et al., 2020; Vihma et al., 2021), wanting to abort national as well as EU climate targets and climate policies. [20] SD is culturally and cognitively motivated by conflicting 'evil' beliefs of previous governments for decades, both S-led and M-led, why climate policy was purposefully included in the Tidö Agreement by SD (Rothstein, 2023; von Malmborg, 2024a). Including climate policy in the agreement opened a window of opportunity for SD, the largest party in the Tidö quartet, to not only veto but dictate the government's climate policy. With the Tidö Agreement, made it possible to execute a paradigm shift in Swedish climate policy and governance. The situation is similar for all policy areas included in the Tidö Agreement, which effectively defines which policy areas that SD are to lead to support the government (Rothstein, 2023).

Based on a combination of anti-establishment rhetoric, knowledge resistance and emotional communication of doubt, industrial/breadwinner and petro-masculinities, and ethnonationalism (Hultman et al., 2019; Vowles & Hultman, 2021a; Ekberg & Pressfeldt, 2022; Vowles et al., 2024), SD in close collaboration with the Tidö government, advocates less ambitious or even aborting climate targets and climate policies (SCPC, 2024, 2025, 2026). They look back to a great national past during the oil-fuelled record years of the 1950s and 60s, when men had lifelong jobs in industry and sole access to society's positions of power (Vowles & Hultman, 2021a, 2021b).

Bargaining on finalising the Tidö government's CAP in 2023, SD now accepts the 2045 target but managed to reduce overall climate policy ambitions by deleting short- and medium-term targets and actions important for reaching long-term targets. The Tidö quartet focuses entirely on emission reductions by 2045, ignoring climate science saying that reducing every ton of GHG emitted from now to 2045 is what counts (Lahn, 2021).

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[19] The Atlas Network: Big oil, climate disinformation and constitutional democracy. Research Seminar, University of Technology Sidney, 8 December 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlQOw6qpblY

[20] Op-ed in *Dagens Nyheter*, 20 May 2024, https://www.dn.se/kultur/kjell-vowles-sd-trollar-ocksa-om-klimatet-nu-vill-de-riva-upp-eus-klimatpakt/

The policy change was apparent already with the state finance bill presented to the Riksdag only a few weeks after the Tidö government entered office.[21] Tidö parties proposed to use one third of the budgetary reform space to reduce renewable energy quotas and carbon dioxide taxation for fossil fuels, estimated to increase emission by ten per cent. This was also apparent in the first Riksdag debate between party leaders after the elections in 2022.[22] PM Kristersson in his introduction reduced climate policy to energy policy, putting great faith in new nuclear power.

In all, Tidö climate policy can be characterised as anti-climate action with increased GHG emissions. The CAP, presented in December 2023, provides further evidence that Tidö climate policy violates the legal responsibilities of nation states advised by ICJ. While the government estimates that existing and new policies would reduce GHG emissions to zero by 2045, SWEPA, (2024), the government's expert authority on climate change, estimates a gap of 35 per cent (Figure 2). The reason being that the government included effects of policies that it had aborted, as well as calculated GHG emission reductions from policies that had neither been designed, nor decided upon. They purposefully tried to manipulate stakeholders (cf. Törnberg & Chueri, 2026).

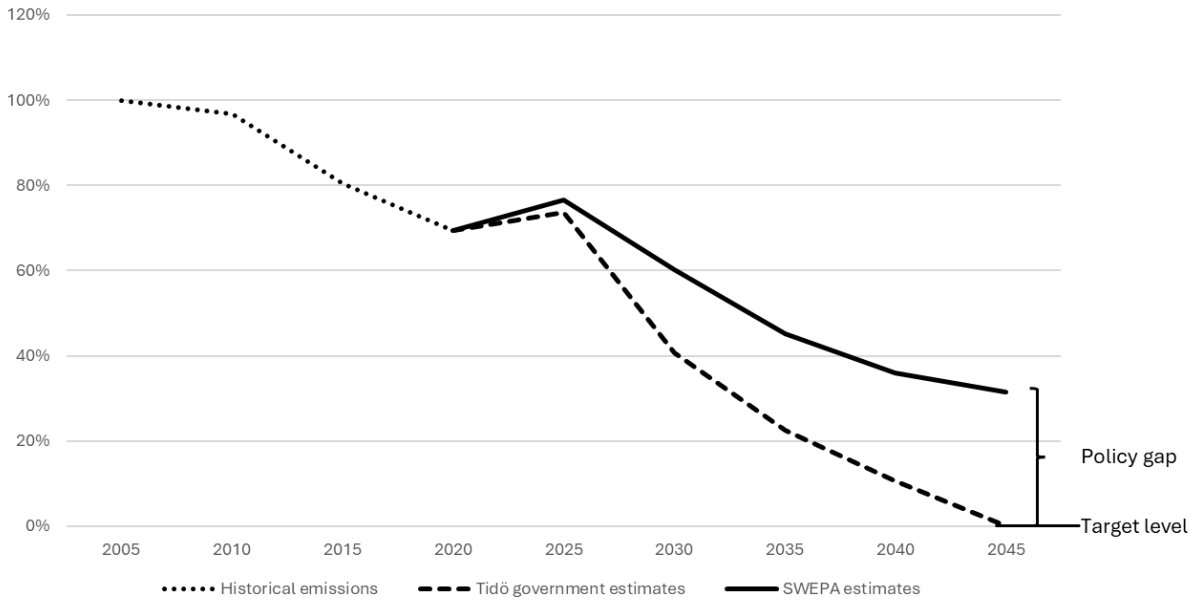

Figure 2. Policy gap to meet the long-term climate target. Data sources: GOS and SWEPA.

[21] https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/def2026cac0b4ef7acf4afeb988326ed/budgetpropositionen-for-2023-hela-dokumentet-prop.2022231-.pdf

[22] Party leader debate, 16 November 2022, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/partiledardebatt/eu-politisk-partiledardebatt_hac120221116pd/?pos=1774&autoplay=true

The CAP was heavily criticised domestically by the political opposition, climate scientists, economists, government authorities, the environmental and social justice movement, business associations, citizens and editorial writers in leading national newspapers.[23] Critique was put forward on the lack of short- and medium-term domestic action, manipulation of information, and a large focus on new nuclear power and climate compensation in other countries (von Malmborg, 2024a, 2024c; Ergon et al., 2025). SCPC (2024) and SWEPA (2024) claimed that Tidö policies lead to increases of annual GHG emissions, corresponding to more than ten per cent of Sweden's total annual emissions, and that the CAP will not suffice for Sweden to reach the target on climate neutrality by 2045, nor Sweden's responsibilities in relation to EU's 2030 climate target.

In critique of Tidö climate policy, three out of four parties in the Riksdag opposition (C, MP and V) tabled a motion of non-confidence, calling for the setting aside of climate minister Romina Pourmokhtari (L) for failing to deliver policies that reduce GHG emissions. The critique towards Pourmokhtari also refers to the fact that she herself promised to resign if Sweden does not meet Swedish and EU climate targets – which it will not. In addition, more than 1 350 critical L-politicians from local and regional levels demanded the resignation of Pourmokhtari because she and L gave way to SD's influence over the climate action plan, implying crossing several red lines of L's party program and ideology. However, when the Riksdag voted, the critics did not gather enough support to set Pourmokhtari aside.

Swedish opinion polls made one and two years after the Tidö government entered office show that there is low support for the Tidö climate policy (von Malmborg, 2024a). The most recent *Global Climate Change Survey* shows that 85 per cent of Swedes want the government to do more to combat climate change (Andre et al., 2024). Studies also show that only 20 per cent of Swedes think that the government's measures to reduce fuel prices were good (Barthel & Karlsson 2024).

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[23] See for instance article in *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden's largest newspaper, independent liberal), https://www.dn.se/sverige/ulf-kristersson-om-klimatet-karnkraft-viktigaste-atgarden/; interview with the chair of the Swedish Climate Policy Council in *Svenska Dagbladet*, https://www.svd.se/a/VPV2Al/klimatpolitiska-radet-klimatplanen-otillracklig; statement on X/Twitter by Prof. Johan Rockström, director of *Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research*, https://twitter.com/jrockstrom/status/1737888256149057692; statement on Facebook by Dr. Mikael Karlsson, Associate professor in Climate leadership, https://www.facebook.com/mikael.karlsson.3158/posts/pfbid02xuBEHVir9pH3zT9kmysSeD7EAUodsGkwLNREQKhZbP7KPKd4b3CdBjgsRmUVAZZ3l; statement by *Swedish Association of Nature Conservation*, https://www.naturskyddsforeningen.se/artiklar/en-klimathandlingsplan-utan-handling/; editorial in *Dagens Nyheter*, https://www.dn.se/ledare/regeringen-maste-ta-klimatkrisen-pa-samma-allvar-som-krigshotet/; statement by Swedish leading green think tank *2030-Secretariat*, https://www.2030sekretariatet.se/2030-sekretariatet-klimathandlingsplanen-en-gor-det-sjalv-julklapp/

Besides domestic criticism, Tidö climate policies were criticised also internationally, claiming that Sweden is losing its role as climate policy frontrunner and risk dragging the EU down with it.[24] Due to the Tidö climate policies, Sweden dropped from number one to number eleven between 2021 and 2024 in the Climate Change Performance Index (Burck et al., 2024). The European Commission has rejected Sweden's application for SEK 40 billion funding from the EU Recovery Fund since Sweden will meet neither national nor EU climate targets for 2030.[25] In March 2025, the international Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) mentioned in its review of Sweden's environmental policies that "recent policy shifts, particularly in the transport sector, have put into question Sweden's ability to meet EU and domestic climate targets, with emissions projected to increase" (OECD, 2025).

Summarising the extensive critique towards the Tidö climate policy, the lead editorial in Sweden's largest newspaper, Dagens Nyheter, stated in mid-June 2025 that "[i]t is clear that the government's policy is not an accident. It is a deliberate climate fiasco".[26]

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[24] Articles in French newspaper *Le Monde*, 27 January 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/01/27/sweden-is-moving-backward-on-climate-policy_6470373_4.html, and pan-European newspaper *Euractive*, 30 March 2023, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/swedish-right-wing-government-puts-country-on-wrong-climate-path/

[25] Article in *Syre*, 22 July 2024, https://tidningensyre.se/2024/22-juli-2024/sverige-enda-land-som-inte-sokt-pengar-fran-eus-aterhamtningsfond/

[26] Editorial in *Dagens Nyheter*, 18 June 2025, https://www.dn.se/ledare/efter-fiaskot-har-ar-experterna-som-sagat-regeringens-klimatpolitik/

5. Use of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate policy

This section presents results regarding the use of insults, accusations, intimidations, incitements etcetera in Swedish climate politics (cf. von Malmborg, 2026a). As will be shown with illustrative examples in section 5.1, hateful and threatening rhetoric is used by politicians from all Tidö parties, also by the PM, as well as their climate sceptic, libertarian or radical right extremist supporters, all advocating a radical degradation of Swedish climate policies. But uncivil rhetoric, including insults and accusations, is not only used by populist radical right and right-wing leaders and supporters. It is used also by oppositional politicians, climate scientists, climate journalists and activists in climate movement organisations, all opposing the Tidö climate policies. Illustrative examples are presented in section 5.2. A full account of insults, accusations, intimidations, incitement and different types of violence committed by both camps is presented in Annex B.

Before presenting examples of insults, accusations, intimidations, state repression etcetera in Swedish climate politics, it is worth stressing that every political speech and debate does not include hate or threats. The first party leader debate after elections in 2022[27] started off with rather normal rhetoric. The PM and party leaders of KD and L initially claimed that climate policy is a priority policy area, but party leader for SD didn't mention climate change in his initial speech. PM Kristersson in his introduction reduced climate policy to energy policy, putting great faith in new nuclear power. He also pointed at China – that it is more important that China reduces emissions than Sweden.[28] And, he lied about who decided to close four nuclear power plants a couple of years before the elections. In response, party leaders of S, C, V and MP claimed that the Tidö climate policy was unambitious, full of words but no action and thus being incoherent. They also stressed that Sweden's role as a pioneering country has been important in EU and global climate policy and should not be underestimated, and they questioned if the Tidö government could lead EU negotiations on the *Fit for 55* package during its Presidency in the EU in spring 2023.

The role of emotions for shaping Swedish climate policy was highlighted in the first party leader debate after the Swedish general elections in 2022. The leader of SD claimed that the previous S–MP government, together with V and C, were emotional on climate policy, not basing it on facts, and that everything was about the children and what children think. In a similar vein, the current

[27] Party leader debate, 16 November 2022, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/partiledardebatt/eu-politisk-partiledardebatt_hac120221116pd/?pos=1774&autoplay=true

[28] Ibid., speech No. 1.

PM of Sweden, representing M, claimed in the same debate that the symbol politics of the previous red–green government will be replaced by things that have a real effect. In essence, they claimed, pretending to not reveal their own emotional attachment to climate politics, that climate policy should not be based on emotions, but being technically-economically rational. The heat was turned on with insults and accusations to the extent that a leading Swedish newspaper described Swedish climate politics as "a musty rant with accusations of betrayal, sin and devil pacts".[29]

5.1 Tidö politicians and supporting climate sceptics as offenders

5.1.1 Insults

Insults are the mildest type of nasty rhetoric and can include harassment, ridicule and caricature, but also hyperbole. Insults of climate scientists, journalists, activists and oppositional politicians are made outspoken by the PM and cabinet ministers, party leaders from all Tidö parties, press secretaries and climate policy spokespersons in political debates, press conferences and social media. Insults are also made by Timbro and in editorials in radical right media.

A telling insult for the mode of Swedish climate politics was made by SD party leader Åkesson in the first Riksdag party leader debate in November 2022, just weeks after the Tidö government entered office. He claimed that the previous S-MP government as well as C and V are "emotional" on climate policy, "not basing it on facts", and that everything is about the "children and what children think".[30] In a similar vein, Tidö PM Ulf Kristersson (M), rhetorically insulted the previous S-MP government and its climate policy when the Tidö parties presented their climate action plan in December 2023, claiming that the red–green "symbol politics is now replaced by things that have a real effect".[31] These claims, not backed by evidence of any kind, were used in the beginning of the debate, setting the rhetorical tone of Tidö climate politics.

In preparing its climate action plan, the Tidö government organised a national climate meeting in mid-June 2023, and a series of 'open afterwork meetings' in different cities to collect views and suggestions for the climate action plan. But in breach of the Tidö agreement –saying that civil society should be included in consultations on climate policy – climate scientists and the

[29] Article in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 21 December 2023, https://www.svd.se/a/3EneLP/torehammar-svek-och-djavulspakter-i-klimatpolitiken l

[30] Op. cit. 26, speech No. 63

[31] Analysis of the Tidö parties' press briefing on the climate action plan, *TV4*, 21 December 2023, https://www.tv4.se/artikel/5MenofU2MHfkzfa4yGT6YF/analys-kompromissen-med-sd-baeddar-foer-hardare-strid

environmental and climate justice movement, e.g. Greenpeace, FFF and XR,[32] were not invited. According to the government, their voices and opinions were "not relevant". In a similar vein, PM Kristersson and SD's climate policy spokesperson, Martin Kinnunen, dismissed the scientifically based critique of the climate action plan presented by the SCPC as "just an opinion", which the Tidö government did not need to care about.

With the climate action plan, the 'green' right considered they have won big. The "extreme environmentalism" advocated by MP – the "political arm of the climate justice movement" – they campaigned against is unhooked.[33] Radical right media refers to climate activists as "leftish activists" and "muppets"[34] and libertarian think tank Timbro published an essay claiming "climate alarmists" are "religious doomsday prophets" that cause more harm to the world than GHG emissions.[35]

In spring 2024, a less vocal form of insult was made towards climate activists when the chair of the Riksdag industry committee, Tobias Andersson (SD), deliberately walked across a banner of climate activists, including Greta Thunberg, demonstrating and blocking the entrance to the Riksdag. The situation was filmed and posted on an SD-related YouTube channel,[36] showing how Andersson redirects his steps in an act of showing power, that he owns her, when identifying Greta Thunberg.

Climate journalists have increasingly received insults in social media and by e-mail. Insults are targeted at both male and female journalists, but female journalists seem to receive more hateful and aggressive insults (Björkenfeldt & Gustafsson, 2023), e.g. "left pack", "crypto environmentalist", "motherfucker" and "moron hag".[37]

5.1.2 Accusations

The second level of nasty rhetoric includes accusing opponents of doing something illegal or shady, or conspiracy theories that they are controlling the economy or politics (Radnitz, 2021).

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[32] *Extinction Rebellion* includes many subnetworks such as *Scientist Rebellion*, *Mother Rebellion* and *Father Rebellion*. https://rebellion.global/

[33] Op.cit. 28.

[34] See e.g. articles in *Fria Tider*, 29 August 2022, https://www.friatider.se/klimataktivister-stoppar-ambulanser; and *Nyheter Idag*, 1 April 2022, https://nyheteridag.se/jan-emanuel-ingrep-mot-klimataktivister-miljomuppar/

[35] Essay in Timbro magazine *Smedjan*, 11 November 2021, https://timbro.se/smedjan/klimatalarmismen-har-blivit-ett-storre-hot-an-klimatforandringarna/

[36] Video showing Tobias Andersson (SD) insulting Greta Thunberg and other climate activists. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlBy2uc6JuU&t=2s

[37] Article in *Dagens ETC*, 24 June 2021, https://www.etc.se/klimat-miljo/vag-av-hat-och-hot-mot-klimatjournalister

Accusations have mainly been directed towards public service media, scientists and climate activists, but also towards civil servants in national agencies.

In mid 2010s, Swedish climate denialists and the populist radical right movement accused established media of "censoring the climate debate" and being "climate alarmist propaganda centres". Similarly, the radical right accused established media of belonging to the 'left-liberal conspiracy'.[38]

As part of the campaign for the national elections in 2022, SD's climate policy spokesperson Kinnunen and social policy spokesperson Clara Aranda accused the environmental movement, climate activists, MP and C of being "infantile" and using a rhetoric that "scares children and young people to climate anxiety".[39]

In October 2023, climate minister Pourmokhtari (L) cancelled a meeting where the cement industry would launch its roadmap for fossil free competitiveness due to an alleged "security risk" posed by the fact that one of the notified participants was a retired engineer and member of SR, a subgroup of XR.[40]

At the same time Kristersson's (M) accused in his official Instagram account XR of being "totalitarian" and "a threat to Swedish democratic political processes".[41] Shortly after, two members of the Riksdag representing M accused XR and other climate activists on social media of being "terrorists", but without explaining in what way.[42] Both the PM and climate minister Pourmokhtari continued to accuse XR and its subgroup MR of "pretending to care for the climate and just want to destroy the democratic discussion in an illegal way".[43]

A special group of scientists accused of acting wrong are those who turned to climate activism in SR when right-wing and populist radical right politicians constantly ignore climate science warnings published in scientific journals, magazines and newspapers. They were accused of being

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[38] Op. cit. 29

[39] Op-ed in *Aftonbladet*, 19 May 2022, https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/9KJB49/sd-sluta-skram-vara-barn-med-er-klimatangest

[40] Article in *Aftonbladet*, 6 October 2023, https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/O89GxO/pourmokhtari-stallde-in-mote-greenpeace-ilska

[41] Post on the PM's Instagram account (@kristerssonulf), 4 October 2023. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cx_RMVuMawb/

[42] https://riktpunkt.nu/2023/10/moderat-riksdagsledamot-terroristanklagar-klimataktivister/; https://twitter.com/FredrikKarrholm/status/1705600537448587714

[43] Article in *Syre*, 7 October 2023. https://tidningensyre.se/2023/7-oktober-2023/ministrar-kritiserar-klimataktivister-de-stor-demokratin/

a "security threat" by the climate minister and of "undermining public trust in science" by then minister of education and research Mats Persson (L).

In April 2025, climate activists in ÅV made a series of actions at Swedish airports, trespassing security objects and flying drones at airports to highlight the need to end extraction of peat.[44] SD's spokesperson for legal policy, Pontus A. Garpvall, responded quickly to the airport actions by proposing just a few days after, that climate activists should be prosecuted for terrorism under current laws, which if they are found guilty would render prison in four to eight years.[45] In what way climate activists would be terrorists was still not explained.

Leading Tidö members of the Riksdag have accused civil servants in the GOS and national agencies of being activists, taking employment to drive their private agenda.[46] It has later been found that leaders in SD have a black list of people they want to fire from the GOS for having wrong opinions.[47] This is similar to, but far behind the Trump administration's Project 2025 to reshape the federal government of the United States and consolidate executive power in favour of radical right extremist policies.[48]

When officials at the Public Health Agency of Sweden (PHAS) appealed to raise climate change as an issue of public health, they were called activists by their superiors, who also told that they had behaved inappropriately and violated the state's values – the rules that government officials must follow.

5.1.3 Intimidations

The third level of nasty rhetoric advocates economic and/or legal sanctions against an opponent, e.g., that they should be fired, be investigated or sent to prison. Intimidations are mainly directed

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[44] Press releases of *Restore Wetlands*. https://aterstallvatmarker.se/pressmeddelanden/

[45] News article in *Aftonbladet*, 25 April 2025. https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/zAjVkv/sd-forslaget-klimataktivister-ska-domas-for-terrorbrott?utm_source=iosapp&utm_medium=share. News article in *Tidningen Syre*, 25 April 2025. https://tidningensyre.se/2025/25-april-2025/sd-vill-doma-klimataktivister-for-terrorbrott/

[46] Op-ed in *Arbetsvärlden*, 24 November 2022, https://www.arbetsvarlden.se/debatt/en-del-av-de-nya-makthavarna-vill-se-utrensningar-i-statlig-forvaltning/. Op-ed in *Aftonbladet*, 21 February 2023, https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/GMwpnl/fackforbund-statliga-tjansteman-ar-inte-aktivister. Op-ed in *Altinget* 24 October 2024. https://www.altinget.se/artikel/otillaaten-paaverkan-mot-statligt-anstallda-hotar-rattssakerheten. Op-ed in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 24 January 2025. https://www.svd.se/a/dRzj6z/regeringen-skapar-misstro-mot-myndigheter-skriver-britta-lejon?utm_source=iosapp

[47] Article in *Dagens ETC*, 25 March 2025, https://www.etc.se/story/svarta-listan-saa-rensar-sd-ut-sossiga-tjaenstemaen-fraan-regeringskansliet. Op-ed in *Altinget*, 28 March 2025. https://www.altinget.se/artikel/stoppa-aasiktsregistreringen-i-regeringskansliet

[48] Article in *The New Republic*, 22 July 2024. https://newrepublic.com/article/183971/jd-vance-weird-terrifying-techno-authoritarian-ideas

to climate activists, suggesting stronger state repression, but also towards climate scientists and journalists.

The Tidö parties pushed back against the critics of their climate action plan. In most cases it stopped at insults and accusations. SD's climate policy spokesperson thought that the report of SCPC contained "little of value for climate policy" and questioned the existence of the council and threatened to revise its mandate.[49]

In 2022, Tobias Andersson (SD) and Johan Forsell (M), then spokesperson on legal policy issues now minister of migration, accused climate activists performing traffic blockades at demonstrations of being "saboteurs", and that they should be charged for "sabotage" instead of "disobedience to law enforcement".[50] This change was later supported by current minister of justice Gunnar Strömmer (M), saying that the actions of climate activists must be seen as sabotage so that they can be "sentenced to prison".[51] Responding to climate actions at airports in April 2025, SD's spokesperson for legal policy, Garpvall, did not only claim that climate activists should be prosecuted for terrorism under current legislation, but that the anti-terrorist legislation should be revised to clearly include acts of climate activism as terrorism.[52]

Climate scientists and public service journalists are often intimidated with threats of getting fired since they are often paid by taxpayers' money. Journalists scrutinising the actions of the populist radical right movement targeting climate activists are also seriously harassed, starting with insults but rapidly expanding to accusations or intimidations. An SD-related media person attacked a male journalist in an interview, where part of the interview was posted on social media and set in motion an online hate campaign:[53]

> *"You are a showman, an idiot, a dishonest person, a political activist. There is no reason for me to be serious with you. The only way I can treat you is to fool around. I will post this conversation just so you know."*

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[49] Article in *GöteborgsPosten*, 2024, https://www.gp.se/politik/sd-kritiska-mot-klimatpolitiska-radet-ska-ses-over.e9469d5f-ec8b-4cb7-864b-68d51010c490

[50] Article in *Fria Tider*, 29 August 2022, https://www.friatider.se/klimataktivister-stoppar-ambulanser

[51] Interview with Swedish minister of justice Gunnar Strömmer, *Altinget*, 10 November 2023. https://www.altinget.se/civilsamhalle/artikel/strommer-m-vill-se-haardare-domar-mot-klimataktivister

[52] News article in *Aftonbladet*, 25 April 2025. https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/zAjVkv/sd-forslaget-klimataktivister-ska-domas-for-terrorbrott?utm_source=iosapp&utm_medium=share. News article in *Tidningen Syre*, 25 April 2025. https://tidningensyre.se/2025/25-april-2025/sd-vill-doma-klimataktivister-for-terrorbrott/

[53] Article in *Syre*, 27 June 2023, https://tidningensyre.se/2023/27-juni-2023/hatkampanj-mot-syres-reporter/

Accusing civil servants of being activists with personal agendas, SD has collected a list of names of non-political staff in the GOS that they want to get rid of and people that should not be employed.[54]

5.1.4 Incitements

Incitement is the most threatening kind of nasty rhetoric, likely to provoke actual physical violence. It includes threats encouraging or facilitating physical violence against opponents, which if the statement is followed through would imply physical harm to opponents.

In spring 2022, some months before national elections in Sweden, radical right extremists media site *Exakt24*, linked to radical right extremist party *Alternative for Sweden* (AfS)[55] and SD, initiated an online name-and-shame campaign targeting climate activists, or climate extremists as they called them. Mastermind behind the campaign, a well-known extremist and so-called journalist with ties to the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NMR) and AfS, posted photos, names, addresses and phone numbers of climate activists on radical right extremist websites as an incitement for further harassment and physical violence. Activists in XR were particularly targeted. In chat rooms filled with followers with Nazi symbols and Nazi rhetoric about race traitors, some of them members of NMR, followers are encouraged to infiltrate and seek accommodation with activists in XR.[56]

In a video on Instagram, a former member of the Riksdag for S, who started a new populist radical right party ahead of the 2024 EU elections, appears next to what is supposed to represent a dead person wrapped in a black garbage bag, with a sign tied around the body: "I regret that I voted for the Green Party last election".[57]

An SD-related journalist working for YouTube-channel Riks, formerly part of SD's communications office, but also engaged with radical right extremist Exakt24, posted openly on his X/Twitter account that "I am a little sceptical that the state should execute people. But when it comes to @vatmarker [ÅV], I am willing to make an exception to my principles".[58]

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[54] News article in *Dagens ETC*, 25 March 2025, https://www.etc.se/story/svarta-listan-saa-rensar-sd-ut-sossiga-tjaenstemaen-fraan-regeringskansliet

[55] AfS was formed by radical right extremists when SD's youth organisation was expelled from the mother party.

[56] Article in *Syre*, 13 June 2022, https://tidningensyre.se/2022/13-juni-2022/hogerextrem-infiltrationskampanj-mot-klimataktivister/

[57] See articles in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 20 June 2022, https://www.svd.se/a/8Qy7zd/jan-emanuels-video-kritiseras-vem-blir-klimathatets-nasta-offer; and *Expressen*, 15 June 2022, https://www.expressen.se/tv/nyheter/jan-emanuels-likvideo-anvands-som-hot-mot-miljopartister/

[58] Article in *Syre*, 27 June 2023, https://tidningensyre.se/2023/27-juni-2023/sd-kopplad-profil-avratta-aterstall-vatmarker-aktivister/

5.1.5 Economic and legal sanctions

Between September 2020 and September 2024, 310 climate activists were prosecuted in Swedish district courts for different crimes related to civil disobedience, some of them several times. Of these, 200 persons were convicted, mainly to fines or suspended sentence.

As presented, leading SD and M politicians accused climate activists performing roadblocks at demonstrations of being "saboteurs", and intimidated that they should be charged for "sabotage" instead of "disobedience to law enforcement".[59] This change was later supported by the current minister of justice, saying that the actions of climate activists must be seen as sabotage so that they can be "sentenced to prison".[60] In 2022, without change of legislation, prosecutors around Sweden suddenly began to charge climate activists performing roadblocks at demonstrations for sabotage. Between summers 2022 and 2023, 25 persons were convicted for sabotage, some of which were sentenced to prison, but most were later acquitted in the Court of Appeal.[61] Several climate activists felt that this change in the judicial system was politically motivated. The Supreme Court's decision in July 2025 that the road blockade carried out in August 2022 was not a sabotage legally speaking, is perceived by activists and their defence attorneys as a victory for democracy.

In 2023, 17 activists of SR carried out peaceful action at a private aviation terminal. Some posted scientific articles about the climate emergency on the doors of the terminal and held a banner calling for private aviation to be banned. Two activists sprayed water-soluble red paint on the terminal and threw red paint on a parked jet. When the police arrived, all 17 people, including the photographer, the police contact and those who were only holding a banner or had arranged coffee for the rest of the group, were arrested and put in cells suspected of airport vandalism, on false grounds.[62] Swedavia, the state-owned company running the airport, lied about the activists stopping an ambulance flight and the police spokesperson claimed that activists had been inside the airfield. Swedavia has since admitted that they lied, and the activist are no longer suspected of airport vandalism. Yet they were brought to justice, with a trial in the District Court of Stockholm in spring 2026. They all stood prosecuted for the crime of 'vandalism together and in concert', alternatively 'aiding and abetting vandalism', a criminal act where everyone is considered

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[59] Article in *Fria Tider*, 29 August 2022, https://www.friatider.se/klimataktivister-stoppar-ambulanser

[60] Op. cit, 48.

[61] News article, *Dagens Arena*, 23 August 2023, https://www.dagensarena.se/innehall/200-klimataktivister-domda-25-sabotage/

[62] See news article in *Dagens ETC*, 7 April 2026, https://www.etc.se/klimat-miljo/obs-boer-publiceras-tis-morgon; Op-ed in *Dagens ETC*, 7 April 2026, https://www.etc.se/debatt/foerbjud-privatflyg-och-sluta-kriminalisera-miljoefoersvarare

the perpetrator regardless of who did what. In its ruling, the district court concluded that only the two activists spraying paint on a terminal building were guilty of crime.

Following the climate actions at airports in April 2025, SD proposed that Swedish antiterrorism legislation may need to be changed so that climate activists surely can be charged for terrorism.[63] This was shortly followed by editorials in Tidö supportive right-wing newspapers, also suggesting that the *Swedish Institute for Human Rights*, a national authority under the government, should be abolished, and that Sweden should exit the *UN Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters*.[64] Obviously, human rights are not for climate activists and members of other environmental movements.

In 2024, a person engaged in MR, a subgroup of XR not engaging in civil disobedience actions,[65] was fired from her job at the *Swedish Energy Agency* (SWEEA) due to accusations and intimidations of her predecessor and subsequent allegations in right-wing and radical right media and from the minister for civil defence that she was a was a potential criminal and a threat to Swedish national security. She was employed as national gas coordinator, a key role for security of energy supply in Sweden. In 2023, an immigrant scientist engaged in SR was arrested for alleged sabotage of an airport. The action took place outside the airport, and the activist held a banner. The court case, which includes several lies from the airport manager and the police was finalised in the district court in May 2026, ruling that she did not conduct a criminal act, but the activist, being a citizen in another EU member state, got her application for Swedish citizenship rejected in spring 2025 with the motivation that "[s]ince you are suspected of a crime, you have not shown that you meet the requirement of an honest way of life".[66]

Protesting the government's policies seems to be a manifestation of lack of conduct and an dishonest way of life according to the Tidö parties. In spring and autumn 2025, another climate activist, an EU citizen resident in Sweden, was arrested by police on his way to and from his work – without suspicion of crime.[67] He was taken to the border police and interrogated without

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[63] News article in *Aftonbladet*, 25 April 2025. https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/zAjVkv/sd-forslaget-klimataktivister-ska-domas-for-terrorbrott?utm_source=iosapp&utm_medium=share. News article in *Tidningen Syre*, 25 April 2025. https://tidningensyre.se/2025/25-april-2025/sd-vill-doma-klimataktivister-for-terrorbrott/

[64] Editorial in *Göteborgs-Posten*, 28 April 2025. https://www.gp.se/ledare/lagarna-maste-motsvara-var-tids-terrorism; Editorial in *Norrbottens-Kuriren*, 28 April 2025. https://www.kuriren.nu/ledare/artikel/aktivister-ska-inte-fa-frikort-att-bega-brott

[65] Article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 18 January 2024. https://www.dn.se/sverige/kan-rebellmammorna-radda-varlden/. Article in *Liberal Debatt*, 18 November 2024, https://www.liberaldebatt.se/2024/11/rebellmammorna/

[66] Article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 5 February 2025, https://www.dn.se/sverige/protesterade-mot-privatflyg-far-inte-bli-svensk-medborgare/

[67] Article in *Aftonbladet*, 24 October 2025, https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/B05jb9/storde-loreen-nu-kan-forskaren-david-alcer-bli-utvisad

a lawyer. He was told that he may be deported and then transferred to the Migration Agency's detention centre. The case has later evolved, with more charges made that could lead to deportation. The police wrote in the documentation to the Migration Agency that his participation in civil disobedience actions shows that he deemed to be engaged in criminal acts to bring about a change that can only be achieved through political decisions and is therefore considered a threat to the democratic basic order. The police claimed that he poses a serious threat to public order and security and should therefore be deported.

As an impact of nasty rhetoric's message effect, warning others to do what the 'enemies' have done, some state agencies under the government have changed their recruitment routines to include additional question on what applicants do in their leisure time. In other agencies, staff perceived as activistic have been replaced in their job. As witnessed by the activist that got fired, agencies are tightening the seat belt for other climate engaged people and people sympathetic with civil disobedience who seek security-classified positions:[68]

> *If you show commitment to climate change, there will be tougher tests and controls, which does not make it easier for the agency to find qualified aspirants. And, if you show an understanding that people are protesting something through peaceful civil disobedience, you will not pass a security clearance.*

5.1.6 Physical violence

Shortly after the 2022 online name and shame campaign targeting climate activists, XR reported that five masked people attacked a climate action, and that one activist had been assaulted.[69] About an hour after the attack, the radical right extremist that organised the campaign appeared at the spot with video camera and studio light but did not get any interviews. "They weren't so talkative last night when I came by with a studio light and everything...", he wrote in his Telegram channel. In a later post, he questioned that the attack on XR really took place but added that he distances himself from the event "if it is true".[70]

Another act of physical violence was experienced in late April 2024, when five masked members of a neo-Nazi fight club attacked a political meeting in Gubbängen, a suburb south of Stockholm,

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[68] https://annafranenergimyndigheten.se/anna-from-the-swedish-energy-agency/

[69] News article in *Syre*, 13 June 2022, https://tidningensyre.se/2022/13-juni-2022/hogerextrem-infiltrationskampanj-mot-klimataktivister/

[70] Ibid.

organised by V and MP on how to deal with the nasty politics of the radical right extremist movement and its implications for democracy.[71]

5.2 The political opposition and climate advocates as offenders

Rhetoric of the political opposition, S, C, V and MP) started off quite normal in the first party leader debate in the Riksdag after the elections in 2022. Responding to the Tidö parties' first state budgetary bill, with proposals that would increase Sweden's GHG emissions, S party leader said that:[72]

> *Sweden's role as a pioneering country has been important and should not be underestimated. It is because Sweden is at the forefront of development that thousands of new jobs are now being created in the green industrial transition here in Sweden. That gives us credibility. But with what credibility will the new government now be able to lead the negotiations to reduce emissions in the EU when a national policy is being pursued that will increase Swedish emissions? 'If we don't do it, we won't do it,' was the finance minister's answer to the question of what happens if we don't reach our climate targets.*

Similar critique was given by party leaders of C, V and MP, where Annie Lööf (C) also mentioned Sweden's role in the EU and globally:[73]

> *Sweden has taken the lead at home and shown how our country can and should be a role model for others. But if we are to achieve success, more must follow. It is therefore worrying to see how the Swedish government is now swaying in a number of areas. When you go to the global climate summit with the message to other countries that it is urgent, but back off yourself in climate policy and increase our emissions by millions and millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide, you are not a green example in the world.*

One of the spokespersons of MP continued:[74]

> *There is a lot of talk about the effectiveness of the government's climate policy, but what the government is effectively succeeding in is raising emissions, exacerbating the nature crisis and delaying the Swedish transition. It is incredibly unfortunate that we are now hearing from both the Minister for the Environment and other government representatives, such as the Minister of Finance, that it is uncertain whether the Swedish climate goals will be achieved.*

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[71] News on Swedish public service television *SVT*, 25 April 2024, https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/stockholm/har-flyr-flera-maskerade-man-efter-attacken-i-gubbangen

[72] Op. cit. 26, speech No. 2.

[73] Op. cit. 26, speech No. 5.

[74] Op. cit. 26, speech No. 7.

But the data reveals that the targets of the Tidö parties' and other climate sceptics' nasty rhetoric, i.e. the political opposition (S, C, V and MP), climate scientists and activists as well as journalists, are also using uncivil rhetoric, in response to how they perceive of Tidö climate policy and the right-wing use of nasty rhetoric. A significant difference is that climate advocates only use insults and accusations of a rather mild kind, and with another purpose than silencing their opponents.

5.2.1 Insults

Insults of oppositional politicians, climate activists, scientists and journalists are mainly targeting the government as a collective, SD and individual ministers, in particular the PM and the climate minister.

In the first Riksdag party leader debate after the Tidö government entered office, then party leader of MP Per Bolund called the PM a "provoking naked liar", for his claim that the S-MP government decided to decommission four nuclear power plants, when in fact it was the owners that took the decision since the plants were old, not safe and unprofitable, based on policies that also M and KD approved:[75]

> *It is quite provocative to have a PM who stands and peddles untruths in the Riksdag to try to hide how naked he and the government are on environmental issues. Ulf Kristersson knows as well as anyone else that the nuclear reactors he is talking about were shut down by the owners because they were old, unprofitable and unsafe. The energy policy that prevailed was also supported by the Moderates. It is also very slippery when it comes to the climate targets on the part of the government. It is very unclear to find out what really applies. The Minister of Finance is at least honest about the fact that no climate targets will be achieved with the government's policy.*

Calling them "irrelevant", the government purposefully insulted and discriminated climate justice organisations and climate scientists from participating in the national climate meeting in June 2023. As a response, Greenpeace and FFF organised a demonstration outside the meeting. Together with 14 other environmental organisations, they also wrote an op-ed insulting the government. Climate scientists also wrote op-eds in leading newspapers before and after the meeting. While the former were rather subtle in insulting the government, inviting people to an action outside the "climate meeting" which included "civil society organisations", with quotation

[75] Op. cit. 26, speech No. 22.

marks insinuating that the meeting was illegitimate,[76] the latter were more explicit, calling the government's climate meeting a "joke", a "play for the galleries" and a "spectacle".[77]

The opposition was critical to the climate action plan. The S climate policy spokesperson, Anna-Caren Sätherberg, called the Tidö parties' climate action plan "a napkin sketch and a broken promise".[78] Member of the Riksdag, Jytte Guteland (S), a former Member of the European Parliament, claimed that climate minister Pourmokhtari is "standing in front of an empty shop window."[79]

With the almost exclusive focus of the Tidö parties on nuclear power to mitigate climate change, critical journalists have asked energy minister Ebba Busch (KD) about the reasons for the government to suddenly shift and suggest state funding of new nuclear power plants. The answer given, 'that it is a natural law', did not please the journalists, why a politics journalist of *Dagens Nyheter*, claimed that the lure of nuclear power is "an erogenous zone to the government".[80] Also critical to the exclusive focus on new nuclear power, Tony Haddou (V) claimed that minister Busch is in some kind of "nuclear Tourette's state of mind".[81]

5.2.2 Accusations

While all climate advocates insulted the government and individual Tidö politicians, mainly oppositional politicians and some groups of scientists used accusations. Most harsh in accusing the Tidö parties and individual ministers was Märta Stenevi, then party leader of MP. Debating the Tidö climate policy in the Riksdag, she accused the climate minister of being:[82]

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[76] Invitation to demonstration. https://www.greenpeace.org/sweden/pressmeddelanden/klimat/pressinbjudan-demonstration-utanfor-regeringens-klimatmote-16-juni/

[77] News article about concerns of climate policy researchers, *Dagens Nyheter*, 14 June 2023, https://www.dn.se/sverige/regeringens-klimatmote-vacker-fragor-i-forskarvarlden/; Op-ed by eight climate policy researchers, *Aftonbladet*, 15 June 2023, https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/3E78Ad/atta-forskare-klimatmotet-riskerar-bli-spel-for-gallerierna; Op-ed by six climate policy researchers, *GöteborgsPosten*, 1 July 2023, https://www.gp.se/debatt/m%C3%A5nga-avg%C3%B6rande-fr%C3%A5gor-saknas-i-regeringens-klimatpolitik-1.103017568; Op-ed by 16 environmental organisations, *Expressen*, 14 June 2023, https://www.expressen.se/debatt/regeringens-klimatmote-framstar-som-ett-skamt/

[78] Analysis of the Tidö parties' press briefing on theclimate action plan, *TV4*, 21 December 2023, https://www.tv4.se/artikel/5MenofU2MHfkzfa4yGT6YF/analys-kompromissen-med-sd-baeddar-foer-hardare-strid

[79] Riksdag debate on the climate action plan, 19 March 2024, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/klimathandlingsplanens-redovisade-utslappskurva_hb10538/

[80] Podd 'Älskade politik' (Beloved politics'), *Dagens Nyheter*, 14 August 2024, https://www.dn.se/podd/alskade-politik/en-erogen-zon-for-regeringspartierna-karnkraftens-lockelse/

[81] Riksdag debate on climate policy, 6 December 2022, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/atgarder-for-att-na-klimatmalen_ha1039/

[82] Ibid.

> *a minister in an extremely weak puppet government that could only take office after a comprehensive agreement was made with the right-wing extremists in SD, /…/ We are debating with a liberal climate minister who runs SD's climate policy.*

Guteland (S) questioned the attitude of the climate minister, constantly referring to herself as a liberal minister in a right-wing government in which SD has no ministers, that:[83]

> *In politics the motto 'I can do it myself' works very poorly. In politics, it's about creating trust and making sure that you get joint decisions and can make them together with others – not least in Sweden's Riksdag, this is completely decisive. Therefore, this superhero attitude is not satisfactory. /…/ The climate minister stands very alone in an uncomfortable situation because the support that exists for this government rests on a climate sceptic party.*

In its critique of the climate action plan and previous climate policy decisions of the Tidö parties, the Swedish Finance Policy Council (SFPC, 2024, p. 15) was rather outspoken for being a national authority, accusing the Tidö parties of (author's highlight underlined):

> *Lacking a coherent and comprehensible strategy to reach both the Swedish and the EU's climate targets by 2030. /…/ We conclude that the government's climate action plan does not provide clear and concrete information about how the climate targets are to be reached; it rests on hopes that future actions will lead to the achievement of the targets.*

The SCPC (2024, p. 8) was even more outspoken in their critique and accusations (author's highlight underlined):

> *The Tidö parties provide a misleading picture of the action plan's expected contribution to achieving the goal. The claim that the action plan leads 'all the way to net zero' is factually flawed.*

5.3 Analysis

Nasty rhetoric is not a new phenomenon in Swedish politics. In the 1970s and 80s, the hate targeting then PM Olof Palme (S) was prominent. In the early 1970s, one could hear and read rumours that Palme was a "drug addict", a "Russian spy", a "manic liar" and a "communist". In the 1980s, hatred towards Palme increased sharply with campaigns initiated by the Moderate party, demonising him as a "double nature"; a "deformed and dangerous person with demonic

[83] Riksdag debate, 14 March 2023, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/forhandlingen-om-sveriges-klimathandlingsplan_ha10224/

traits".[84] It is not yet clear who murdered Palme in February 1986 and why, but there were many far-fetched conspiracy theories and hateful attacks against Palme at this time.

Between 2015 and 2022, a main target of populist radical right hate and threats was the former leader of the Centre Party and minister for business, Annie Lööf.[85] She stood up for social-liberal and green values, a humane migration politics and criticised the turn to toxic language in Swedish politics. For this, she was called "Sharia-Annie" and was accused of being a "traitor to Sweden" that should be "brought to the neo-Nazi court and executed". In 2022, it was revealed that a radical right extremist was plotting to kill her. After years of steadfast resistance against the haters – "They shouldn't fucking win" (to use her own words) – fear and anxiety, "crying herself to sleep", made her fed up with politics, and Lööf resigned as party leader and from other political assignments.[86]

The use of nasty rhetoric in climate policy follows years of increasingly toxic language in Swedish politics and social media, where "small nasty words and the intertextual nets of which they are part have already fundamentally changed Sweden" (Milani, 2020, p. 9; italics in original text). Journalists are among the victims, but the manifestation of a more widespread and subtle *banal evil*, to use the words of Hannah Arendt (1971), cannot only be blamed on politicians. It has been facilitated by Swedish media and mainstream political formations circulating and normalising toxic language in covert and mundane ways (Milani, 2020). Instead of approaching political debates as fora to develop politics and policy, media and politicians have together made political debates into televised competitions, with commentators in the studio and newspapers analysing and reporting about 'who won the debate', with language becoming increasingly and explicitly nastier (cf. Freedman, 2018).

5.3.1 Offenders and victims of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics

As presented, the targets of hate speech in Sweden have expanded since the hate and threats towards Palme and Lööf, beyond oppositional politicians to also include scientists, activists and journalists. This is not new with climate politics. It can rather be seen as a continuation and expansion of populist radical right hate speech and hate crime in Sweden targeting outgroups for ethnical, religious and gender reasons to a new policy domain (see e.g. Tham et al., 2011; Hagerlid, 2021; Atak, 2022; Ilse & Hagerlid). The results also reveal that members of all parties in

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[84] Article in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 30 August 2021, https://www.svd.se/a/oWk7LK/palmehatet-exploderade-pa-1980-talet

[85] Article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 26 August 2022, https://www.dn.se/sverige/sa-sprids-hat-och-hot-mot-centerledaren-annie-loof/

[86] Article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 16 December 2022, https://www.dn.se/sverige/annie-loof-jag-grater-nar-lampan-ar-slackt/

the Riksdag but C use insults and accusations in their political rhetoric. Former party leader of C, Annie Lööf, stood firm in criticising the use of nasty rhetoric in Swedish politics. Emma Wiesner (C), top candidate in the 2024 EU elections, was the only politician in the final debate in Swedish television that did not use toxic language.

Politicians rarely humiliate or denigrate other politicians in person, but other political parties. Swedish politics is not as person fixated as, for example, American politics. It is rather radical right extremists that target politicians in person. Except for the hate on Greta Thunberg, the same holds true for nasty rhetoric of politicians targeting climate activists or scientists. It is primarily the organisations, not the persons, who are targeted. Some exceptions in politicians' rhetoric are the accusations of (i) former MP party leader Bolund calling PM Kristersson a "provoking naked liar", (ii) former MP party leader Stenevi calling the climate minister a "week minister in a puppet government", and (iii) S spokesperson Guteland criticising the climate minister for her "superhero attitude". Hate and threats sent by anonymous offenders are often targeting individual climate activists, scientists, journalists and other outgroups, orchestrated by SD and AfS, who display names, photos, addresses and phone numbers of the 'enemies' in radical right extremist web forums.

5.3.2 Pro-climate advocates are uncivil but not nasty

The political opposition in the Riksdag, and to a lesser extent scientists and activists as well as critical journalists also use insults and accusations, but no intimidations, incitements or violence. Insults and accusations from climate advocates target the government as a collective, or the PM and climate minister directly, to delegitimise them in affective response to what they consider to be inferior climate policy in substance and process. They also insult and accuse the PM and the climate minister for lack of leadership. Being climate minister, Pourmokhtari is bound to take the hit, although everyone understands that she is only a "liberal minister in SD's puppet government".

The red–green political opposition as well as climate scientists and climate activists use uncivil rhetoric, sometimes with a humoristic twist, to delegitimise opponents to rally supporters, not to silence their opponents. In that sense, it cannot be considered nasty rhetoric. They value pluralism and freedom of speech and us uncivil language to enhance 'normal' rhetoric. Like Kamala Harris and Tim Walz were calling Donald Trump and J.D. Wance "weird" in the 2024 US Presidential campaign, former party leaders of MP, Bolund and Stenevi show with their accusations and the eye of a child that the PM and climate minister are "naked emperors" – that the Tidö quartet lacks credible political reforms, no visions of building a climate neutral society.

Tidö's response to the climate emergency is described as "Tourette-like tirades" about new nuclear power at upfront costs of about USD 30–60 billion and USD 1 000 in annual nuclear taxation per Swedish household. The uncivil rhetoric of Bolund and Stenevi, an everyday call to laugh at the Emperor's new clothes, can arouse broad popular engagement. This is indicated by the results of the 2024 EU elections, were Swedish left-wing and green parties more than doubled their votes compared to the national elections in 2022, collecting almost 25 per cent of the votes in total. SD dropped from 20.5 per cent in the national elections to 13 per cent in the EU elections, for the first time ever getting reduced support in a nationwide election.

As for humour in climate rhetoric, studies indicate that climate activists are 'radically kind' and use humour in digital activism to transform democracy (Pickard et al., 2020; Sloam et al., 2022; Chiew et al., 2024). The humoristic turn in climate rhetoric is evident in Swedish climate politics, with Greta Thunberg's insulting response to Andersson's (SD) intimidation outside the entrance of the Riksdag – a laughter, saying that he is a loser, not the master he tried to be. It is also found in the subtle insults of Greenpeace and FFF related to the government's illegitimate "climate meeting" with "civil society organisations".

5.3.3 Nasty rhetoric as a tactic of anti-climate advocates

Analysing the use of derogative language by the anti-climate and pro-climate groups, the empirical data provides clear evidence that the Tidö parties and their followers use hate speech and hard repression systematically silence their political opponents. This is nasty rhetoric in essence. All types of nasty rhetoric, from insults to incitements and violence, are widely used by Tidö party leaders and cabinet ministers, including the PM. It is also used by neoliberal, libertarian and populist radical right influencers and climate sceptics, applauding the weakening of Swedish climate policy. The main aim is to delegitimise, dehumanise and threaten their enemies to silence. Nasty rhetoric explicitly targeting climate scientists, climate journalists and climate activists also has a message effect, indirectly targeting people and society in general to prevent them from participating in a public and democratic debate on climate policy (cf. Ilse & Hagerlid, 2025). They should refrain from expressing opinions that do not agree with those of the perpetrator or perpetrators.

Inspired by several years of advocacy of the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise and Timbro, the highest representatives of Tidö parties regard strong climate policy and pro-climate advocates as threats. However, it seems that the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise and Timbro have recently changed opinion. Climate activists formulate system criticism based on climate science

calling for a just transition (Evans & Phelan, 2016; Wang & Lo, 2021; Fischer et al., 2024) and economic degrowth (Heikkurinen, 2021).

Instead of responding pro-climate advocates with good arguments, as would be suspected in traditional environmental or sustainability rhetoric (cf. Myerson & Rydin, 1996; Dryzek & Lo, 2015; Wolrath Söderberg, 2020), the anti-climate advocates use nasty rhetoric, attacking their opponents for who they are. The insults, accusations, intimidations and incitements are not a matter of isolated occasions, and it cannot be considered innocent mistakes. The words come from the highest-ranking politicians, including the PM, whose rhetoric agitates that climate activists really are a threat to democracy. Pro-climate advocates are dismissed as equal human beings and should not have the same rights as Swedish citizens in general. Climate activists are facing court trials that can be considered nothing else than strategic lawsuits to get them out of way from public debates on climate policy, so-called SLAPPs. A recent survey of 156 civil society organisations in Sweden, working for democracy from all sorts of angles, shows that right-wing politicians all over the country openly use negative connotations to discredit and delegitimise civil society (Ardin, 2026). Advocating liberal or deliberative democracy is seen as extremism and antidemocratic in the right-wing populist discourse. Insults, accusations, intimidations and incitements are made openly, mainly in social media from official accounts of ministers and other politicians. Intimidations targeting climate activists are also made in national radio, on the streets, and in political debates in the Riksdag.

In addition, hatred expands when individuals and groups connect policy issues or are part of more than one target group, thus being branded with multiple cultural identities. Such intersectionality makes some people more vulnerable to hate speech, and hate speech harsher (Alfaro, 2022). Activists in SR are double hated, as scientists and as activists. Greta Thunberg's linking of climate activism with human rights activism and her early denunciation of Israel's actions in Gaza as genocide, coupling rhetoric of anti-capitalism to rhetoric of colonialism and white supremacy, sparked global accusations against her. For this, she is openly called a 'leftish Nazi' or 'girl-Hitler'.[87]

In parallel with increasing use of nasty rhetoric targeting climate justice activists, we have witnessed increasing use of nasty rhetoric targeting pro-Palestine activists and demonstrators, being accused of 'antisemitism' (Ardin & Irving, 2025). Particularly SD, M and KD politicians

[87] Editorial in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 26 November 2023, https://www.svd.se/a/abR9jO/madeleine-albright-hade-haft-en-sarskild-plats-i-helvetet-at-stina-wollter-och-greta-thunberg?fbclid=IwAR21Rypq7bOKRL_TxeJP2NCn8LljNx1K57bn5YRLa_Vl_1-34Mb2rU4SVLo; Commentary in *Arbetet*, 27 November 2023, https://arbetet.se/2023/11/27/sa-blev-greta-thunberg-tjej-hitler/

accuse pro-Palestine demonstrators of activism, sometimes violent, and thus being a threat to democracy.[88] But, researching journalists critically analysing the Swedish populist radical right argue that violence is often provoked by SD politicians with teams of photographers linked to Riks, who immediately publishes films and comments about violent anti-democratic activists in social media.[89] Posts that are then shared by the PM. Given the similarities with films of climate activists at demonstrations, there is a pattern in how SD's troll factory is used as video provocateur to create an image of activists as anti-democratic. With the focus on climate justice, linking climate policy to human rights policy, many climate justice activists are also involved in the pro-Palestine movement.

Nasty rhetoric is an outspoken tactic of SD to entrench the 'us vs. them' and the 'people vs. elite' narratives. But it has turned out that SD also uses nasty rhetoric through its anonymous troll accounts on social media targeting ministers of M, KD and L for being part of 'The Cry' (Swe. 'Klägget'). The insults and accusations towards cabinet ministers were condemned by the political opposition and criticised by the PM, who required an excuse and that posts on social media smearing the government were deleted, but he did not criticise the widespread use of nasty rhetoric in general. This is symptomatic since the systematic and strategic use of nasty rhetoric by the Swedish radical right is normalised by the PM's and other leading politicians' extensive use of nasty rhetoric. An editorial in the largest newspaper in Sweden called upon the PM to stop threatening opponents and start dealing with public policy issues in substance.[90]

Analysing the psychological roots of the climate crisis, Weintrobe (2021) argue that wealthy people in wealthy countries are stuck in a state of *exceptionalism*, i.e. a specific psychological state in late capitalism, with a tight link between libertarians and populist radical right politicians and influencers, and where people seize to compromise. If reality or conspiratory fiction in any way challenges that perception, it is the threatening challenge that needs to be denied. Therefore, individuals or groups who tell difficult, challenging things – such as climate justice activists, climate scientists or climate journalists speaking of a climate emergency and need for urgent action, as well as victims of hate speech calling for an end to hate speech – need to be ostracised. This tight link between pseudo-liberals, libertarians and radical right populists has recently been analysed by numerous scholars (e.g. Brown, 2015b; 2019; Klein, 2024; Slobodian, 2025; Klein &

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[88] Editorial in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 15 June 2025, https://www.svd.se/a/vgBw8l/palestinarorelsens-utlopare-hotar-demokratin;

[89] Op-ed in *Aftonbladet*, 23 June 2025, https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/mPb2B4/jessica-stegrud-roger-sahlstrom-och-hetsen-mot-palestina-demonstranter

[90] Editorial in *Dagens Nyheter*, 23 June 2025, https://www.dn.se/ledare/max-hjelm-ulf-kristersson-spelar-skramselspel-i-stallet-for-att-losa-samhallsproblemen/

Taylor, 2026). The populist radical right is described as a *Doppelgänger* of the (neo)liberals (Klein, 2024, p. 12): "the fascist clown state that is the ever-present twin of liberal Western democracies, perpetually threatening to engulf it in its fires of selective belonging and ferocious despising". Nations and culture flip to their sinister doubles – from democratic to authoritarian, secular to theocratic, and pluralist to fascistic – all which are evident in this case study.

In Sweden, the close ties between Tidö ministers and climate denying SD go beyond the Tidö Agreement. Tidö climate governance, including nasty rhetoric, adheres not only to populist radical right leaders and supporters, but also to libertarians who want to abolish the state (von Malmborg, 2024a). Many strategies and actions of radical right populists around the world ascend from libertarian philosophy and neoliberal economics with its 'There is no Alternative' to capitalism (TINA) narrative (Goldwag, 2017; Séville, 2017). The Swedish government and populist radical right leaders know very well that we are entering, if not already living in, an age of emergency and existential danger from a climate breakdown. But they have responded with various fantasies to let the Earth burn and drown as effects of climate change. The contemporary radical right movements lack any credible vision for a hopeful future and offer instead remixes of a bygone, nostalgic or even mythical past (cf. Kenny, 2018; Taş, 2022), alongside the sadistic pleasures of dominance over an ever-expanding assemblage of dehumanised others. The governing ideology of the populist radical right in our age of escalating wicked problem disasters has become a monstrous, supremacist survivalism. This is most obvious in the US since President Trump entered the oval room a second time in January 2025, but this report shows that it is also apparent in Sweden.

6. Harms to people

This section presents results regarding the self-reported psychological and social psychological harms of nasty rhetoric to different groups of people, i.e. emotional, cognitive and behavioural harms, as well as harms to their perceived social status. The section ends with an analysis of the resilience of people harmed by nasty rhetoric – the crime victims.

6.1 Climate scientists

In 2023, more than 50 % of climate and environment scientists at Swedish universities reported in a survey by Sweden's largest newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* that they sensed decreasing public trust in science over the last five years.[91] Over a quarter state that they had been attacked by those around them because of their research or how they have spoken in the media. Many have experienced a stream of voices harassing, intimidating, heckling, stalking, and even threatening them for being climate scientists. The offenders are mainly individuals in business, politics and the general public, but occasionally also from civil society and colleagues in academia. Since then, climate science has been accused by leading right-wing and radical right politicians and other Swedish climate sceptics of being "just an opinion", with climate scientists serving a "left-liberal conspiracy" (see Section 5.1.2). Over a third of the respondents to the survey spontaneously brought up that they believed Swedish right-wing politicians ignore or question climate and environmental science, that they are knowledge resistant. A professor in environmental science testified that "there is an arrogance towards science, not least among politicians who want to attract voters".[92] Several researchers expressed concern about reduced funding for environmental and climate science, as their expertise is perceived as superfluous. Another professor said:

> *The development is becoming increasingly threatening. And when you also manage to move the debate in the Riksdag from "what to do about climate change" to "is there climate change" – then you yourself become conspiratorial. Is this some kind of plan? It's scary.*

Nasty rhetoric attacks on Swedish climate scientists are made to delegitimise individual researchers, but also to cast doubts on universities, the scientific community and the role of science in providing knowledge for citizens, businesses, public authorities and politicians to make

[91] News article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 26 February 2023, https://www.dn.se/sverige/miljoforskarnas-oro-varfor-ska-vi-finnas-om-ingen-bryr-sig-om-oss/

[92] News article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 27 February 2023, https://www.dn.se/sverige/ministern-om-forskarnas-svar-djupt-oroande/

informed decisions. An associate professor in environmental science testified about death threats and threats about being fired from university [S3]:

> *As an environmental researcher, I have been exposed from various directions. After a wolf debate, I was informed that I live with two red dots on my chest. And in the climate debate over the past ten years, I have received threats that both one and the other measures will be taken to get me rid of my job, in a couple of cases in the last five years also uttered or hinted at by politicians.*

After being attacked by hate speech, many researchers perceive a continued risk of being followed or chased and withdraw from research in areas that have become politically charged. Those who continue to conduct research in such areas withdraw from communicating their research results to the public. Especially researchers in their early career self-censor and avoid presenting their results to the public. A Swedish professor of climate policy explained how hatred and threats affected him [S1]:

> *I've received hate and threats for long. Being criticised in substance is part of being a researcher, that is what brings science forward. But being criticised in person, often related to conspiracy theories, is detrimental. Once, haters threatened to send a death squad to the university. The hatred and threats drain me of energy and to avoid it, I refrain from participating in the public discussion on climate policy.*

All researchers interviewed mentioned that being criticised in substance is part of being a researcher, but being criticised, hated and threatened in person, for being a climate scientist, creates doubt about one's role as researcher and the role of universities. "Why should we exist if no one cares about us? Why, then, should we be financed by taxpayers' money?"[93] One interviewee explained [S2]:

> *It's one thing if someone criticises your selection or method. It can be answered by showing raw data or analyses. Attacks that are directed at you as a person cannot be responded to without abandoning your role as a researcher. And this is something that has become more common. When we published a study in a scientific journal a few years ago that questions Swedish industry practice, several representatives of the industry questioned, among other things, that the paper had not been reviewed for longer than eleven days by the journal. For me, it crosses a red line when high-ranking people in industry and politics, but also colleagues in academia, question the entire validity of the scientific process and academia.*

[93] News article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 26 February 2023, https://www.dn.se/sverige/miljoforskarnas-oro-varfor-ska-vi-finnas-om-ingen-bryr-sig-om-oss/

Scientists who have been threatened sought support from colleagues or the universities' security departments. But experience shows that they receive limited help. Most are offered technical support to avoid getting more hateful and threatening e-mails, but they are not offered other measures to increase personal safety, e.g., related to the risk of being followed or chased. A scientist threatened with death laments [S1]:

> *The security department was involved, I got a crash course in safety and was taught, among other things, that if I was physically attacked, I would run in zigzags. That instruction has stubbornly lingered in the back of my mind.*

Some universities, or rather university departments with many people doing climate science, have initiated workshops among colleagues on how to deal with knowledge resistance and hatred:[94]

> *Should one engage in online discussions with science deniers so as not to let them run wild with their messages – or does it affect your credibility as a scientist if you 'lower' yourself to the level of trolls?*

Some climate scientists were more offended and felt anger from the insults about climate science being "just an opinion". Few climate scientists were invited to the government's national climate meeting in June 2023, and those who were invited were not allowed to speak. In response, they insulted the government, calling the government's climate meeting a "joke", a "play for the galleries", and a "spectacle", to delegitimise it.[95]

6.2 Climate justice activists

All climate activists interviewed mentioned that fear and anxiety for the climate emergency described by climate science – that the human era on the earth may end – combined with anger about the lack of action in society, made them engage and become climate activists. Following the footsteps of Greta Thunberg and FFF, they claimed they must do something and see themselves speaking on behalf of potential victims of climate change, including themselves, but also for those who do not have a voice, particularly children. The founder of MR explained: "We

[94] Ibid.

[95] News article about concerns of climate policy researchers, *Dagens Nyheter*, 14 June 2023, https://www.dn.se/sverige/regeringens-klimatmote-vacker-fragor-i-forskarvarlden/; Op-ed by eight climate policy researchers, *Aftonbladet*, 15 June 2023, https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/3E78Ad/atta-forskare-klimatmotet-riskerar-bli-spel-for-gallerierna; Op-ed by six climate policy researchers, *GöteborgsPosten*, 1 July 2023, https://www.gp.se/debatt/m%C3%A5nga-avg%C3%B6rande-fr%C3%A5gor-saknas-i-regeringens-klimatpolitik-1.103017568; Op-ed by 16 environmental organisations, Expressen, 14 June 2023, https://www.expressen.se/debatt/regeringens-klimatmote-framstar-som-ett-skamt/

are worried about our children's future and show our despair in a silent roar".[96] Drawing on climate science, climate activists raise concerns and shape opinions about the "climate emergency", calling upon politicians and business leaders to "tell the truth", and "act now" to "end fossil fuels" (von Malmborg, 2024d). Increasingly critical to the hegemonic norm of neoliberal economics and economic growth, these activists are angry and fight for the sake of the climate, human rights of current and future generations – climate justice – and economic degrowth. As in other countries, Swedish climate activists use different peaceful protests and civil disobedience, to criticise and raise opinions about the government's, and companies' lack of action to reduce GHG emissions, thus contributing to climate change crimes and ecocide.

For this, using their democratic right to demonstrate and raise their voices and protest the state and companies who violate their responsibilities regarding climate change, they have become victims of nasty rhetoric, from hate speech to hate crime and state repression. Climate activist organisations and individuals are the main targets of Tidö nasty climate politics. They are hated, partly for what they do, but mainly for conflicting political preferences on climate policy and economic policy, representing the 'evil' that will destroy Sweden and the Swedish. Instead of taking the science-based arguments of activists seriously, inviting them to policy discussions, the PM and cabinet ministers and their supporters insult climate activists of being "irrelevant" and "hippies estranged from the world", accuse them of being "climate extremists", "totalitarian terrorists", "saboteurs" and "a threat to democracy", and present intimidations and calls for them to be "sent to prison" and "executed". A few activists have been assaulted, some have been fired or replaced in their jobs, and many more have been prosecuted and sentenced to fines or prison.

As identified, the Tidö parties use a whole range of nasty rhetoric of different degrees to control and counteract, from insults and other kinds of soft state repression to economic, legal and other kinds of hard state repression. Thus, climate activists are victimised differently.

6.2.1 Harms of soft repression

All activists interviewed but three belong to the hard core of different organisations, planning different climate actions. They mentioned that they have balanced pros and cons of radical climate activism. Engaging in civil disobedience actions, they have all deemed it worth taking the risk of being fined or imprisoned. Being accountable for your actions are key in civil disobedience. The other three have chosen more peaceful forms of actions, without civil disobedience, e.g., singing sit-ins with MR and FR that have been authorised by the policy in

[96] News article in *Aftonbladet*, 19 July 2025, https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/o3OddV/rebellmammorna-blev-klimataktivister-for-barnens-skull

advance. No matter what actions they have taken part in, all stated that they take some offense to hate and threats, but they also claim to have learned over the years that hate speech is not targeting them as individuals, at least not insults and accusations. They find nasty rhetoric part of a larger, orchestrated attempt to polarise and break down society and democracy to ensure economic growth and male privileges. One activist said that insults and accusations are seen as "background noise", and that they do not see themselves as victims [A2]: "We don't want to be martyrs".

Very few activists in MR have been personally attacked with hate speech. One of the founders of MR said that there may have been some by-passers muttering at actions, but more usually people are stopping by "crying a bit":[97]

> *We sit with our signs and try to show our feelings about the climate and the future. We try to reach into people's hearts and touch them emotionally. We notice that something is happening between us and those who pass by. Older men, often talked about as an obstacle to change, often stop by our sit-ins and are noticeably moved. Sometimes teenage boys have come up and say: 'Can we sit with you for a while?' Sit here, we say. It's a very low threshold in.*

The activists interviewed feel supported by other activists. They train how to support each other before, during and after an action, and discuss how to react and behave if targeted by hate speech or repression. They also support each other economically if needed. This seem to be different from the early actions and demonstrations organised by FFF some five years ago, which rallied thousands of participants. A young female climate activist who was intimidated by SD politicians and SD supporters at a large climate demonstration, and then online, described how the hatred affected her:[98]

> *They never said who they were but wanted to ask a few questions. I had no idea that they had evil intent. It was very naïve of me. They had put on clown music and cut the interview so that I appeared stupid and ignorant. I felt extremely humiliated. The video had over 2 000 comments and the tone was very harsh and mocking. From fear that radical right extremists would start harassing me, I didn't dare to respond to the comments.*

Quite few activists, usually with known identity, have been targeted with more severe hate speech [A2]:

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[97] Ibid.

[98] News article in *Dagens ETC*, 2 September 2022, https://www.etc.se/inrikes/sd-toppen-styrde-trollarmen-gav-sig-paa-unga-under-klimatdemonstration

> *I've received many death threats and threats of physical violence, both me and my family. The threats to the family are much, much worse. I have also been beaten. In the moment of incitement, I get completely cold. Silent and passive. Afterwards, I can be very sad and disappointed that people can be so cruel. These events have made me more careful when I move around town so as not to be knocked down by someone who recognises me. I've also become more afraid that staff and people around a climate action will act violently towards me or my friends.*

Some activists have stepped back from civil disobedience protests, e.g., roadblocks or disturbing television shows, to less confrontative actions, e.g., song sit-ins or street walks. They changed from RW to XR or MR. Some have withdrawn and remain silent after being subjected to hate and threats. One of the activists said that he stepped back when his family became worried about his safety [A1]. But the more radical activists have been strengthened in their conviction about climate justice activism. To them, the fight for a just climate transition is so important that they largely ignore negative emotional reactions from hate speech. With a sense of despair about the climate inaction and hate speech of the current government, they rather get angry and want to make things change. They want to make perpetrators understand that they are wrong on climate change, and that they are the real threat to democracy trying to silence climate activists. A member of MR mentioned that rather than scaring her, hate speech makes her provoked:[99]

> *When politicians throw around concepts such as terrorism and totalitarian forces, I see it as a tactic to scare. I'm provoked instead. As a white, well-educated woman, I'm quite privileged, so I have a responsibility. Both for my children, but also to not just back down.*

A full-time radical activist mentioned, and others confirmed [A2]:

> *We in the small group of radical activists in Restore Wetlands and parts of Extinction Rebellion are strengthened in our conviction and what is required when we have serious allegations about sabotage and terrorism directed at us.*

Hate speech with accusations and intimidations about activists being "saboteurs", "totalitarian", "terrorists", and "a threat to Swedish democracy", has turned the struggle of climate activists into a struggle for the climate, for democracy, and for human rights. It is a struggle for human survival. This is evident also with the actions of Greta Thunberg, calling for Israel to end the genocide in Gaza, which has resulted in accusations of Thunberg being "leftish Nazi" or "girl-Hitler", portrayed with a Hitler type moustache.[100] She, like many other climate activists, find the

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[99] Op. cit. 97.

[100] Commentary in *Arbetet*, 27 November 2023, https://arbetet.se/2023/11/27/sa-blev-greta-thunberg-tjej-hitler/

root causes of the climate emergency as well Israel's war-crimes, and the reasons for inaction of the EU and the Swedish government on both issues, to be colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy. The discussion on deepening and developing democracy has become a central part of the climate justice movement.

When the climate minister cancelled a meeting because an attendant, a retired man in his 70s, was engaged in XR, and the PM claimed that XR is "a threat to Swedish democracy and just pretend to care for the climate", spokespersons for Greenpeace and XR responded in social media and newspapers:[101]

> Greenpeace: *We need to talk about democracy, Ulf Kristersson.*
>
> XR: *It's really, really bad that the PM accuses XR of being a security threat instead of taking the climate threat seriously.*

Spokespersons for RTF were both sad and angry about the PM's statement. In a press release, they clarified:

> *We are a totally peaceful movement. When the PM lied about his own policies during his open after-works, we felt a need to protest in the way we could. The fact that the PM is now portraying peaceful children and young people as a security threat is undemocratic.*

6.2.2 Harms of hard repression

Activists from all organisations, each with a different niche and role in the larger movement, mentioned that politicians and other nasty rhetoric perpetrators are often lumping climate activists together. The climate justice movement in general is alleged for roadblocks and other disruptive actions, performed by a few. Therefore, climate activists are scared by the PM's accusations about MR, XR and other groups being "totalitarian" and "anti-democratic". Not of the content targeting them as individuals, but of the message effect to people in society that it is perfectly normal and legitimate to use nasty rhetoric – to lie, to hate, to threat and to repress all climate activists. And to skew the meaning of concepts of a liberal democracy.

The lack of fear in person, and the rather angry reaction of climate activists targeted by hate speech was encapsulated by a female activist that got fired from a national agency because of her engagement in MR [A3]. This is a form of hard repression victimisation. She was sad and disgraced, but mainly because she was very loyal to her employer and thought she had maybe

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[101] News article in Aftonbladet, 6 October 2023. https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/O89GxO/pourmokhtari-stallde-in-mote-greenpeace-ilska

done something that could hurt the agency. In this case, exposure to collective and coordinated online hate speech targeting her personally started after having been fired, when right-wing and radical right newspapers wrote about the case taking the side of the person who initially harassed her and got her fired.[102] Things shifted when a climate journalist at Sweden's largest newspaper changed narrative, from the alleged criminal act to that of the victim.[103] But she says she was not angry with the people that started the hate campaign that got her fired, she is angry and scared of the ongoing autocratisation in Sweden. The activist told me [A3]:

> *When the campaign started, of course, it felt terrible. I thought at first that it was me who had done something wrong, so then I didn't feel well. I really liked the Swedish Energy Agency and was absolutely horrified that I might have done something that damaged the agency's reputation, which I absolutely did not want. But then I saw how it was all staged and understood that it wasn't my fault. After all this, I also very quickly got a new job assignment, so I got over the bad feeling. This is of course a very serious story. The serious thing is that it shows that society is heading in an undemocratic direction, and that this is part of a harsher climate in politics and society that affects a lot of people, as well as our work for a just climate transition.*

The perceived threat to democracy from nasty rhetoric of leading politicians is a recurring issue in the stories of climate activists. In the early 2020s, radical activists were prosecuted and fined for disobedience to law enforcement, but leading politicians in SD and M, hating climate activists and civil disobedience, started to accuse them of sabotage and most lately terrorism – without explaining in what way the actions meet criteria for sabotage and terrorism. The number of lawsuits regarding sabotage have also increased. Quite many climate activists have been sentenced to fines or prison for their activism.

With expanding hard repression and related victimisation of climate activists, many of them seem to be more harmed by economic and legal repression than hate speech. After a previous infiltration of XR by radical right extremists, measures of precaution such as encrypted communication, have been taken to avoid physical violence. Core group activists are also more cautious to avoid surveillance and potential legal repression due to prosecutions for sabotage, bearing in mind that climate activists in the UK have been sentenced to prison for planning a

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[102] Op. cit. 68.

[103] A series of news articles in *Dagens Nyheter*; 11 April 2024, https://www.dn.se/sverige/anna-ar-klimataktivist-blev-av-med-jobbet-pa-energimyndigheten, 16 April 2024, https://www.dn.se/sverige/klimataktivisten-anna-blev-av-med-jobbet-nu-ku-anmals-ministern-som-kontaktade-hennes-chef/, 25 May 2024, https://www.dn.se/sverige/klimataktivisten-blev-av-med-jobbet-fallet-anmals-till-jk/, 8 October 2024, https://www.dn.se/sverige/fn-kritik-mot-sverige-for-fallet-anna-pa-energimyndigheten/

climate action. They have learned, desensitised, not to be touched emotionally by online hate and threats, at least not negatively. However, police interventions and lawsuits following climate actions, with face-to-face threats from officers of the judicial system, lead to some emotional reactions among climate activists. A leading activist who has served once in prison told [A2]:

> *The police and prosecutors are often biased in the conflicts we find ourselves in. Reports of environmental crimes, assault, perjury (staff from fossil fuel companies who outright lie in court) are not considered or are immediately dropped. On site, at an action, the police usually have a preconceived idea that we are the ones who are breaking the law. Knowledge of international law and governing conventions is very inadequate.*

Activists arrested after the action at a private jet terminal witnessed that were treated like terrorists:[104]

> *Police officers with automatic weapons kept us quiet, calm and separated, sitting on cold asphalt for hours. Some of us were heckled by the police in the bus when we were taken to a cell, we were examined naked.*

Greta Thunberg is potentially the one activist being harmed most, both from hate speech and hard repression. She has been kidnapped by the Israeli military and put in prison, where she, as stated by herself, was subjected to torture and humiliation. In an interview prior to a new documentary about FFF, she reflects on the extreme political existence she and other climate activists as well as people in general find herself in:[105]

> *I have accepted that I will not live a long life. But I'd rather do everything I can to improve things, than live in some false comfort.*

Thunberg says that she does not feel safe in Sweden anymore.[106] Neither do the other activists in FFF. The reason, Thunberg says, is the fascist wave spreading around the world, that is extremely hostile to those who feel and act for empathy and want people to heed climate science.

Activists that have been prosecuted often feel worried about penalties, potential imprisonment and its further economical and professional implications. Will they get a new job if fired? Later, they worry more about practical things such as how things will go at work and with the family while they are on trial and whether they will be sentenced to prison. A full-time activist told he has had constant threats of imprisonment since 2020, which is detrimental [A2]:

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[104] Op-ed in *Dagens ETC*, 7 April 2026, https://www.etc.se/debatt/foerbjud-privatflyg-och-sluta-kriminalisera-miljoefoersvarare

[105] News article in *Dagens ETC*, 9 April 2026, https://www.etc.se/kultur-noje/greta-thunberg-om-doedshoten-accepterat-att-jag-inte-kommer-leva-saerskilt-laenge

[106] Ibid.

You never know if you're going to end up in prison. It's a constant worry and it makes it difficult for me and my family to make longer plans. To avoid this stress, we chose not to appeal the prison sentence and instead serve out the time.

Many activists also expressed a sense of surrealism and schizophrenia leading to mental and physical illness. A climate activist who is member of several climate justice organisations, and who has participated in numerous climate actions resulting in prosecution and sentencing on more than one occasion, stated [SA2]:

Sometimes the present feels extremely surreal. I alternate between correcting exams and discussing, with both the father of my youngest and my boss, upcoming (one week) absence due to climate lawsuit. At the same time as the planet alternately burns up, sometimes drowns. Difficult to navigate.

Those who are prosecuted get support from each other and dedicated lawyers, but some defend themselves in court. What they have in common is that they consider their actions to be done in self-defence, given the ongoing climate emergency and the illegal lack of action by the state. They claim that they mainly have got an objective assessment in court. They have won many judgments on the most serious charges, such as sabotage and gross unlawful trespassing. But the courts consistently duck in dealing with the issue of emergency law and necessary self-defence. Not even the rulings justify why the right of necessity should not be applicable. This may change with the new advice from ICJ.

But in the district court trial against participants in the action at a private jet terminal, starting in April 2026, several defendants had their request to invoke a wide range of evidence and witnesses in their defence rejected by the court.[107] This indicates that they will not get an objective assessment in court. For instance, one defendant asked to call the UN Special Rapporteur for environmental defenders under the *UN Aarhus Convention*, Michel Forst, as a witness, but was refused. The testimony was intended to show the court how the Aarhus Convention to which Sweden has signed should be interpreted, and that the defendant should be acquitted in accordance with it.[108] UN Special Rapporteur Forst attended the trial, not as a witness but to monitor the proceedings.

Through the message effect, increasing use of hard repression has made people much more cautious about demonstrating and taking part in climate actions. It has become difficult to get

[107] News article in *Dagens ETC*, 8 April 2026, https://www.etc.se/klimat-miljo/aatalade-klimataktivister-stoppas-fraan-att-laegga-fram-bevisning

[108] News article in *Dagens ETC*, 7 April 2026, https://www.etc.se/klimat-miljo/obs-boer-publiceras-tis-morgon

people to join completely legal demonstrations/actions. While MR attracts plenty of new activists, counting to about 9 000 in total and present in 40 cities and towns in Sweden, ÅV and XR attract few new activists. But for the small group of radical activists in ÅV and parts of XR, it is the other way around. They continue their actions according to plan. Radical activists convicted of crimes take their punishment, usually fines, sometimes imprisonment, but they are not deterred. As mentioned, they have balanced pros and cons of activism and the risk of being imprisoned. They often go directly from the court to a new climate action. One example is Greta Thunberg, who has been prosecuted and sentenced to fines several times. Another example is a group of activists sentenced to prison for arbitrary action and vandalism at a peat bog by a district court in early July 2025. Less than a week later they were back at the bog working to restore it.[109] An activist in RW tells, with support of radical activists from XR and SR as well as an academic activist analysing the effects of different climate actions [A2, SA2–4]:

> *We know that our methods work because we measure and analyse the effects. We can also see that petitions and permitted demonstrations have less effect, both regarding media space and being able to influence decision-makers. The fact that we in Restore Wetlands have had such a great impact on restoring wetlands and that there is a proposal to ban peat mining on the government's table shows that we are successful. You must disturb to be heard and we disturb just enough for it to have an effect.*

A young female activist engaged full time in ÅV mentioned that she initially was critical and upset of those who sat on highways and airports to demonstrate. After contacting media about an action at a destroyed peat bog, she realised that radical activism is what it takes to achieve change. Media's response was that they were interested only if people got arrested. Swedish state television responded in a similar way, that they were interested in reporting from an action organised by MR in Stockholm, dressing the Riksdag building with a 4.5 km long red scarf, only if there were people arrested. Therefore, she and many others will continue with disruptive actions, no matter if it makes them terrorists:[110]

> *I will continue regardless of what repression there will be. I have long been willing to take prison sentences because I know that we must act on climate justice and democracy. The current situation must change.*

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[109] News article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 26 July 2025, https://www.dn.se/sverige/aktivisterna-i-katt-och-rattalek-med-gravmaskinerna-i-grimsas/

[110] News article, *Läget*, 25 May 2025, https://sites.jmk.su.se/laget/klimataktivister-kan-bli-terrorister-jag-kommer-fortsatta-oavsett-vilka-repressioner-det-blir/13093

The defence attorneys of climate activists in the court case on sabotage, which they won in the Supreme Court, agreed with the activists:[111]

> *It is by disturbing that you are seen, heard and get your message out. The rhetoric and acts of radical right populists in power, that there must be no disturbance, is to circumscribe the freedom of demonstrations. A demonstration that does not disturb, be seen and heard is not a demonstration. The court case is about democracy, and the threat to it.*

The ruling by the Supreme Court in July 2025, that the roadblock performed in August 2022 was not an act of sabotage, is perceived by activists and their defence lawyer as a victory for democracy.[112] Experiences of hate speech and hard repression have prompted all climate justice organisations but ÅV to discuss whether to rethink the climate justice movement's strategies and tactics. They have initiated a series of workshops on how to develop the climate justice movement. One activist told [A1]:

> *I feel insecure about our way of acting; do we dare to rethink or not? But if you look at climate research, what we do is insufficient.*

One way forward that is discussed is to combine civil disobedience and peaceful, yet confrontational actions, with more collaborative activities, like joining with other organisations, trade unions and companies to present concrete policy proposals – to become policy entrepreneurs[113] or to use arts.

But not all activist organisations want to be institutionalised and part of society's formal organisational structure, which would force them to take responsibility according to a liberal democratic and neoliberal market-oriented understanding. They fight against the system and see a need for revolution.

Reacting with anger, climate activists and their organisations are sometimes responding to hate speech with insults and accusations themselves – with a humorous twist. Adhering to norms of deliberative democracy, praising rhetoric with fact-based, good arguments, hate and threats have little or no place in the repertoire of climate activists. This humorous transformation of 'hate speech' was evident in Greta Thunberg's insulting response to an attempt to insult and intimidation by a leading SD politician outside the entrance of the Riksdag – laughter, followed

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111 Ibid.

112 News article in *Aftonbladet*, 9 July 2025, https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/MnyLzo/hd-klimataktion-pa-e4-inte-sabotage

113 Op-ed in *Dagens ETC*, 26 August 2024, https://www.etc.se/debatt/vem-tar-ansvar-foer-klimatraettvisan

by a retort that the politicians was a loser. In a similar vein, Greenpeace and FFF organised a demonstration outside the government's national climate meeting in June 2023 when they were not invited. Inviting people to a demonstration outside the "climate meeting with civil society organisations", they insulted the government in a subtle way, with quotation marks insinuating that the meeting was not a legitimate climate meeting and that civil society organisations were not properly represented.[114]

6.3 Science activists

Many climate scientists have asked themselves how they can spread awareness about climate science results when political decision-makers are ignoring warnings published in scientific journals, magazines and newspapers. Some have turned to climate science activism and have joined SR. Such activism by scientists has been perceived as political and strongly opposed by the Tidö parties and thus accused of double wrongdoing – being climate scientists and climate activists. Scientist activists were accused of being a "security threat" by the climate minister, and of "undermining public trust in science" by then minister of education and research. But such activism is based on scientific knowledge and well in line with the so-called 'third duty' of scientists and universities according to 2 § Swedish law (1992:1434) on higher education, implying that:

> *The task of higher education institutions must include collaborating with the surrounding society for mutual exchange and working to ensure that the knowledge and expertise available at higher education benefits society.*

A Swedish climate science activist has received plenty of anonymous hate messages on Twitter/X but also insults and accusations in e-mails and letters signed by climate deniers and others feeling threatened by her research. She says that she mostly neglects anonymous insults, but accusations made by people from industry and lobby organisations, in what she perceives as a slander campaign, about her being disloyal to the university and not credible as a scientist, hurt emotionally and leave a feeling of unease about doing a bad job and possibilities to keep her job at university. Contrary to several of her non-activist colleagues being accused by the same persons, she has decided not to become silent. She continues conducting research and participating in climate actions, but she has become more careful about what she says in social media, and more restrictive with which actions to take part in. She has also chosen to confront

[114] Invitation to demonstration. https://www.greenpeace.org/sweden/pressmeddelanden/klimat/pressinbjudan-demonstration-utanfor-regeringens-klimatmote-16-juni/

the worst perpetrators, convinced that she and climate science are right. But this, she says, takes a lot of energy and time from other things, both private and professional. She has received a lot of positive feedback from colleagues and other activists for her resistance. A good sign is that she was appointed associate professor after the interview for this study was made. She is supported by her superior, but she adds [SA1]:

> *It would be much easier if more scientists and activists dared to take a stance or at least support others in public. That they agree that the public debate climate is heading in the wrong direction, that you must obey in advance, saying only what some people think is the right thing to say.*

Another scientist activist, an EU citizen, who was arrested after a climate protest, recently had her application for Swedish citizenship rejected. In custody, the police forced her to strip naked and spread her buttocks while she bent forward. "I found it hard to believe what I've been exposed to. It feels surreal", she lamented.[115] Like for other climate activists, it is the victimisation from hard repression, being discriminated and humiliated by the state because of her political views, that threatens her the most:[116]

> *It's frightening, it can result in imprisonment for two years. Risking prison for holding a banner during a demonstration, I would never have thought that was possible in Sweden. I chose to express my opinion for something that I believe is important for improving society. Because of that, I am ultimately denied the right to vote. That does not go together with democracy. There is a strong right to protest in a democracy.*

Most scientist activists taking part in the action at a private jet terminal in 2023, mention a feeling of surrealism being arrested, held in custody and facing trial in court from raising their voices on the climate emergency and the lack of climate action. They cannot understand how performing a peaceful demonstration can render court trial in a democracy.

6.4 Civil servants

The activist who got fired for her engagement with MR initially thought that the message effect of her case would make people more afraid to get involved in climate activism. But the aftermath of her case made her change opinion. When the narrative on her case was changed by a journalist of *Dagens Nyheter*, MP and V reported the minister of civil defence to the Riksdag's *Constitutional Committee* for ministerial rule. A trade union for state employees, ST, took the case to the

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[115] News article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 5 February 2025, https://www.dn.se/sverige/protesterade-mot-privatflyg-far-inte-bli-svensk-medborgare/; News article in *Dagens ETC*, 12 February 2025, https://www.etc.se/klimat-miljo/clara-protesterade-mot-privatflyg-nekas-svenskt-medborgarskap; News article in *Dagens ETC*, 7 April 2026, https://www.etc.se/klimat-miljo/obs-boer-publiceras-tis-morgon

[116] Ibid.

Chancellor of Justice, and later to the District Court in Stockholm, arguing that the state had violated her fundamental rights as a citizen. In addition, the UN rapporteur on rights of environmental organisations under the Aarhus Convention wrote a letter to the Swedish government, stating that he was deeply concerned with the actions of the minister of civil defence (Forst, 2024a). The activist mentioned [A3]:

> *It's sick that this could have happened from the start. But I think I'm a winner somewhere, and if it makes people becoming less afraid, if it becomes more difficult to repress or dismiss people who engage in activism from employment, then this has contributed to something good. We have shown that if you fire people who are committed to the climate issue without reason, then you will be in the newspaper. Even the UN steps in and writes the world's finest letter. Such strong words! The UN's letter was to all of us. Not just for me. I've come out of this stronger. And now I feel that there has been a point to everything. We have managed to turn a hate campaign into something positive.*

But this turned out to be wrong. It has been the other way around. Due to the message effect of nasty rhetoric, more civil servants feel anxious about getting involved in the climate debate, of saying what they think. A culture of silence has spread. The fact is that many state employees testify about widespread fear and a culture of silence, and that the climate issue is polarised and difficult to discuss after the case with the activist that got fired.[117] A civil servant in a municipality states:[118]

> *We feel that we must hide, because we are fighting for our children and grandchildren to have a planet that can safely be lived on. That's the general mood right now.*

The hunt for climate activist employees in state agencies has not been limited to the SWEEA. In mid-2023, SR performed an action at the entrance of the Public Health Agency of Sweden (PHAS), calling on the agency to address climate change as a public health issue. According to the WHO (2021, 2023), climate change is the greatest threat to human health. When officials at PHAS tried to raise the issue, they were called activists by their superiors, who also told them that they had behaved inappropriately and violated the state's values – the rules that government officials must follow. "We were being silenced", said one employee.[119]

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[117] News article in *SVT*, 9 November 2024, https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/facket-st-varnar-statligt-anstallda-oroliga-efter-fallet-med-rebellmamman

[118] News article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 17 April 2025. https://www.dn.se/sverige/hemligt-natverk-av-klimatengagerade-vaxer-inom-myndigheter-manga-kanner-oro/

[119] Article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 10 September 2023, https://www.dn.se/sverige/tjansteman-pa-fhm-vi-tystas-om-klimathotet/

The hate and threats targeting the climate activist that got dismissed from her employment, and the silencing of employees at PHAS, were preceded by leading Tidö members of the Riksdag claiming that non-political staff in the GOS and national agencies are activists, working in state agencies only to drive their private agendas.[120] It has later been found that leaders in SD keep a blacklist of people they want to dismiss from the GOS for having wrong opinions.[121] This is similar to, but far behind the Trump administration's Project 2025, to reshape the US federal government and consolidate executive power in favour of populist radical right extremist policies.[122]

Policy officers, managers and directors-general in state agencies are reacting emotionally to the message effect of nasty rhetoric. People sit crosswise and slow down the clean energy transition because they become suspicious and afraid of doing wrong. After the civil defence minister's outburst and demand that 'this should not happen again', the SWEEA has rearranged its recruitment routines with additional question batteries. In other agencies, staff perceived as activistic have been replaced in their job.

Recent studies from Swedish trade unions shows that civil servants in state agencies have become more silent, and the situation has worsened since 2021 (ST, 2021, 2006; TCO, 2025). Civil servants are afraid of criticising the workplace or telling their opinion openly, and if they do or if they act as whistle-blowers, they are afraid of the consequences.[123] The fear of some kind of repression from their superiors have made more than 150 civil servants in over 20 state agencies, regions and municipalities, many of which have key roles in developing and implementing climate

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[120] Op-ed in *Arbetsvärlden*, 24 November 2022, https://www.arbetsvarlden.se/debatt/en-del-av-de-nya-makthavarna-vill-se-utrensningar-i-statlig-forvaltning/. Op-ed in *Aftonbladet*, 21 February 2023, https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/GMwpnl/fackforbund-statliga-tjansteman-ar-inte-aktivister; Op-ed in *Altinget* 24 October 2024, https://www.altinget.se/artikel/otillaaten-paaverkan-mot-statligt-anstallda-hotar-rattssakerheten; Op-ed in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 24 January 2025. https://www.svd.se/a/dRzj6z/regeringen-skapar-misstro-mot-myndigheter-skriver-britta-lejon?utm_source=iosapp

[121] Article in *Dagens ETC*, 25 March 2025, https://www.etc.se/story/svarta-listan-saa-rensar-sd-ut-sossiga-tjaenstemaen-fraan-regeringskansliet; Op-ed in *Altinget*, 28 March 2025. https://www.altinget.se/artikel/stoppa-aasiktsregistreringen-i-regeringskansliet

[122] News article in *The New Republic*, 22 July 2024. https://newrepublic.com/article/183971/jd-vance-weird-terrifying-techno-authoritarian-ideas

[123] Op-ed in *Dagens Nyheter*, 22 April 2025. https://www.dn.se/debatt/kritiska-tjansteman-tystnar-av-radsla-for-repressalier/; Op-ed in *Aftonbladet*, 22 April 2026. https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/L438Ax/svartmalning-har-blivit-ett-nytt-politiskt-verktyg

policy, to form a secret climate network.[124] An employee of a state agency working with climate policy and member of the secret network explained:[125]

> *I work at a government agency that really works with environmental and climate issues. Every employee and manager know how bad the situation is with climate change. Still, we downplay the external information about how serious it is. There is an anxiety about the political situation – we are giving in before anyone has even demanded it.*

6.5 Climate journalists

Independent media plays an important role in raising awareness in societies, which is why the first actions of autocrats are often directed against established media. As mentioned, SD and other nationalist right-wing groups built their own ecosystem of digital media to avoid rules of press ethics. In addition, the Tidö parties have reduced financing of and changed policies for public service to make it more liable to Tidö whims. Tidö parties, the populist radical right movement, and other climate sceptics have accused climate journalists in established media to belong to a "left-liberal conspiracy censoring the climate debate" and being "climate alarmist propaganda centres".

Swedish journalists described how their news articles on climate issues often generate storms of criticism, angry phone calls and e-mails to editors, and sometimes even threats of legal proceedings. A long-time female climate journalist described how the hate and threats had affected her, emotionally and behaviourally [J1]:

> *While working as a climate journalist, I have been in a storm of hatred, threats and insults. Lies about my person and alleged political affiliation have been glued to me. My feeling of powerlessness has been paralysing at times. I have, to use an old-fashioned word, felt dishonoured. Therefore, I have now resigned as a journalist.*

Journalists in public service television and radio have experienced an increase of insults and incitement since 2019, when financing of Swedish public service changed from a license fee to taxation. Swedish public service television's first climate journalist explained [J1]:

> *Since 2019, I've got several e-mails saying 'Damn you, I pay your salary and will make sure you're fired'.*

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[124] News article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 17 April 2025. https://www.dn.se/sverige/hemligt-natverk-av-klimatengagerade-vaxer-inom-myndigheter-manga-kanner-oro/; Article in *Landets Fria Tidning*, 17 April 2025. https://landetsfria.nu/2025/nummer-544/hemligt-klimatnatverk-bland-tjansteman/

[125] News article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 17 April 2025. https://www.dn.se/sverige/hemligt-natverk-av-klimatengagerade-vaxer-inom-myndigheter-manga-kanner-oro/

Journalists are found to be one the most vulnerable targets groups of cyberhate in Sweden (Svensson et al., 2021). One journalist revealed emotional reactions to the hate and threats received:[126]

> *I remember laughing at the first threat that came. It was so banal, such blatant lies. There were five individuals/organisations that over a period of nine months wrote 'articles' with lies, several a day. Each article was followed by threats and harassment from their followers. The phone rang non-stop, e-mails were filled up, all social media accounts were sabotaged. It wasn't really the content that tired me, but the amount... After a couple of months, a death threat came that was so cold and uncomfortably worded that I was really scared, and after that it was hard to stop being afraid. As if something had shifted inside.*

Industry lobbyists have put in place a system of particularly attacking new, young reporters, to scare them to silence:[127]

> *People call straight to them and say, "you don't understand anything". If you're not confident in your role and about climate change, then you might doubt yourself.*

Many journalists who were severely threatened perceived heightened risks of being followed or chased. They sought support from the security departments of media houses, but also from the police or security services. As one journalist stated:[128]

> *I have camera surveillance outside the door, security door and security glass. Have a note in my wallet with a direct number to a security company, contact to Swedish Security Service. Constant information to relatives what you are doing, and encouragement to everyone to be attentive. Life has changed completely. I'm very rarely scared – but I'm damn pissed off! Angry because the whole society has slowly adapted to a new norm where this form of everyday terror has been accepted. And angry for the ineptitude that has spread all the way up to the highest decision-makers.*

A widespread culture of silence and self-censorship has taken hold also in media. In a recent survey by the *Swedish Union of Journalists*, as many as 39 per cent state that they engage in self-censorship to avoid hate and threats, and 48 per cent respond that they have adapted their reporting for the same reason.[129] Regarding the culture of silence, some climate journalists consider that the worst pressure comes from the editorial offices in established media houses, not

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[126] Op-ed, *Dagens Nyheter*, 22 September 2024, https://www.dn.se/kultur/upprop-detta-maste-fa-ett-slut-for-demokratins-framtid/

[127] Commentary, *Dagens ETC*, 20 July 2025, https://www.etc.se/kommentar/svenska-klimatjournalister-tvingas-till-tystnad-av-cheferna

[128] Ibid.

[129] *Swedish Union of Journalists*, https://www.sjf.se/yrkesfragor/yttrandefrihet/hot-och-hat-mot-journalister

as hatred and threats from outside. Reporters are questioned or silenced because they are seen as too "engaged" by their editors.[130] This comes after years when climate journalists have been accused of 'activism', a concept that have got an increasingly negative connotation with the spread of hate speech targeting climate activists. A heavily targeted Swedish climate journalist claims that [J2]:

> *The reason why anti-climate advocates like to throw the 'activist' stamp on a journalist who investigates large companies and the system is because climate policy is potentially subversive. The UN says that we must have rapid change in every sector. Of course, it is dangerous for everyone who wants business-as-usual and for many who are in positions of power. There is a huge interest in criminalising activism.*

Either the reporters silence themselves, or an editor does. Most often, it happens in secret, by certain articles never being written, a reporter being moved from a certain job or the position being withdrawn. However, not all climate journalists being targeted with hate speech are silenced. Two Swedish climate journalists recently wrote a book on how to develop climate journalism (Röstlund & Urisman Otto, 2025). Their starting point is the mission of journalism, as formulated in § 1 of the *International Federation of Journalists' Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists* (IFJ, 2019), that the first duty of a journalist is "respect to the facts and for the right of the public to truth". Despite that IFJ has adopted a charter stating that journalists have a special responsibility to promote facts about climate change and its effects, the opposite often happens (Blagojev et al., 2025). Research reports with alarming results are ignored, climate-related weather events or conflicts are not put into context, protests and manifestations are suspected. Because you do not want to be an alarmist.

Röstlund and Urisman Otto (2025) argue that mainstream media has betrayed readers, listeners and viewers on the climate crisis. Even the editorial offices that claim to invest in climate crisis coverage are claimed to be helplessly behind when it comes to portraying the situation we are in. During the Covid-19 pandemic, mainstream media communicated a feeling of emergency, that we as people had to change our way of living. In comparison, climate change and climate change events are presented as news among others.

Accordingly, Röstlund and Urisman Otto argues that news media must be better at describing the convergent scientific 'truth' about climate change. If scientists say that we are destroying the very systems that are required for the existence of humankind, then media must take a point of departure there. While climate sceptics and right-wing populists use insults, accusations, lies and

[130] Op. cit. 127.

threats to silence media coverage of climate change and climate policy, engaged climate journalists claim that media "provides people with a skewed picture of reality that contributes to legitimising the dramatic and systematic destruction of our life-sustaining systems" [J3]. Claiming to be engaged and activistic but not activists, they urge climate journalism to portray and make people aware that the human species has never ever lived at global average temperatures more than 2 °C above preindustrial levels and that humankind with the climate crisis is heading on its way out of the life corridor [J2, J3]. Both have been accused by their editors of being too engaged, too 'activistic'.

6.6 Analysis

Harms of nasty rhetoric are found on different levels, from the individual person being targeted and victimised, to group level and sociopolitical level, with negative consequences for liberal democracy. There are similarities but also differences in harms to the different groups of individual victims. Aware of these differences, Figure 3 illustrates the complex relationship between different elements of nasty rhetoric and the different kinds of psychological, economic, social and political harms to people, the latter by violations of the victims' dignity and equality, their freedom of expression, the free formation of opinion and right to demonstration.

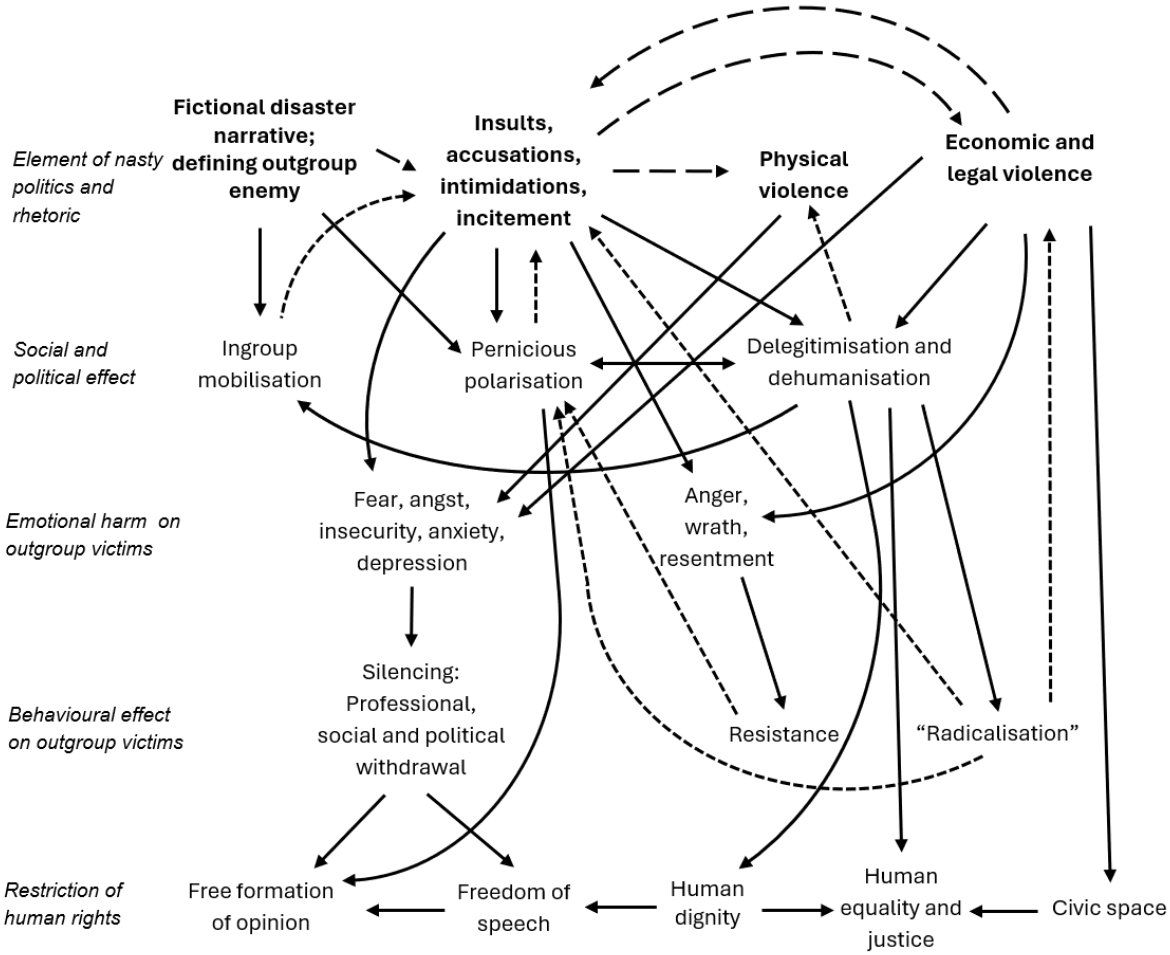

Figure 3. Psychological and social-psychological harms of nasty rhetoric.

In summary, victims to nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics respond behaviourally in two main ways, mirroring the basic behavioural reactions to hate, i.e. flighting or fighting:

- *Silence and self-censoring*: Withdrawing from public debates, ending civil disobedience, changing job, or changing research area.
- *Resistance and 'radicalisation'*: Increased argumentation for climate action, strike-backs with nasty rhetoric, more actions of civil disobedience, or radicalised climate actions such as sabotage and trespassing security objects.

6.6.1 Harms to people working with climate change

Non-activist climate scientists and climate journalists are targeted directly by hate speech as individuals for what they do professionally, for being climate scientists and climate journalists. Beyond insults and accusations, they reported sexual harassment, intimidations and threats of losing their jobs, of being repositioned at work, of physical violence, and of death threats. As victims, they reacted with fear and anxiety of violent crime, and a perceived risk of being

followed or chased. This leads to feelings of personal insecurity, angst, exhaustion, and sometimes anger. Some scientists and journalists also came to doubt themselves and their professional role.

To cope with mental stress, both scientists and journalists reported withdrawal from the public debate or changing their research area or changing job. Many scientists and some journalists self-censored and silenced. They withdrew, socially and politically. But some got angry, took the bull by the horns, and tried to win the battle with better arguments, assuming that their perpetrators take part in a deliberative discussion and listen to good arguments (cf. von Malmborg, 2025). Some scientists and journalists even hit back with insults and accusations, as well as science-based facts, that offenders in the Tidö government, individual ministers or industry representatives are wicked and naked like the emperor. That Tidö climate policy as well as hate and threats towards scientists and journalists are based on fantasies. All journalists interviewed have quit their job, not primarily from receiving hateful messages, but for experiencing lack of support from their superiors to be serious in their coverage of climate change and climate policy.

Except for work-related fears, the emotional and behavioural responses of climate scientists and climate journalists are like those reported in Swedish research on hate speech and hate crime victimisation based on misogynist or racist motives (Hagerlid, 2021; Atak, 2022; Ilse & Hagerlid, 2024). Compared to LGBTQIA victims, climate scientist and climate journalist victims seem to have higher resilience and ability to process negative emotions. While climate scientists and journalists feel reduced fear of crime after self-censoring and withdrawing from the public debate, LGBTQIA victims self-censoring and withdrawing by concealment of sexual orientation may also experience reduced risks of further victimisation. But they experience negative harms to the overall health through feelings of lack of authenticity and personhood (Ilse & Hagerlid, 2024). This indicates that social and political withdrawal is a plausible coping strategy for victims of hate speech and hate crime based on antagonistic political preferences, but not for victims of more explicit identity-related hate speech and hate crime. Hate speech and hate crime targeting scientists and journalists may impact their identity as professionals, but not their personal identity and personhood.

6.6.2 Harms to activists and engaged citizens

Compared to non-activist climate scientists and climate journalists, climate activists and scientist activists interviewed were targeted with hate speech for their political opinions and their actions outside their professional occupations. As victims of hate speech, they are mainly targeted as a group, less so as individuals. Some exceptions are Greta Thunberg, who has experienced plenty

of hatred and threats from climate deniers and misogynists, and activists that have chosen to leave anonymity after legal processes. All are known to the public, which makes it easier for haters to hate them as individuals.

Victimised as a group, climate activists and scientist activists seem to spur each other to learn individually and collectively to ignore insults, accusations, intimidations and incitements. They seem to undergo a process of desensitisation (cf. Soral et al., 2018), becoming less sensitive to hate speech (soft repression) in person. They also become more prejudiced toward haters and perpetrators of soft repression, finding nasty rhetoric to be part of a larger strategy orchestrated by (far) right-wing politicians to polarise and break down society and democracy.

This is an unexpected finding. The academic literature on hate speech focuses on desensitisation among members of the ingroup, the group emitting hateful and threatening messages, which makes them 'immune' to hate speech targeting outgroup members (Calvert, 1997; Soral et al., 2018; Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). Because climate activists are seldom targeted by hate speech in person, but as a group, it is easier for them to ignore hate speech. Another explanation to the desensitisation among climate activists, often left-wing, could be related to previous research findings that left- and right-wing people have partially different emotional opportunity structures, and distinct political strategies at exploiting these structures. Left-wing people are often associated with 'acknowledged shame', while right-wing people are characterised by 'repressed shame' (Salmela & von Scheve, 2018). Acknowledged shame holds emancipatory potential, allowing individuals to establish social bonds with others who feel the same. In comparison, repressed shame transforms fear and insecurity into resentment and hatred against perceived 'enemies', where repressors seek social bonds from repression-mediated defensive anger and hatred. The outgroup desensitisation among climate activists also aligns with theory on political communication, proposing that emotional effects provoked by hateful messages will not depend so much on the content of the message as on the ideological affiliation of the receiver (victim) with that of the sender (perpetrator) (Crawford & Brandt, 2020; Abuín-Vences et al., 2022). The messages sent are antidemocratic, while the receivers are pro-democratic.

Climate activists, particularly the core group activists, are found to be more afraid and anxious about the climate emergency itself, and the anger that politicians and business leaders are not acting appropriately fast and ambitious given the severe situation. Instead of being silenced by nasty rhetoric, they get angrier with the perpetrators and continue their climate actions over and over again. They do not turn violent but intensify legal demonstrations or civil disobedience actions to pursue their science-based argumentation for strong climate policy and degrowth.

Contrary to hate, anger does not spur aggression and violence, but a will to change the 'enemy' (Martínez et al, 2022a, 2022b). For instance, radical activists in ÅV announced and performed a series of actions at Swedish airports during April 2025, e.g., trespassing security objects and flying drones, to highlight the need to end extraction of peat,[131] leading to several activists being arrested. Other activists from ÅV, being sentenced to prison for arbitrary action and vandalism at a peat bog by a district court in early July 2025 immediately went back to restore the bog, and when the police arrived at the bog they announced:[132]

> *Come to Grimsås! Borås police station has limited cells. Let's fill them all! Because we are doing the right things and Neova is a fossil emitter that is going out of our country.*

Some people were arrested and held in custody for some days. When released, they went back to the peat bog again to finalise their "work", restoring the wetland. Climate activists who continue with civil disobedience, despite being prosecuted and sometimes sentenced, experience surrealistic emotions, and mental and physical exhaustion, because they find it difficult to combine job, family, court trials and climate actions while the Earth is burning and flooding at the same time. Activists involved in court cases mention anxiety from not knowing when to go to court next time, if they will be sentenced and to what sentence. Compared to climate scientists and climate journalists, this group of activists is also referring to violations of human rights, being discriminated and humiliated by the state because of her political views, leading to eroded dignity as human beings. They also recount hateful and threatening behaviour of individual police officers. The latter resembles experiences of legal estrangement among racist hate crime victims in Sweden (Atak, 2022).

Besides ÅV, MR has organised more than 300 actions since their start in 2022. Other, more peaceful and thought-provoking actions were made by XR with art performances at the Tesla showroom in Stockholm,[133] and at an art exhibition at the Swedish Academy of Arts where a piece of art itself together with a speech by an activist called for climate action.[134] Some activists react with fear of crime and harassment from hard repression and choose to revert to less confrontative actions. An uncertainty factor for climate activists to change their behaviour is that politicians and other haters do not see any difference between the very heterogeneous group of

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131 Facebook post of *Restore Wetlands*, 30 July 2025, https://www.facebook.com/share/v/17VCrWNYrQ/?mibextid=wwXIfr

132 News article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 26 July 2025, https://www.dn.se/sverige/aktivisterna-i-katt-och-rattalek-med-gravmaskinerna-i-grimsas/

133 Link to video of the art performance. https://fb.watch/zdDuwoVtWZ/

134 Link to video of the art performance. https://www.facebook.com/share/r/1653nntceq/

climate justice organisations. All are lumped together. MR has been accused of actions undertaken by ÅV. Backing down from civil disobedience in ÅV, XR or SR to less confrontative actions with prior authorisation from the police in MR or FR makes no difference to the perpetrators, and there is a risk that one will continue to be exposed to hatred and threats.

6.6.3 The message effect

Emotional governance with nasty rhetoric does not only target specific individuals and organisations in the outgroup. It is used intentionally by leading politicians and followers also for its normative message effect, to govern emotions in society, providing individuals in general with emotion rules and a sense of what is regarded as appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. It intends to scare people in general from participating in a public and democratic debate on climate policy, to refrain from be engaged, 'activistic' and expressing opinions not in line with the Tidö policies. If people obey in advance, they will not the subject to nasty rhetoric in person.

Due to the message effect of nasty rhetoric, many civil servants engaged in climate change feel anxious about getting involved in the climate debate, of expressing what they think. In line with the intentions of the perpetrators, a widespread culture of silence and self-censorship has taken hold. People obey and give in before anyone has explicitly demanded it. The fact is that many state employees testify about widespread fear and a culture of silence, and that the climate issue is perniciously polarised and difficult to discuss. The fear of some kind of repression from the employers have made more than 150 civil servants in over 20 state agencies, regions and municipalities, many of which have key roles in climate policy, to form a secret climate network.

The hate and threats targeting climate activist in state agencies were preceded by leading Tidö members of the Riksdag claiming that non-political staff in the GOS and national agencies are activists, taking employment to drive their private extremist agendas. It has later been found that leaders in SD have an exclusion list of people they want to fire from the GOS for having wrong opinions. This is similar to, but yet far behind the Trump administration's Project 2025 to reshape the federal government of the United States and consolidate executive power in favour of radical right extremist policies.

Policy officers, managers and director generals in state agencies are reacting emotionally. People sit crosswise and slow down the clean energy transition because they become suspicious and afraid of doing wrong. A recent study from Swedish trade union TCO, reports that civil servants in state agencies have become more silent (TCO, 2025). They are afraid of telling their opinion openly, and if they do or if they act as whistle-blowers, they are afraid of the consequences.

In line with the intentions of Tidö politicians, a widespread culture of silence and self-censorship has taken hold in Sweden. People give in before anyone has explicitly demanded it. Less so among climate activists, more among worried citizens not becoming activists, climate scientists and particularly civil servants and climate journalists. For the latter two groups of victims, the results show that the threats often come from within their organisations, the directors-general, directors or editors, who are also afraid and anxious of potential consequences and supposedly trying to balance 'engaged' employees and what they would perceive as reputational risk to a public agency or a media house. The superiors are afraid and anxious from the message effect and fear what could happen to them and the organisation if employees are considered 'activists'. As a consequence, research, analyses or news articles that would present new findings or new perspectives on how to deal with climate changes are not written, presented or published. Another consequence is that good employees go underground to form secret networks or leave, and that it becomes difficult to hire new good employees.

6.6.4 Resilience of victims

Politicisation of the victim in society has made the concept of resilience more prominent in political, media and policy circles. The impact of crime, the victimisation, is now considered a balance between the severity of injury and the level of resilience, where the latter is a resource to help cope with harm, as well as a "form of agency that reminds that the victims of crime should not be assumed or treated as passive, subordinate or powerless" (Green & Pemberton, 2017, p. 61).

As for resilience of hate speech victims in climate politics, a distinction should be made between people victimised in their profession and people victimised as civilians. Employees could and should get support from their employers, which is not the case for civilians. The results indicate that employers provide very different kinds of support. Scientists described that they get limited help from security offices once they have been attacked, mainly to prevent further attacks they get support to block more hate messages on their profession e-mail account. One university department, with many victims, has initiated workshops with group discussions on how to deal with hate speech.

Among journalists, which is a vulnerable group targeted since long, there is better preparedness and routines as for how to deal with hate speech. Quite often, the Swedish Security Services are engaged. But as mentioned by journalists, this is the case only in the largest media houses, and with focus on physical safety rather than mental well-being. A climate journalist with long experience from the field mentioned that she wanted to report hate speech to the police, but that

her superiors advised her not to. Other studies have shown that both scientists and journalists are primarily targeted at work, and that measures must be taken both at workplace level and societal level (Oksanen et al., 2022; Björkenfeldt, 2024; Brax, 2024). As claimed by Björkenfeld (2024), efforts to safeguard resilience among journalists are largely misdirected, with a heavy focus on criminal law rather than on building a resilient work environment. But building a resilient work environment for climate journalists seems to be difficult since the greatest threat to them comes from their editors. The European Media Pluralism Monitor found in its latest report that journalists reporting on highly sensitive topics, e.g. climate change and democracy, are at risk of severe harassment (Blagojev et al., 2025). These risks are intensified by the poor working conditions of journalists. In most EU countries, the profession is becoming more precarious, journalists are paid poorly and have access to weak social security schemes (Blagojev et al., 2025). This increases their vulnerability to threats.

Climate activists working as civil servants and science activists are also targeted by their superiors or by colleagues, but not for what they do professionally. They refer to networks of colleagues and fellow activists being crucial for their resilience. As found, superiors are fearing the nasty rhetoric message effect and contribute to silencing or even dismissing employees. In one case, an activist that got dismissed from her employment got support from her trade union. As mentioned, surveys by trade unions have showed that a culture of silence has grown in Swedish state agencies. In such climate, trade unions can have an important role in supporting climate activists that are members and victimised directly as well as indirectly. In the case mentioned, the trade union ST decided to sue the state since the case is principally important from a legal perspective. With the current situation, ST argues:[135]

> *There may be a loophole in the Swedish constitution implying that a state employee cannot have his or her freedom of expression violated by the state. This opens for the state to arbitrarily get rid of employees based on who sits in the Swedish government at the moment. This creates uncertainty among our members and is a major departure from the system we have, where employees are assessed based on their knowledge and skills.*

ST notified the SWEEA to the Chancellor of Justice and the District Court of Stockholm, where they sued the Swedish state for violating her fundamental rights as a human and citizen. In addition, the UN rapporteur on rights of environmental organisations under the Aarhus Convention got involved in the case. The verdict of the district court was rather ambiguous. It ruled that the SWEEA had violated the human rights of the climate activist by firing her, but also

[135] https://annafranenergimyndigheten.se/11-efter-jk/

that they had the right to fire her. Thus, the question of what a government employee can think and do in her spare time was never answered. Therefore, the trade union ST has now decided to appeal the judgment to the Labour Court.[136]

ST received a lot of questions about the case from its members. In response, they organised a webinar with about 400 participants to explain what security classification means and sorted out issues linked to security classification, freedom of expression and freedom of association.[137] In addition, they support their members with legal analyses of being an activist employed by the state, which are also provided to the public in reports, podcasts and op-eds.[138]

Finally, climate activists not employed at state agencies or universities are found to be largely desensitised from hate speech. It is a "background noise" to live with, and they hardly see themselves as victims since they do not want to become martyrs. When they decided to become activists, they weighed in risks of soft and particularly hard legal repression such as fines or imprisonment. Nevertheless, those who feel victimised are supported by their network of fellow activists to cope with harms of nasty rhetoric. From discussions among activists, they have come to consider themselves more victimised by the climate emergency than hate speech. Those who want to turn into fulltime activists are supported economically for loss of income through crowdfunding in the movements. The same holds true for those being dismissed from work. As victims of hard repression, prosecuted for criminal acts related to civil disobedience, they have help of dedicated lawyers. In addition, the non-profit association *Rosamålet*[139] helps activists by analysing court cases and advocating changes to legislation.

Acts of nasty rhetoric, from insults to hard repression, could be classified as hate crime and/or democracy crime in Sweden, depending on the motive of the perpetrator and who is the victim. Some acts of hard repression can also be considered *strategic lawsuits against public participation* (SLAPPs), which were criminalised in the EU with the adoption in April 2024 of the Anti-SLAPP Directive.[140] This directive shall protect civil society organisations (including climate justice organisations), scientists and journalists from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings when they participate in public policy discussions. None of the people interviewed

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[136] Op-ed in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 10 July 2026. https://www.svd.se/a/BxwwoG/st-otydlig-dom-kring-rebellmamman

[137] See https://www.st.org/

[138] Link to webinar. https://www.st.org/rad-och-stod/fragor-och-svar-om-sakerhetsklassning

[139] https://www.rosamalet.se/

[140] Directive (EU) 2024/1069 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on protecting persons who engage in public participation from manifestly unfounded claims or abusive court proceedings ('Strategic lawsuits against public participation'), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202401069

have reported such acts to the police, and there is no statistics on hate crime related to political opinion. The *Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention* focuses on racist and LGBTQIA hate crime.[141] Speaking of democracy related crime as a criminal act in Sweden, the legislation considers only politicians, artists and journalists as victims. But *Victim Support Sweden*[142] takes a broader approach and provides advice and other kinds of support to anyone being offended and silenced, e.g.:

- with conversations when you are worried and need someone to talk to,
- with information about the legal process and whether you want support in the event of a trial,
- when contacting the authorities and providing information about compensation and damages, and
- offering support to relatives and witnesses.

In all, the resilience of victims of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate policy depends very much on support from other victims, *Victim Support Sweden*, and trade unions such as ST. Some employers seem to reduce the resilience, when managers are contributing themselves to hatred, threats and sometimes violence.

[141] https://bra.se/english

[142] https://www.brottsofferjouren.se/en/

7. Harms to liberal democracy

Swedish civil society organisations and democracy scholars have identified several signs of autocratisation in Sweden since the late 2010s, and increasingly so after the elections in 2022 (see e.g. Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019; CRD, 2023; UNAS, 2023; Widfeldt, 2023; Gustavsson, 2024; Silander, 2024; von Malmborg, 2024a, 2024b; Avellan et al., 2026). Nasty rhetoric is an important tactic in the political ideology, discourse, strategy and style of the populist radical right (cf. Olivas Osuna, 2021). Voices are raised in Swedish media that hate speech and thus nasty rhetoric is a threat to democracy.[143] But they seldom explain how, why such claims become abstract. This section presents results on how nasty rhetoric, targeting and harming real people, harms liberal democracy.

As for Swedish climate politics, nasty rhetoric is used by climate sceptic right-wing and radical right politicians and their anonymous followers to scare climate scientists, climate justice activists, civil servants and climate journalists to silence. There is no coincidence that people in these groups are targets of nasty rhetoric. It reflects well the strategic approach of SD and other Tidö parties in radically changing Swedish climate policy and governance. These target groups have important roles for developing strong climate policy and the functioning of a liberal democracy. Climate scientists provide scientific knowledge on climate change and climate policy, further conveyed by climate activists and climate journalists. Climate scientists, climate activists and pro-climate partisans can scrutinise and criticise current climate policies and provide alternative, more ambitious policy proposals. Climate journalists report about climate change and climate policy in media, making information on current climate policy available to people and voters that can hold the Tidö parties accountable. By getting rid of these groups, the Tidö parties hope to be able to continue demounting Swedish climate policy.

From section 6.6, we learn that victims of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics respond behaviourally in two main ways, mirroring the basic behavioural reactions to hate and violence, i.e. fleeing or fighting. These behavioural responses influence the further harms of nasty rhetoric to liberal democracy, as presented below.

[143] See e.g. Op-ed in *Dagens Nyheter*, 11 September 2024, https://www.dn.se/debatt/sverige-har-blivit-tystare-och-sd-jublar/; Op-ed in *Dagens Nyheter*, 22 September 2024, https://www.dn.se/kultur/upprop-detta-maste-fa-ett-slut-for-demokratins-framtid/; Op-ed in *Dagens Nyheter*, 21 November 2025, https://www.dn.se/debatt/hat-och-hot-mot-debattorer-maste-bli-ett-demokratibrott/; Op-ed in *Expressen*, 11 February 2026, https://www.expressen.se/kultur/kulturdebatt/svenska-politiker--blir-mer-som-trump/

7.1 Pernicious polarisation of society and politics

Nasty politics is used in a culture war started by the populist radical right, where climate politics is one of several battlefields. The overall aim is to claim cultural hegemony, where no one questions the sociocultural norms of the ruling populist radical right elite in any policy area. As reported in sections 5 and 6, nasty rhetoric is used in Swedish climate politics to contentiously divide and polarise society and politics into an antagonistic dualistic state, a pernicious polarisation between the 'good climate sceptics' and the 'evil pro-climate advocates'. With pernicious polarisation in mind, SD and the Tidö government defined an ingroup, for which they are spokespersons and define what is in the public interests. They also defined an outgroup of 'enemies' to the nation to be silenced.

With the aim to delegitimise previous governments and the current opposition, displaying their evil, leading Tidö politicians, including the PM, SD party leader and the climate minister denounced previous climate policies as "emotional", "not based on facts" and thus "symbol politics", and that the Tidö parties will now make sure that these "replaced by things that have a real effect". They delegitimise climate scientists as "irrelevant" providing no knowledge, but "just opinions". Climate journalists are accused of "censoring the climate debate" and spreading "climate alarmist propaganda". The climate minister also refused to give interviews with climate journalists. Climate justice activists and the entire climate justice movement, being hit hardest, are accused of being a "security risk", "totalitarian" and "terrorists", and "a threat to Swedish democratic political processes" that must be "sent to prison". The PM claimed that they are only "pretending to care for the climate and just want to destroy the democratic discussion in an illegal way". Climate scientists and journalists have received death threats and threats of being fired. Climate justice activists have been prosecuted for increasingly severe crimes in what can be considered as strategic lawsuits against public participation, often resulting in imprisonment if found guilty, and some have got applications for citizenship denied, being threatened with deportation, or being fired.

But why are pro-climate advocates dangerous and evil? Why are they made an 'enemy' of the nation?

7.1.1 Degrowth and climate justice

The current cycle of climate justice activism is a response to decades of global depoliticisation or 'post-politicisation' of climate politics (Swyngedouw, 2011). There has been wide consensus that something must be done to mitigate climate change, but what should be done was mainly turned

into a technocratic practice through consensus building on techno-economic solutions among national authorities and businesses, suppressing the articulation of social conflict and justice (Schlosberg, 1999; Thörn & Svenberg, 2016; Cassegård & Thörn, 2017; Berglund & Schmidt, 2020; de Moor et al., 2020).

Beyond referring to a climate emergency, the call for climate justice, linking climate change to human rights. (Evans & Phelan, 2016; Wang & Lo, 2021; Fischer et al., 2024). Their analysis tells that the whole economic system of today is flawed, an insight transformed into a critique of the neoliberal, capitalist economic system and its focus on free markets and economic growth (Bailey et al., 2011; Davidson, 2012; Euler, 2019; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2020). In addition to a call for degrowth, they criticise the hegemonic socio-political liberal democratic system unwilling to deal with social-political conflicts and focusing on restricted and competitive participation where it pays off to invest large in lobbying, as opposed to a more deliberative and inclusive ecological democracy (Pickering et al., 2020). The climate justice movement has experienced a reluctance from established policy actors in liberal democracy to be invited to policy processes, since they are not responsible enough (von Malmborg, 2024a).

7.1.2 Fictional threats to the populist worldviews

The climate justice movement's calls for economic degrowth (Heikkurinen, 2021) and concern for human rights is perceived by SD leaders as an intrusion upon their and the popular's worldviews and dominant status in society. Based on a combination of anti-establishment rhetoric, knowledge resistance and emotional communication of doubt, industrial/breadwinner petro-masculinities, anti-feminism and ethnonationalism (cf. Daggett, 2018; Hultman et al., 2019; Jylhä et al., 2020; Agius et al., 2021; Vihma et al., 2021; Vowles & Hultman, 2021a, 2021b) SD presents a fictional 'disaster' narrative (cf. Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022). It is a symbolic threat that predicts hatred (Stephan & Stephan, 2017), which in turn predicts aggressive tendencies and hurting behaviour (Martínez et al., 2022b), and serves to polarise climate politics into a dualistic worldview of 'good' vs. 'evil', 'us' vs. 'them', the 'people' vs. the corrupt 'elite' (cf. Ketola & Odmalm, 2023; Abraham, 2024).

SD, mainly attracting older white men, look back with nostalgia to a great national past during the oil-fuelled record years of the 1950s and 60s when men had lifelong jobs in industry and sole access to society's positions of power, while women stayed at home taking care of children and dinner (cf. Vowles & Hultman, 2021a, 2021b; Marquardt & Lederer, 2022; Marquardt et al., 2022). This reference to nostalgia (Kenny, 2018) and a mythical past (cf. Taş, 2022) is similar to the narrative of Trump–Vance and the MAGA movement, imposing high trade tariffs on export

to the US to protect and stimulate American industrial production to bloom like it did in the late 19th century.

Analysing the psychological roots of the climate crisis, Weintrobe (2021) argue that wealthy people in wealthy countries are stuck in a state of *exceptionalism*, i.e. a specific psychological state in late capitalism where people seize to compromise. If reality or conspiratory fiction in any way challenges that perception, it is the threatening challenge that needs to be denied. Therefore, individuals or groups who tell difficult, challenging things – such as climate activist, climate scientist or climate journalists – needs to be ostracised. Or be accused of sabotage and terrorism. That Greta Thunberg has gone from pet peeve to pariah among Tidö parties and other climate sceptics from 2018 to 2020 is no coincidence (Vowles & Hultman, 2021a).

A similar fear of system critique was perceived in Olof Palme's attacks on neoliberal economics and libertarian political philosophy as threats to the welfare state in the 1970s and 80s, and former C-party leader Annie Lööf's socio-liberal views on migration policy. This made Swedish right-wing and radical right politicians in M and KD and later on SD and AfS and their supporters paint pictures that Palme and Lööf were evil. For this, they should be punished – silenced. Importantly, Timbro had a significant role also in the hate and threats targeting Olof Palme. In 1984, they published the book "Who is Olof Palme?" (Östergren, 1984), the most elaborate and offensive attack on Palme as a person and politician.

7.1.3 Backfire cementing the polarisation

ÅV claims that they have not been radicalised, that they are just doing what they have always done. It is true that ÅV has not radicalised in terms of turning from non-violent to violent or violence-affirming like *Earth First!* and the *Environmental Liberation Front* in the USA (cf. Zeitzoff, 2026). But in the eyes of SD and others who declare ÅV a criminal 'enemy', both soft and hard repression of climate activists backfire and some climate justice activists are perceived as being radicalised. Instead of becoming silent, giving in to the populist perpetrators, they strike back. They do not turn violent but intensify confrontative civil disobedience actions to pursue their science-based argumentation for strong climate policy and degrowth. For instance, ÅV made a series of actions at Swedish airports during April 2025, trespassing security objects and flying drones at airports – actions that they know are illegal and can render prison – to highlight the need to end extraction of peat. This led to three climate activists being detained. They also made an action at the world-famous Vasa Museum in Stockholm.

Repression can make the subjects of repression more radical and sometimes trigger movement mobilisation (cf. della Porta, 2013; Lindekilde, 2014). SD does not know the strategies, planning,

tactics and campaigns of ÅV, XR, SR and other activist movements. They see more intense actions, why in their view, ÅV and other groups are 'radicalised'. The anger of climate activists being targeted with soft and hard repression could be perceived as a rejection of the constructed rule in society that "subordinates are not entitled to express anger toward superiors" (Flam, 2005; Cantrell, 2019, p. 52). Climate activists, challenging the status quo, are 're-appropriating' anger through their actions, which itself is a threat to SD and the Tidö government.

In response to the 're-appropriation' of anger and 'radicalisation' of radical climate activists, SD proposed just a few days after the airport actions in April 2025 that climate activists should be prosecuted for terrorism under current laws, which if they are found guilty would render prison in four to eight years. SD also proposed that Swedish antiterrorism legislation may need to be changed so that climate activists surely can be charged for terrorism. SD and the climate minister responded to the ruling of the Supreme Court in July 2025 that roadblocks are not to be seen as sabotage, that Swedish anti-sabotage legislation should be revised. All to make certain that climate activists will be imprisoned, perhaps indefinitely. This was shortly followed by editorials in Tidö supportive right-wing newspapers, also suggesting that the *Swedish Institute for Human Rights*, a national authority under the government, should be abolished, and that Sweden should exit the *UN Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters*.

As witnessed in my interviews and focus groups, many climate justice activists do not want to play the game and take part in policy discussions according to the rules of liberal democracy. They do not want to take responsibility in a liberal democratic sense, but to confront the power with antagonism. They lack confidence in liberal democracy and want a revolution, although with unclear governance structures and processes thereafter. Until climate politics is re-politicised, focusing on the urgency of the zero-carbon transition including focus on equity and climate justice based on a more deliberative and inclusive ecological democracy (Pickering et al., 2020; von Malmborg, 2024a), the climate justice movement will continue challenge liberal democracy through (i) confrontation such as trespassing of airports, painting buildings, attacking painted art or art performances in acts of iconoclasm, or iconoclash (Garland, 2023), (ii) civil disobedience such as road blocks, or (iii) peaceful performance activism such as flash mobs, sit-ins or singing, targeting politicians and companies portrayed as 'enemies' but also aimed at raising awareness of the public, and (iv) writing op-eds, information material and raising awareness on social media (von Malmborg, 2024d). But we have no traditional liberal democracy in Sweden. It is under great pressure from radical right authoritarian forces. Ironically, the populist radical right culture war on liberal democracy and climate politics has made climate justice activists play the game

according to the rules of the radical right populists creating a pernicious polarisation, not a transformative repolarisation that could bring the autocratisation to a halt (von Malmborg, 2026b). The perceived radicalisation plays into the hands of radical right populists who can say – *Look, we were right, they are terrorists*. Actions of radical climate activists' risks cementing the pernicious polarisation into a maelstrom-like trench war.

Another kind of 'radicalisation' and re-appropriation of anger can be interpreted from stories of two climate journalists at Sweden's largest newspaper, who both argue that mainstream media has betrayed readers, listeners and viewers on the climate crisis. The subsequent silencing of them, due to their 'engagement', made them write a book on how climate journalism ought to be done to make a difference and be true (Röstlund & Urisman Otto, 2025). Then they resigned to be able to act according to their beliefs. To be an engaged journalist is synonymous to being a radical journalist.

Backfiring of both hard and soft repression was found in a study of effects of repression by Swedish authorities towards the left-wing 'violence-affirming extremist' movement in Sweden (Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020). In their case, backfiring took the form of confirmation, where the labelling of the movement as 'violent' created an aura of radicalness that facilitated contacts between radicals and increased distrust of institutional politics (cf. Peterson & Wahlström 2015). Being stereotypically labelled, the organisations radicalised by attracting more activists, particularly radical activists. But as mentioned, the radical climate activists have had difficulties attracting more members. It is rather MR, who does not engage in civil disobedience, that attract more members. Climate activists are outspokenly non-violent, and do not want to attract 'violence-affirming extremist'.

In all, the use of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics disqualifies the liberal democratic conception of the public interest based on the coexistence and aggregation of various political visions and of various stakeholders in a political society. In the end, if all 'enemies' are silenced, there will be only one unitary voice in climate politics, the voice of the climate sceptics.

7.2 Undermining public deliberation and critical scrutiny of power

Besides contributing to pernicious polarisation, nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics aims at silencing climate activists, climate scientists and climate science as well as climate journalists, but also civil servants. These groups of actors sense a normative shift, resulting in a culture of silence. This restricts the flow of information to the public, which has high costs to democracy.

When scientists, science and even universities are attacked and feel threatened by right-wing and radical right populists, as is currently the case in the US but also Sweden, and withdraw from controversial research or public discussions, it risks leading to perspectives on climate change and climate policy that are considered controversial by the radical right populists being weeded out. Perspectives of the outgroup are self-censored. Regarding accusations of climate scientist activism undermining the trust in science and universities, Swedish professor of philosophy of science, Harald A. Wiltsche, argues that passive consent, i.e. non-activism, would be contrary to what is expected of Swedish scientists under the Swedish law on higher education.[144]

One does not have to look far at history to see that science-based activism and civil disobedience have been instrumental in ending social injustices such as discrimination, slavery, apartheid, and providing universal suffrage, and thereby in building our modern liberal society. In response to the Tidö parties' increasingly articulated conspiratory accusations on science as "just an opinion", invoking knowledge resistance, 1,047 Swedish scientists from several disciplines at 30 universities wrote an op-ed in Sweden's largest newspaper in April 2025 to speak out against how politicians misuse and ignore science, with detrimental impacts on democracy and a better future.

State agencies have key roles in Sweden's liberal democratic governance. They provide statistics in their area of responsibility, they act as intermediaries translating science, and they do analyses and provide science-based expert input to the government's policies. Most agencies are also tasked to inform the public and companies. State agencies are also responsible for executing the government's policies. The message effect of nasty rhetoric has made national agencies and their employees more silent and cautious about what they communicate externally, to the government and the public (cf. TCO, 2025; ST, 2026). Agencies restricting what information they communicate externally not only undermines the epistemic quality of government policies but also reduces the flow of important information that could help people shape an opinion and scrutinise politicians.

Swedish professor in political science, Lennart J. Lundquist (2012), highlights the perils of a silent public administration. Freedom of expression in the public workplace is a guarantee that political decisions made are based on the best expert input and are implemented legally and professionally. The fact that civil servants speak out thus becomes a very important political instrument of control and connects to the democratic norm of transparency in the administration and the government and constitutes a very important part of democratic governance. When individual

[144] Op-ed in *Aftonbladet*, 5 July 2023. https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/5BwJJK/professor-klimatforskare-maste-kunna-vara-aktivister

officials in the state are attacked, accused of activism and threatened to silence. Those who stake their careers, their livelihoods and their professional pride depend on the trust of their own political leadership. For them, being targeted with nasty rhetoric is an attack on fundamental human rights and freedoms.

Since independent media plays an important role to raise awareness in societies, SD and other climate sceptics began to target established media in nasty rhetoric campaigns early on. Attacks on public service and independent media discourage free formation of opinion and critical scrutiny of power. When journalists are hated and threatened, it risks that investigations are not carried out and important facts are never published. Consequently, citizens loose important information. Besides nasty rhetoric targeting journalists, Tidö parties have recently reviewed the guidelines for public service, proposing that public service journalism in the future must be evaluated by external reviewers, and adapt the content to a certain type of populist political opinion, which goes against basic journalistic principles of impartiality, neutrality of consequences and truth-seeking (cf. Bjereld, 2024). As a response, Swedish public service television and radio have decided not to keep their climate correspondents, effectively reducing the dissemination of information and knowledge about climate change and climate policy to Swedish citizens.

Nasty rhetoric sped up and expanded with the help of the Internet and social media leads good scientists and journalists, but also civil servants in state agencies and even entire state agencies to silence, giving space to nastier people to take their places and plant deepfake. Restricting the flow of scientific knowledge and information, communicated by scientists, state agencies or independent media, exchanging it with deepfake may invoke knowledge resistance. To radical right populists, their (deepfake) 'knowledge' will represent the 'Only Truth', as compared to the 'opinions' of climate scientists and the 'climate propaganda' of established journalists.

7.3 State repression erodes human dignity and squeezes the civic space

As found in this study, nasty rhetoric targeting climate activists, including science activists, and civil servants is different from nasty rhetoric targeting non-activist climate scientists and climate journalists. The less aggressive acts of nasty rhetoric, focusing on hate and threats, have soon come to be accompanied with legal and economic repression by the state. The direct effects on democracy are somewhat different, but in the end, they lead to the same overall harm.

The new legal praxis in Swedish district courts, sentencing climate activists performing roadblocks to prison for sabotage can be seen as a threat to human rights and freedom of demonstration. Since the change was proposed by leading M and SD politicians in a nasty

rhetoric campaign and later cheered by the minister of justice, several climate activists felt that this change in the judicial system was an act of political commissioning. Swedish law professor Anna-Sara Lind considers the criminal classification of roadblocks as sabotage to be disproportionate.[145] "Limitations of constitutional rights may only take place in the manner specified in the constitution", Lind says and specify that a "restriction may not extend so far that it constitutes a threat to the free formation of opinion".

Failure to understand climate actions such as roadblocks or protests at airports righteous and legal demonstrations is a mistake in an antiliberal democratic direction, where constitutional rights are at stake. The right to demonstrate is a central building block in every democratic society. It is protected in Swedish constitution and through several international conventions. Even civil disobedience is covered by the right to demonstrate if violence is not used. But not all who perform roadblocks are considered terrorists. Think of farmers blocking highways in Europe and burning hay bales in Brussels months before the EU elections in June 2024. Some even destroyed public buildings. They were not treated as terrorists but hailed as heroes by populist radical right politicians such as Marine le Pen and Victor Orbán. It's a matter of money and political clout.

Accusations of climate activists being terrorists were intensified in April 2025, when SD's spokesperson on legal issues proposed that climate activists are prosecuted for terrorism instead of sabotage, which if they are found guilty would render prison in four to eight years. By equalling demonstrations to sabotage or even terrorism, legal authorities are provided with a broader repertoire of instruments that further contributes to the squeezing of civil space (Buyse, 2018; Ardin, 2026). Beyond arrest, activists can be detained and held in custody prior to prosecution. Categorising climate actions as sabotage or terrorism further gives the police the right to preventive interception of people without concrete criminal suspicions, and a person can be charged of sabotage for just planning a climate action. This happened in the UK in July 2024, when several climate activists were sentenced to four years in prison for planning a roadblock in a Zoom meeting. and imprisoning activists reduces the number and plurality of voices in the public debate.

A similar increase in legal repression is found in the court trial against 17 scientist activists prosecuted for the crime of 'vandalism together and in concert' for a demonstration at a private jet terminal in 2023. This is a criminal act where everyone is considered the perpetrator regardless

[145] News article in *Dagens Arena*, 23 August 2023, https://www.dagensarena.se/innehall/200-klimataktivister-domda-25-sabotage/

of who did what and everyone can get sentenced to prison. Most activists taking part in the action referred to a sense humiliation and of loss of human dignity, i.e. a loss of equal consideration in public policy decision-making, of equal recognition as human agents capable of making and executing plans for their lives, and of equal opportunity to participate in the cultural, professional, and political spheres. Expressions of nasty rhetoric are designed to dehumanise people in the outgroup, eroding the fundamentals of basic reputation that entitle the targets to be treated as equals in the ordinary operations of society. They cannot understand how performing a peaceful demonstration can render court trial in a democracy. One of the activists mentioned that risking prison and being denied citizenship and the right to vote for holding a banner during a demonstration is frightening and surreal, and nothing she thought would happen in Sweden.

A similar development of increased state repression of climate activists is seen in other European countries, e.g. Austria, France, Germany, Spain and the UK. The UN rapporteur on environmental organisations' rights expresses well the impact of nasty rhetoric and nasty politics targeting climate activists (Forst, 2024b, p. 11):

> *By categorising environmental activism as a potential terrorist threat, by limiting freedom of expression and by criminalising certain forms of protests and protesters, these legislative and policy changes contribute to the shrinking of the civic space and seriously threaten the vitality of democratic societies*.

Democracy scholars highlight the need for strong civil society organisations and civic education as an important effort to defend liberal democracy against ongoing autocratisation (Lührmann, 2021; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021; Mudde, 2021; Silander, 2024; V-Dem Institute, 2024, 2025). It is therefore ominous that the Tidö parties, besides attacking climate activists with more severe state repression, have changed the Swedish system of support for civic education and civil society prior to the Civic Education Inquiry presented its report in June 2024, thus without an impact assessment. The state financial support to study associations, which have an important role in civic education on climate change and democracy, is deliberately reduced gradually by 30 per cent. Protest, unrest, or an organised monitory civil society, making clandestine autocratisation apparent to a wider public, may prevent or stop the autocratic ambitions of the government (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021). But the Tidö parties' attacks on civic education and civil society organisations, such as CRD and XR, are an important organising principle for a societal transformation that goes deeper than individual decisions and budget items. It is part of a pattern that opposes pluralism and fundamentally liberal and deliberative democracy. In Tidö Sweden, climate policy is obviously culture policy, and the Tidö parties are aware of how a liberal democracy can be dismantled in a very short time (Lagerkvist, 2024).

As indicated in the previous subsection, not only the civic space is squeezed. The public space is also squeezed from nasty rhetoric and nasty politics, when engaged civil servants are moved around and public administrations restrict what information they communicate externally, either voluntarily as a harm of the message effect or by force of the government. The Riksdag decides the budgets for national authorities and the government decides large how money should be used, e.g. cutbacks to certain areas like climate policy instruments.

7.4 Manipulation of language

Since the 2022 election, the Tidö parties' emotional governance has implied a normalisation and increase of hate speech and hard repression against people who try to protect human rights and the survival of humanity. While silencing critics and mobilising followers, nasty rhetoric also manipulates the meaning of words and concepts in the Swedish language. This applies, in particular, to concepts with a normative, ethical or ideological meaning that are central in a liberal democracy, such as democracy, accountability, legitimacy, justice and freedom. Tidö politicians use these concepts in a way that do not match the definitions in liberal democracy, but closer to a populist and authoritarian meaning (von Malmborg, 2024a, 2024b). Concepts describing people's identity and agency to maintain and develop a liberal democracy, such as engagement, activism and education, are also subject to ideological manipulation and propagandistic reinterpretation to delegitimise and dehumanise people, organisations and movements that use their constitutional rights to protest (von Malmborg, 2026c).

There is nothing strange with linguistic concepts changing meaning over time. A language is socio-culturally constructed and the meaning of different concepts is determined by cultural and ideological factors in what philosophers and linguists call *discursive dialectics* and *constitutive antagonism* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In discursive dialectics, antagonism refers to all possible meanings of a concept that are excluded when one meaning become hegemonic. Both the 'inside' and the 'outside' are constituted simultaneously and they are dependent on each other. But given that there are always several contingent meanings, their configurations are arbitrary and the result of given historical power configuration. But what we are seeing now is a very rapid and unilateral change of language based on populist manipulation and hatred. Tidö parties are ideologically manipulating the meaning of important words and concepts, while the political opposition sits crosswise in silence.

7.4.1 The changing meaning of democracy

There are different ideological views of what a democracy is, differentiated by the way they conceive of the public interest, as this shapes the way 'democratic' governance is conceived and the role of different sources of knowledge within (Held, 2006; Caramani, 2017). Sweden is so far a liberal democracy, although sliding towards authoritarianism. The state is supposed to represent a public interest based on an aggregation of different political visions and interests. The key is that different conflicting opinions are allowed to coexist and compete. Other key principles of a liberal democracy are legitimacy and accountability, but also transparency, openness, impartiality, fairness and equality (von Malmborg, 2024a).

In comparison, radical right populism is authoritarian or totalitarian in its ideology. There is and can only be one way to look at things. The public interest is not based on the opinions of the members of society, but on the populist political leaders' own interpretation of the 'Only Truth' – a putative will of the 'people' (Arato & Cohen, 2017; Bitonti, 2017; Caramani, 2017; Mudde, 2017). Based on this 'truth', they run a demagogic propaganda machine, just like leaders of fascist and religiously fundamentalist states, to manipulate the people on emotional grounds what they should feel, and think is right and wrong on various issues. Individuals' interests or rights may be sacrificed for the 'good' of society (Popper, 1945).

Representatives of the Tidö parties, especially PM Kristersson and Minister of Justice Strömmer, often emphasise that they act to protect Swedish democracy. SD party leader Åkesson does likewise. Given the increasing number of studies reporting that Sweden is a sliding democracy, undergoing autocratisation, it is highly relevant to ask what the Tidö parties mean when they talk about the importance of protecting Swedish democracy. So far, no opposition politician or journalist put them against the wall with this question? This is not the first time that right-wing and radical right populists claim to defend 'democracy', without being clear about their view of democracy.

In established liberal democracies, it is unusual to have explicitly authoritarian parties. It is more common with antiliberal or 'semi-loyal' actors who claim to stand up for democracy but do not fully adhere to the liberal-democratic norms and institutions that limit executive power, uphold the freedoms of citizens and the rule of law (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Lührmann, 2021; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021). People are easily manipulated when you pretend to use a language they understand but speak another which they do not understand (Bloch, 1971; Mathiesen, 1978). Democratic principles and concepts are kidnapped so that people will believe that a party is democratic in the liberal sense. But the concepts are given completely new meanings that few

members of society understand. The question is whether all Riksdag politicians understand. Being vague on definitions of central concepts is a way for populists to gain support (Fridlund, 2025). Antiliberal parties rarely attack the electoral system as such but often seek to dismantle the liberal dimensions of the democratic system, such as the rule of law, freedom of expression, accountability, legitimacy and justice (cf. von Malmborg, 2024a, 2024b). The concepts have lost their original meaning. With less than three years use of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics, *democracy* means 'autocracy' or 'democracy for the ingroup'.

7.4.2 The changing meaning of legitimacy

Legitimacy is a multifaceted concept and a central democratic norm with different connotations depending on different theoretical perspectives on democracy (Lipset, 1959). In an empirical sense, the legitimacy can be defined as: (Schnedler & Vadovic, 2011, p. 989):

> *a property of an institution, norm, or authority, [whose] key aspect is the process of validation, that is, an agreement among the members of the society that the course of action or type of behavior is in line with their moral values and principles of justice.*

In this sense, legitimacy is a critical aspect of politics and policy that varies with context (Beetham, 1991; Suchman, 1995). Claims to legitimacy are socially constructed and can be questioned by those who evaluate political regimes and their policies, be they voters or academics. Thus, legitimacy lies as much in the values, interests, expectations and cognitive frameworks of those who perceive or accept the regime or a policy, as it does in the regime or policy itself (cf. Black, 2008). Legitimacy is a matter of the values and principles of members of society in relation to the institutional arrangements that shape power and policies in society. Legitimacy is based in this sense on people's values and their perceptions of the institution/policy in question. But these can differ significantly across time and space, and between actors, systems, and contexts. Moreover, different people's perceptions of whether a political regime or policy are legitimate are not necessarily based on the same types of evaluations. Ideology and the view of democracy play an important role.

Analyses of legitimacy include both empirical and normative components, the latter which are embedded in normative democracy theory. In liberal democratic theory, which has been the norm in Sweden for long, legitimacy focuses on social credibility and acceptance, including (i) the extent to which political regimes, policies, and political actors conform to established rules, (ii) how the exercise of power is justified by reference to the beliefs of both majorities and minorities (both of which can be represented by policymakers), and whether there is evidence of support or consent from the minority, (iii) transparency and a fair, impartial opportunity for citizens and

other stakeholders to participate in the policy process, and (iv) the ability of the political system and/or the instrument to solve collective problems for citizens in a fair way (Lipset, 1959; Barker, 1980; Beetham, 1991).

The Tidö parties claim that their watering down of climate policy is 'popularly legitimate', that they are doing what their voters asked for. But polls show that four of five Swedes disapproves of Tidö climate policy and want the government to take more firm action to combat climate change. It is apparent that current climate policy is empirically illegitimate. In addition, it has been shown that the Tidö parties in their climate policymaking violate all aspects of normative legitimacy according to liberal democracy (von Malmborg, 2024a, 2024b). This confirms Rothstein's (2009) thesis that the legitimacy of a political regime should not only be determined by its input legitimacy. How the Tidö parties and the GOS act in the policy process, and what policies they propose and the Riksdag decides, are important for the legitimacy of the system, which is not static. A policy that lacks legitimacy will negatively affect the legitimacy of the regime. Tidö's decisions to abolish the fossil fuel reduction obligation and reduce carbon dioxide taxes for fuels, with increased emissions as a result, erodes confidence in the government's climate policy nationally and Sweden's leading role in international climate policy.

Tidö climate politics clarifies the tension between empirical and normative legitimacy (cf. von Malmborg et al., 2025). Even if a policy would be accepted by a majority of those affected and thus perceived as empirically legitimate, such a view of legitimacy ignores the fact that actors who are critical may have put forward good reasons as a basis for their criticism, but which have not been considered by the policymakers. There is dissatisfaction with the process as well as the outcome, why the policy is not normatively legitimate. A narrow view of empirical legitimacy, as suggested by the Tidö parties, is not consistent with the normative view that policy, in order to be legitimate, are developed in a process where political decisions take into account and compromise between beliefs from both dominant and subordinate coalitions (Schmidt, 2013).

Tidö parties continue to claim that their politics and policies are legitimate. Thus, it seems obvious that *legitimacy* in Tidö governance has little to do with 'public acceptance', empirical or normative legitimacy as understood in liberal democracy, but rather as 'according to the will of the Tidö parties'.

7.4.3 The changing meaning of concepts of agency

7.4.3.1 Activism

After several coordinated climate actions in April 2025, SD's spokesperson on legal policy, Pontus Andersson Garpvall, argued that climate activists should be prosecuted for terrorism. Garpvall also said that Swedish anti-terror legislation should be changed so that climate activists can be convicted of terrorism with certainty. When the Supreme Court in the summer of 2025 acquitted climate activists who were charged with sabotage in connection with a demonstration on a highway in Stockholm, the response from Garpvall was that the anti-sabotage law will be changed immediately, so that climate activists can be convicted of sabotage. Climate minister Pourmokhtari did not rule out that she would support such a change.

By gradually exaggerating accusations towards climate activists of being saboteurs, totalitarian, terrorists and a threat to Swedish democracy, Tidö parties have managed to change the meaning of activists. Even if people in general do not consider climate activists as terrorists, Tidö parties appear 'reasonable', even though they have shifted the meaning of the term activist very far, from something positive to something negative. According to the dictionary of the Swedish Academy, an activist is defined in a positive manner as "a person who advocates actionable policies in a particular area", an 'engaged citizen' raising her voice in protest against abuses. According to the Tidö parties' world view and language in nasty rhetoric has transformed an activist into a criminal person. The concept of 'activism' has become synonymous with reprehension, non-Swedish and above all something illegal and criminal. The message effect of nasty rhetoric has made directors-general and directors in public agencies and executives and editors in media afraid and anxious of potential harms to them and their organisations if employees, or even the entire organisation, are branded and denounced as 'activists' (cf. Ardin & Irving, 2025; Ardin, 2026).

These conscious language shifts are also found in other policy areas, with concrete consequences for those who protest abuses in the contemporary world. After claiming that immigrants are the root of Sweden's decay, the message from the Tidö parties is now that all problems are caused by the Muslims, increasingly accused of being radicalised Islamists. People who criticise Israel's radical right government for genocide in Gaza and raise their voices in solidarity with Palestine have consistently been accused of antisemitic activism and being members of Hamas (Ardin & Irving, 2025). According to Ardin and Irving, the criticism of the activists has often been speculative and has been about symbols that have been constructed as unequivocal evidence of antisemitism, without other explanations being explored. At the same time, expressions of

antisemitism tend to be trivialised if they come from others than just the Palestine movement.[146] This reinforces the image that the concepts of 'climate activism' and 'antisemitism' are in many cases not used honestly but as ideological tools to achieve political results. In these ways, the climate justice movement and the Palestine movement are singled out as extremists and made a scapegoat for Europe's guilt of capitalism and colonialism (cf. Ardin & Irving, 2025).

7.4.3.2 Learning

Learning is traditionally seen as a lifelong process through which people actively enrich their lives – emotionally, intellectually, linguistically, aesthetically, religiously, socially, economically and politically – thereby creating their own world of knowledge. Learning is of great importance for the vitality of a liberal democratic society. But the concept of *learning* is also given a new meaning with the Tidö parties in power. Since civic education contributes to life-long learning it is an important counterforce against autocratisation. But it poses a threat to the Tidö vision of Sweden as a culturally homogeneous country where people think and behave as they are told with emotional rules. Consequently, the Tidö parties have radically reduced their support for civic education associations, folk high schools and civil society organisations, which harms civic learning hard. When the Tidö parties presented their policy for education in the spring of 2025, the concept of learning had been reduced to *education*, which, unlike learning, is time limited. The Tidö parties' narrow view of learning is a real threat to Swedish public debate and democracy.

7.4.3.3 Sabotage and terrorism

While claiming that harmful actions are 'criminal', the original meanings of words such as radical, saboteur and terrorist are devalued. A small group of radical climate activists continue with their civil disobedience according to plan, despite convictions with fines or imprisonment on the penalty scale. In a liberal democratic discourse, they are not radicalised because they have not become violent or violence-affirming. They use their constitutional right to engage in civil disobedience. Compared to American radical and rather militant environmental movements and activists in the 1990s and early 2000s, engaging in property destruction and arson harmful to people and society, Swedish 'radical' climate activists are not radical at all. If pro-Palestine demonstrators or activists in MR, sitting in a square singing, are branded as radical, and activists in ÅV or XR, performing a non-violent act of civil disobedience are branded as saboteurs or terrorists, what should we then call the real saboteurs and terrorists harming property and people?

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[146] Consider Elon Musk's hailing on stage,

7.5 Analysis

Nasty rhetoric is a central tactic used by radical right populists to polarise society and politics through emotional governance. In this sense, it resembles the governance of fascists throughout history. The pluralism of liberal democracy is exchanged with a pernicious division between 'We', the 'good people' and the 'Others', the 'enemies to the state'. Nasty rhetoric serves to punish everyone with different identities or political opinions than the leaders holding the 'Only Truth'. This is done by threats of violence scaring people to silence and dehumanisation that erodes the human dignity of members in the outgroup. The latter reduces their equality as human beings, thus eroding their fundamentals of basic reputation that entitle them to be treated as equals in the ordinary operations of society, including their civic rights such as freedom of expression and rights to demonstrate. In an autocratic or totalitarian homogenic society, the goal of fascists, there shall be only one legitimate group of people – the ones that obey the emotional rules of fear. To facilitate the polarisation and dehumanisation, political leaders manipulate the language to give new meanings to central concepts such as democracy, legitimacy, justice, activism and terrorism, through which they can manipulate people.

The silencing of climate scientist, civil servants and journalists, and science, public administrations and journalism more generally, restricts the inflow of information and harms the epistemic quality of deliberation and poses grave challenges for the functioning of and may erode liberal and deliberative democracies by undermining:

- free formation of opinion,
- peoples' scrutiny of power,
- collective agenda-setting,
- public deliberation, and
- citizens' empowered inclusion in debates and decisions that affect them.

Being targeted with nasty rhetoric is also an attack on human dignity and fundamental human rights and freedoms. Without human dignity, you lose the fundamentals of basic reputation that entitle you to be treated as an equal human agent capable of making and executing plans for your life, and equal opportunity to participate in the cultural, professional, and political spheres (Bousquet, 2022). Cabinet ministers and other leading Tidö politicians attacking scientists, civil servants, journalists, activists and other people for having wrong opinion is a clear sign that the Tidö Parties do not realise, or ignores, its duty to preserve the equal dignity of all members of society and protect Sweden's fundamental rights and freedoms. Sweden is turning autocratic.

Squeezing the civic space also reduces the possibility for people in general to critically learn about climate change since activists are conveying the messages from climate science. This also undermines freedom of expression, free formation of opinion, collective agenda-setting and public deliberation, freedom to demonstrate and citizens ability to evaluate public policy, hold politicians accountable and make informed votes (cf. Tenove, 2020; Wikforss, 2021; Pawelec, 2022). There are fewer places to meet and protest.

As illustrated in Figure 4, this contributes to undermining the democratic processes by corrupting political discussions and citizens' mutual empathy and respect for people and politics (cf. Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Dahl, 1998; Pawlelec, 2022). This in turn undermines two central norms in liberal democracy (von Malmborg, 2024a):

1. *Accountability*: Citizens' ability to evaluate public policy, hold political representatives accountable and make informed votes (cf. Pawelec, 2022); and
2. *Legitimacy* of public policy and the democratic system as such (cf. Lago & Coma, 2017; Pawelec, 2022).

Legitimacy of public policy and the democratic system is also affected by the increasingly toxic and rude language between politicians. A recent report of one of Sweden's major trade unions show that three in four respondents experience Swedish politics as rude and uncivil, which reduces the willingness to follow political debates (TCO, 2026). Almost half of the people refrain from political debates due to an overly aggressive tone with insults, accusations and hidden threats. The debates are often described as 'smearing plays for the galleries at sandbox level'. It is particularly worrying that one in four respondents state that the harsh tone affects their willingness to vote (TCO, 2026), as this risks lowering the legitimacy of the political system and democracy in the long term.

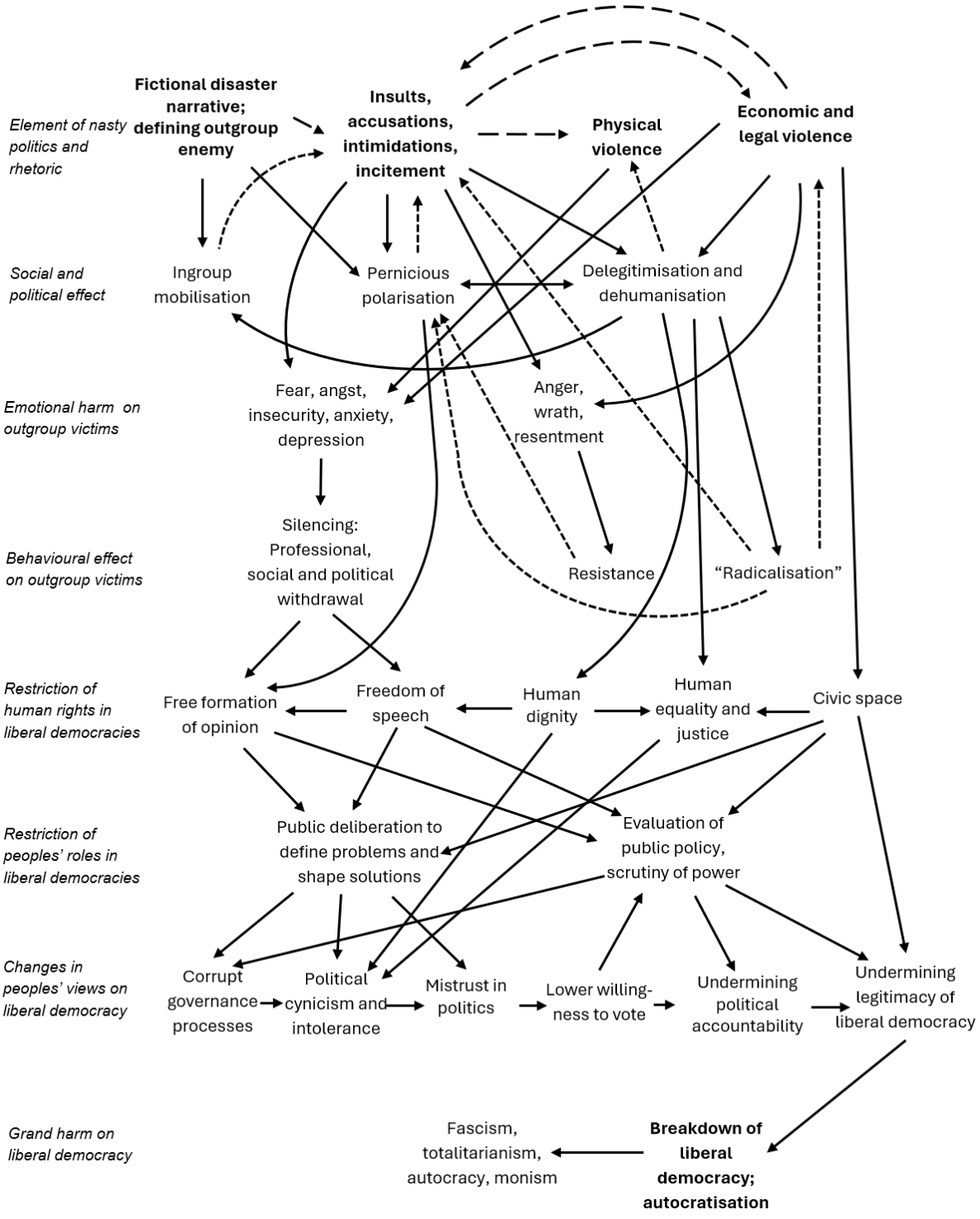

Figure 4. Harms of nasty rhetoric to liberal democracy

8. Discussion

Politics is not only about the substantial policies and legislation developed and adopted. It is also about the governance structures and policy processes in which policies and legislation are framed, formulated, contested, negotiated and adopted. The case of Swedish climate politics shows how these structures and processes can be corrupted by leading politicians in a national government and parliament. Interpreting the results of the empirical studies presented above, this section discusses the links between nasty rhetoric as hate crime and democracy crime to climate change crime. It also discusses the crime victim discourse on nasty rhetoric and how it can be developed in Sweden. Finally, I discuss nasty rhetoric and interpret it metaphorically to understand its nature; from the perspectives of perpetrators, people victimised and liberal democracy.

8.1 Crime victim discourse on nasty rhetoric

Over the last decades, the concept of 'crime victim discourse' has increased in importance in political and public debates on hate speech and hate crime since it affects rationales for punishment, equality before the law, and other legal safeguards (Hansen Löfstrand, 2009; Tham et al., 2011; Mythen & McGowan, 2017; Ilse & Hagerlid, 2024). The concept refers to "the historically, socially, and culturally specific assumptions, expectations, attitudes, and ways of talking (and thinking) about crime victims that exist in society at a given time" (Hansen Löfstrand, 2009, p. 121). But previous studies have focused on hate speech and hate crime with extremist movements and ordinary people as offenders, not nasty rhetoric where leading politicians use and instigate expansion of hate speech and hate crime. Given the severe harms of nasty rhetoric in climate politics, it is important to understand the crime victim discourse in the field of climate politics, and the crime victim discourse on nasty rhetoric. This can contribute to legal safeguards and equality before the law.

8.1.1 It's a crime, but where are the victims?

Nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics has been discussed implicitly in media since summer 2022, but mainly in relation to democracy harms. News articles, op-eds and radio programmes initially focussed on the increase of hard repression of climate activists, being prosecuted for sabotage instead of disobedience of law enforcement. When people were mentioned, primarily as groups, nasty rhetoric was referred to as a violation of people's liberal human rights of freedom of expression and demonstration, framed as a serious threat to liberal democracy (cf. Forst, 2024b). In the discourse of liberal, leftish and green media, the real people harmed were secondary to harm to the democratic system. In conservative and radical right media, the focus

was on climate activists as criminals, e.g. saboteurs, terrorists, totalitarians, and enemies to the nation, not as victims of nasty rhetoric. To conservative, and particularly radical right media, nasty rhetoric is not a crime – it is freedom of speech. Swedish libertarian thinktank Timbro claimed in 2021 that "climate alarmist" activists and scientists are "religious doomsday prophets", that cause more harm to the world than GHG emissions and climate change.[147]

Among those critical to nasty rhetoric, acts of hate speech and hard repression were discussed in media as a threat to democracy, on political, not legal grounds. So far, only one case of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics has been filed in court, explicitly referring to it as a criminal act. In spring 2024, an activist was dismissed from her employment with the SWEEA after allegations of being a threat to Swedish security. The narrative of the perpetrators dominated media coverage for some weeks but took a turn when a climate journalist in Sweden's largest newspaper portrayed her as a person harmed in a long article, letting her speak and provide her narrative.[148] But the concept of victim was absent. Due to support from her trade union, reporting the Swedish state to the Chancellor of Justice and the district court, as well as strong support from UN Special Rapporteur Forst (2024b), the case sparked enormous coverage in Swedish and international media. But, as in the case of state repression of climate activists as saboteurs, the main narrative was still the harm to democracy, with society as the victim, not the harms to the persons targeted and victimised in the first instant.

Another case of individual victimisation of a climate activist, portraying the person rather than the group being repressed and hated, is found in a book written by a radical activist in ÅV, who was sentenced to prison and served his time since he could not cope with angst of not knowing if and when to be imprisoned if the sentence was appealed (Bergendahl, 2025). However, he claims that he does not see himself as a victim of nasty rhetoric because he does not want to be a martyr. This is similar for other radical activists. Rather than seeing themselves as victims in person, the radical activists see society and democracy as victims of nasty rhetoric. But to them, the main victims are all those suffering from climate change, the climate emergency and ecocide: the victims of climate change crime.

Greta Thunberg is also, reluctantly, considering herself as a victim of nasty rhetoric but without using the word 'victim'. She mentions in an interview prior to the premiere of *As We Burn*, a documentary film about FFF, that her and her fellow climate justice activists' commitment have

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147 Essay in *Smedjan*, 11 November 2021. https://timbro.se/smedjan/klimatalarmismen-har-blivit-ett-storre-hot-an-klimatforandringarna/

148 News article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 10 April 2024, https://www.dn.se/sverige/anna-ar-klimataktivist-blev-av-med-jobbet-pa-energimyndigheten/

mostly been used as an alibi by others to avoid doing anything, and that she is "tired of being seen as an anxiolytic medicine for society". There is not much hope in the world if peoples' "hope rests on almost burnt-out teenagers".[149] The climate strikers are worried – on a personal level – about how the film will land with the audience, being afraid that some radical right influencers will pick a word from the documentary and twist it, so that it leads to yet another death threat.

Prior to the court trial of 17 scientist activists prosecuted for 'collective airport vandalism in consent', they all wrote an op-ed in which they indirectly acknowledge victimisation to nasty rhetoric by claiming that they are criminalised on political grounds:[150]

> *That peaceful protest is met as a security threat is no coincidence. How we are treated in this case is part of the increasing repression against activists in Sweden and internationally. /.../ Allowing peaceful activists to protest without being criminalised should be just as obvious. A habitable planet and democratic rights should be more important than protecting lavish private luxury consumption.*

Another group of victims of nasty rhetoric is climate scientists. The very same climate journalist that portrayed an activist being dismissed from her job, wrote a series of articles in spring 2023 about hate speech targeting climate scientists. While not mentioning the word victim, different scientists implicitly saw themselves as victims, and the narrative was that of individual victims – how they were affected by hate speech in person and how they tried to cope with it. But once again, the further implications for society and democracy were also highlighted.

Very few of the persons interviewed consider themselves to be victims of nasty rhetoric. For this, media has a role since it conveys what is okay and not okay to talk about. When Röstlund and Urisman Otto (2025) began to write about individual victims of nasty rhetoric, they were silenced by their editors. Mainstream media seems to be afraid and anxious of being engaged, to be accused of 'activism'. Consequently, voices of victims are silenced.

Taking the harm of nasty rhetoric on democracy as the point of departure, but acknowledging that real people are the ones that are targeted and victimised by real threats that harm real people psychologically at first (cf. Matsuda, 1989), 74 scientists, journalists and writers in Sweden, some which are climate scientists and climate journalists, made an appeal in Sweden's largest newspaper that Swedish politicians and other actors in the public policy debate should take measures to end

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[149] News article in *Dagens ETC*, 9 April 2026, https://www.etc.se/kultur-noje/greta-thunberg-om-doedshoten-accepterat-att-jag-inte-kommer-leva-saerskilt-laenge

[150] Op-ed in *Dagens ETC*, 7 April 2026, https://www.etc.se/debatt/foerbjud-privatflyg-och-sluta-kriminalisera-miljoefoersvarare

hate speech.[151] To show that real people are harmed on route to harm democracy, the appeal included 25 testimonies embodying the emotions and vulnerabilities of the victims of nasty rhetoric. Many victims had been threatened to silence but chose to raise their voice again, in company with others, to stand the grounds for liberal democracy. They spoke also in sympathy with, not for, those who continue to stay silent, those who do not dare to speak of fear to be hated and threatened again, and eventually physically, socially, economically or legally harmed.

Despite being truly targeted and harmed by different acts of nasty rhetoric, few victims consider themselves to be victims in person. Or at least, few are described as victims in person in media. The media focus lies on nasty rhetoric targeting real people as a threat to democracy as an institution, and of people and ecosystems hit by climate change events. Or that the victims are in fact criminals. As a new area of crime, victimisation from nasty rhetoric in climate policy seem to go "unrecognized and unacknowledged, not only by the larger society, but even by the victims themselves" (Best, 1999, p. 109). There is no real crime victim movement related to nasty politics in climate politics.

8.1.2 Reversal of offender and victim roles

The crime victim discourse is culturally dependent and influenced also by perpetrators (Mythen & McGowand, 2017). Acts of nasty rhetoric in climate politics are systematically used by leading right-wing politicians currently with governing powers, who can propose and decide on legislation, to harm and silence their political opponents. They motivate coordinated acts of nasty rhetoric at different levels of aggression by referring to the evil of their opponents who are 'destroying Sweden'. Nasty rhetoric is used to punish their enemies, people and organisations in the outgroup.

This is an explicit act of DARVO (cf. Freyd, 1997; Harsey & Freyd, 2020), where perpetrators deny or minimise the harms of any wrongdoing and attack the victim's credibility, and reverses victim and offender roles such that the perpetrator assumes a victimised position and declares the victim to be the true perpetrator. Climate scientists, climate activists and climate journalists that analyse and describe the severity of climate change and using different fora and means of communication, being critical of the government and calling for stronger climate action to reduce or avoid climate change victimisation, are denounced as evil enemies to the nation. The leading politicians and some industry players, doing criminal acts in two stages – first by implementing policies that increase GHG emissions (climate change crime according to ICJ), second by trying

[151] Op-ed in *Dagens Nyheter*, 22 September 2024, https://www.dn.se/kultur/upprop-detta-maste-fa-ett-slut-for-demokratins-framtid/

to silence their critics (violating their human rights) – act to delegitimise the critics and reverse the victim and offender roles. The Tidö parties assume a position as spokespersons for the victimised 'people' and declare that pro-climate advocates are the true perpetrators.

When the PM and other ministers accuse climate activists as well as pro-Palestinian activists of being "terrorists, a "security threat" and "threat to Swedish democracy", they use DARVO to manipulate people to believe that activists really are a threat to Sweden's security while the authoritarian changes proposed and adopted by the Tidö parties is the real threat to Swedish democracy. This is similar to developments in the US, where the FBI listed in April 2026 what should be seen as *identities*, not acts, of domestic terrorism, e.g., views associated with anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism, anti-Christianity, extremism on migration, race, and gender, as well as environmental rights.[152]

The limited focus on individual people as victims of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics can be attributed to the victims not meeting the stereotypical standards of an 'ideal victim', also linked to DARVO. An 'ideal victim' is (i) weak and vulnerable, (ii) carrying out a respectable project, (iii) in a place no one can blame her for, (iv) abused by a bad and strong offender, (v) abused by an unknown offender, with no relation to the victim, (vi) weak enough not to become a threat to other important interests (Christie, 1986).

Journalists are found to be vulnerable to hate crime and democracy crime in Sweden, but they are usually not weak. Nor are activists and scientists. Many of them are well-educated and have rather strong positions in society. All groups of victims analysed in this report are carrying out respectable projects according to a vast majority of Swedes. But according to the perpetrators of nasty rhetoric, they are non-respectable projects. Consequently, they deflect blame and responsibility and reverse the roles of victims and offenders. Reversing the roles, the Tidö parties and their followers are not seen as bad and strong, but responsible and glorious saviours of the nation. In the manipulative political rhetoric of the Tidö parties, climate scientists, activists and journalists are part of the corrupt 'elite' that should be punished for their 'crimes', whilst the pure and 'good people' are weak and the true victims. In a speech to the 'nation', SD party leader Åkesson commented the SD troll accounts used to spread misinformation and nasty rhetoric:[153]

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[152] News article in *The New Republic*, 6 April 2026, https://newrepublic.com/post/208659/donald-trump-fbi-domestic-terrorism-budget

[153] SD YouTube channel, 14 May 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfQnKHlvEzE

> *To you in The Cry – politicians, campaign journalists, activists: Do you know? We are not ashamed! It is not us who have destroyed Sweden... It is you who are to blame for it.*

The notion of an 'ideal victim' has been criticised in the case of domestic violence (Duggan, 2018), but also international criminal law (Schwöbel-Patel, 2018). This study provides evidence that the notion of 'ideal victim' can be criticised also in relation to victimisation through nasty rhetoric, where leading (right-wing populist) politicians systematically use nasty rhetoric with soft and hard repression to silence political opponents, eroding their dignity and violating their human rights. The view and understanding of what is and what is not a crime, and how victims and victimhood are conceptualised, reflects, according to critical criminological research, political power and political interests. In today's victimological research, the view of the 'ideal victim' has been developed by addressing not only the characteristics of the victim and the relationship between victim and perpetrator, but also the victim's sense of threat and subsequent coping (Bosma et al., 2018). The interests and values of society at the time of victimisation are also considered.

8.2 Developing the crime victim discourse

The current discourse on victims and victimhood from nasty rhetoric in climate politics is currently not mature enough for bringing more cases to court. The media discourse focuses on democracy as the main victim, not the real people and organisations targeted. This could be attributed to DARVO and the fact that victims of hate crime and nasty rhetoric do not meet the stereotypical norms of an 'ideal victim'.

In developing the crime victim discourse, this study shows how nasty rhetoric is used to silence those who criticise politicians and industries that downplay climate change and demount climate policy. The latter is a climate change crime according to ICJ. Acknowledging this, the use of nasty rhetoric to silence pro-climate advocates becomes another crime in a system of criminal acts in climate politics.

8.2.1 A system of criminal acts

As shown in this study, individual ministers and other political leaders commit criminal acts of different kinds and character, so far treated in different subdisciplines of criminology: (i) climate change crime, (i) hate crime and (iii) democracy crime. These are linked to each other in a system of criminal acts (Figure 5).

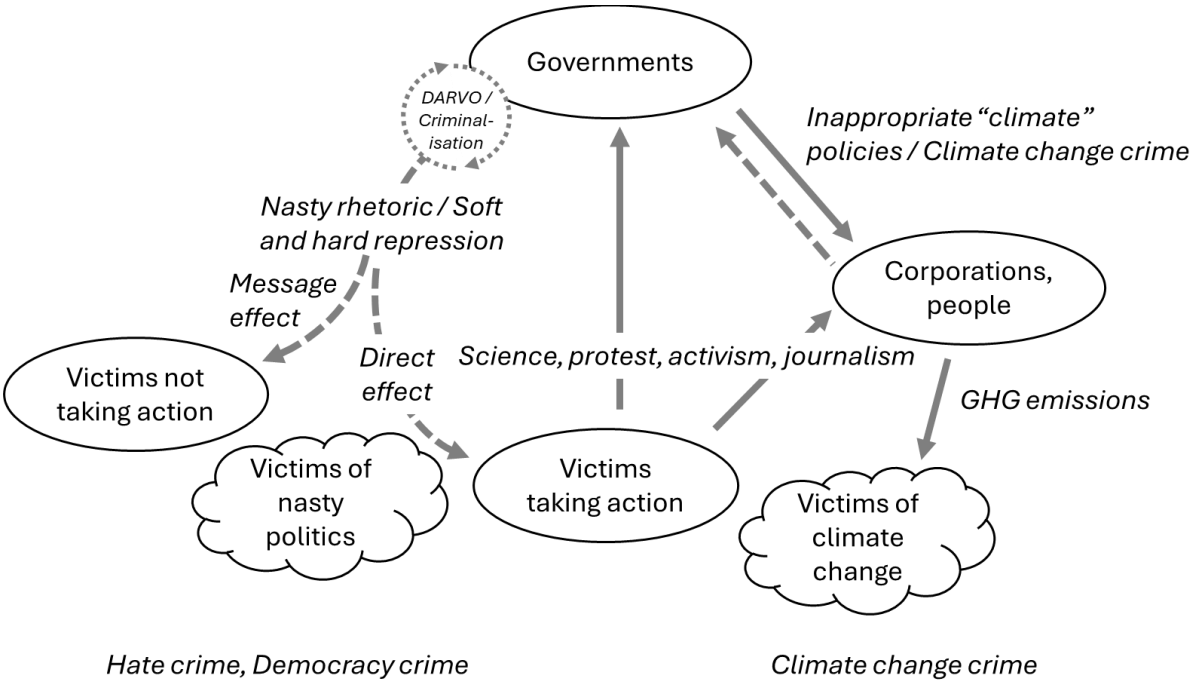

Figure 5. A system of criminal acts in climate politics

With regard to victimisation, this report highlights the importance to address topics such as power and politics in (a) the contestation of space, transgression, and resistance, and (b) the way(s) in which crime is constructed and represented by the media, including DARVO and criminalisation of victims. (cf. Brisman & South, 2013; Brisman, 2014). As addressed by Davies (2014, 2018) and particularly von Malmborg (2024a, 2024b), the climate justice discourse broadens the perspective on victimisation beyond harm of climate change itself. Policies or measures to mitigate climate change as well as political processes may have negative social or economic impacts on vulnerable groups of people in a local community, a region, a nation or globally.

8.2.2 Climate change crime

The entering office of the Tidö government marks a shift in Swedish climate politics, substantially and process-wise. After decades of increasingly ambitious climate policy and reduced GHG emissions, several policies have been adopted that increase GHG emissions and undermine possibilities to meet the Swedish long-term climate target of net-zero emissions by 2045. The CAP, presented in December 2023, provides further evidence that Tidö climate policy violates international obligations set out by ICJ.

Official statements by SWEPA (2024), SCPC (2024, 2025, 2026) and SFPC (2024) make it obvious that the government and SD do neither act with due diligence, nor use all means at their

disposal to prevent activities carried out in Swedish jurisdiction from causing significant harm to the climate system and other parts of the environment. The Tidö parties' climate policy fails to ensure the protection of the climate system and other parts of the environment from anthropogenic GHG emissions. Thus, their lack of climate actions and ambitious enough climate policies can be considered a climate change crime. Climate activists have also filed two court cases (*Auroramålet*)[154], first in 2022 second in 2026, accusing the Swedish government/state of committing climate change crime.

8.2.3 Hate crime and democracy crime

Climate justice activists became activists in response to inappropriate action of governments and companies in dealing with climate change. They see themselves and their children, but also people all over the world and their societies, as potential victims of environmental crime, climate change crime and ecocide (Davies, 2014, 2018; White, 2018). They are potential victims using their agency to act. The same holds for climate scientists and climate journalists, providing and spreading more knowledge about climate change, its effects on different scales, how it can be mitigated, how societies can adapt to climate change events, and what leaders and societies do and do not to deal with climate change.

Criminal acts in Swedish climate politics do not stop at climate change crime. Instead of taking seriously the science-based critique and arguments of climate scientists and climate activists for a more ambitious climate policy, leaders of the Tidö parties, neoliberal thinktanks and radical right media and their supporters, initiate campaigns of nasty rhetoric targeting pro-climate partisans, climate activists, climate scientists, climate journalists and civil servants engaged in climate policy. Climate activists are also criminalised by the Tidö parties, claiming that they are saboteurs and incite attorneys to charge them in court for sabotage. When the Supreme Court ruled that roadblocks are not sabotage, leading Tidö politicians claimed that the law will be changed and that they should be prosecuted for terrorism. The aim is to silence them, eliminate them from influencing politics in what is a yet a liberal democracy but under transition. By getting rid of these specific groups, which all have important roles for developing and scrutinising climate policy and the functioning of a liberal democracy, the Tidö parties hope to be able to continue demounting Swedish climate policy and liberal democracy.

There is no explicit ban on hate speech in Sweden, but certain communication, such as incitement to racial hatred, defamation or attacks on a public official, and cases of derogatory

[154] https://xn--auroramlet-75a.se/

address, violation of privacy or disrespect, is prohibited by law. Swedish legislation concerning nasty rhetoric is part of a larger framework for *democracy-threatening crime*, including (i) hate crime, (ii) democracy crime, (iii) violent extremism, and (iv) influence crime (Swedish Police Authority, 2022). In all cases, the crimes are characterised by the offender's motive to damage democratic values. To these categories will be added a ban on SLAPPs in 2026, when Sweden will transpose the anti-SLAPP directive into Swedish legislation.

Both hate crimes and democracy crimes are considered *message crimes*, because the motive behind the act is not only directed at the personal victim, cf. message effect of nasty rhetoric. These are crimes directed against persons or groups of people with the aim of intimidating or preventing them from participating in public and democratic discourse, with the message that they should refrain from expressing opinions that do not agree with those of the perpetrator or perpetrators.

In this way, the free formation of opinions and, by extension, our democracy is threatened by, for example, a researcher refraining from communicating scientific findings to the media, politicians and the public, that a journalist avoids reporting, or that an elected politician avoids making decisions on a certain issue. Initially, only elected politicians, journalists and artists who were exposed to crimes in their profession were considered potential victims, but this distinction has in practice been loosened as the prevalence of threats and hatred against several professional groups has increased in recent years, such as researchers.

Hate crime is not a crime in a strictly legal sense in Sweden, but in 2019 the Riksdag adopted an amendment to the Criminal Code making it possible for national courts to consider the offender's motive for a possible crime when ruling on punishment. More specifically, courts can consider (2 § 7p., 29 Chap., Criminal Code 1962:700):[155]

> *whether a motive for the crime was to offend a person, an ethnic group or another such group of persons on the basis of race, colour, national or ethnic origin, creed, sexual orientation, transgender identity or expression, or any other similar circumstance.*

"Any other similar circumstance" could potentially refer to insulting a person because of political opinion. If someone is convicted of another crime and the court finds such a motive, it is classified as a 'hate crime', whereupon the sentence can be harsher. An individual 'hate crime' can thus be seen as part of a structural attempt to violate the fundamental values of democracy and the principles of human rights.

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[155] https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/brottsbalk-1962700_sfs-1962-700/#K29

Many of the expressions of nasty rhetoric occurring in Swedish climate politics are potentially criminal under Swedish law, either as toxic language, hate crime, democracy crime or influence crime directed at real people, particularly hate speech targeting politicians and journalists who are considered vulnerable to democracy crimes. On 1 July 2026, a new law entered into force, criminalising psychological violence. It is now considered a criminal offence to repeatedly subject another person to violations in the form of accusations, derogatory statements, humiliating behaviour, undue threats, undue coercion or improper surveillance, if the violations taken together have been likely to seriously damage the person's self-esteem and dignity. This is exactly what nasty rhetoric aims at. Although the Tidö parties and the Riksdag have had psychological crime in close relations in mind, the law could potentially also be applied to politicians and people that systematically use hate speech that damages, harms, a victim's self-esteem and dignity.

Perpetrators could be reported to the police and investigated for crimes. But for this to happen, those who are victimised by nasty rhetoric must acknowledge that they are victims of nasty rhetoric. An individual act of hate speech or expression of violence in any form, can be seen as part of a structural attempt to violate the fundamental values of democracy and the principles of human rights. Acts of democracy threatening crimes are also made in terms of physical violence, and according to this study and claimed by trade union ST, as illegitimate judicial and economic state repression of climate activists since it violates their human rights.

The linking of (psychological) hate crime and democracy crime to climate change crime highlights the relevance of analysing the politics of climate change and climate politics, and the harms caused by the state–corporation nexus setting the rules of the market and to what extent climate change shall be prevented. Climate change criminology pioneer, Rob White, claimed that addressing state–corporate harm (White, 2018, p. 97):

> *requires a political understanding of class power and a rejection of formally legal criteria in assessing criminality and harm. As such, it implies conflict over definitions of conduct and activity, over legitimacy of knowledge claims, and over the role and use of state instruments and citizen participation in putting limits on corporate activity.*

The systematic use of nasty rhetoric in contemporary Swedish climate politics is indeed part of a conflict over definitions of conduct, legitimacy of knowledge claims and citizen participation in the public policy debates.

8.2.4 Criminalisation and victimisation in climate politics

Reflecting on the relation between climate change crime, hate crime and democracy crime in climate politics, all targets can be considered active victims of climate change crime that also become victims of nasty rhetoric used by perpetrators who want them silenced. Beyond hate speech, climate justice activists are also victimised by SLAPPs when leading Tidö politicians claim that activists are saboteurs and terrorists and thus criminalise their democratic human rights, such as freedom of expression and right to demonstrate. They are victimised after being falsely criminalised on cultural grounds, harming them as individual people, their movements and in the end, society and democracy. Thus, climate politics include criminal acts that imply victimisation of partly the same people but in different ways, at different levels, different time horizons, and of different severity.

Since victimisation is considered a balance between the severity of harm and the level of resilience (Green & Pemberton, 2017), one may ask if any of the crimes are more malicious and harmful. There is not one answer. The perspectives are many. To climate activists and most climate scientists, climate change is the most serious threat to humanity and ecosystems. We are on the brink of an irreversible climate disaster with potential collapse of humankind and societies (e.g. Peñuelas & Nogué, 2023; Ripple et al., 2024). In comparison, victimisation of individual activists and scientists through nasty rhetoric may seem paltry. Radical climate activists claim that they do not consider themselves as victims. They do not want to be martyrs. Their position on victimisation can also be seen in relation to that of 'ideal victims' in the 'attention economy' associated with neo-liberal capitalism (cf. Schwöbel-Patel, 2018), which is just as much about attraction as it is about distraction. As there is a politics of grabbing peoples' attention for certain victims, Schwöbel-Patel argues that there is also a politics of distraction from victims of structural violence at play. The increased attention to some victims renders other victims invisible. Climate activists refrain from seeing themselves as victims of nasty rhetoric to avoid making victims of climate change crime less visible.

But acts of nasty rhetoric have negative, potentially detrimental effects on liberal democracy. They are democracy crimes. Climate change is considered a super-wicked problem in need of pluralistic rather than dualistic, divisive approaches to democracy to be governed (Hulme, 2009; Incropera, 2015; Lindvall & Karlsson, 2023; von Malmborg, 2024a). The negative impacts of nasty rhetoric on pluralistic, liberal and deliberative democracy may inhibit the just transition to combat climate change. Without liberal/deliberative democracy, there may be no climate justice.

Drawing on Schwöbel-Patel (2018), an attention-grabbing version of reality portrayed with the vulnerable and weak, dependent and grotesque victim of climate change could be seen as a form of distraction. Worryingly, it may blind the individual citizen–consumer to other social injustices, such as the current autocratisation and violations of human rights, which cannot be addressed by invoking an 'ideal victim' for the purposes of prosecution and perhaps reparation. As argued above, victims of nasty rhetoric are not 'ideal victims'. Emotions achieved through 'recruiting' spectators to the climate crisis, can prevent the questioning of unequal social structures causing other pressing harms.

Some evidence for this argument is given by the limited media coverage and public discussions when the Tidö government took a serious step towards autocratisation in early June 2025, presenting a bill to the Riksdag proposing a change to the Swedish constitution. Tidö parties suggested transferring power from the Riksdag to the government in times of crises, also letting the government decide what is a crisis. Only one parliamentarian and two editorials in the largest newspapers of Sweden were critical. The proposal, which was adopted the first time by the Riksdag in December 2025 includes no mechanism from stopping the government to abuse the law, e.g. to use the military against antagonistic protesters, e.g. climate activists or pro-Palestinian demonstrators, as done by President Trump in California. If it is adopted one more time, the change to the Swedish constitution will enter into force.

8.2.5 Reclaim victimhood

As found in this study, almost every victim to nasty rhetoric denies, or simply fails to cognitively understand, that they are victims. This resembles findings of Hansen Löfstrand (2009) that *young* crime victims, a new category of victims, seldom consider themselves as victims, and the more general conception that "victimization often goes unrecognized and unacknowledged, not only by the larger society, but even by the victims themselves" (Best, 1999, p. 109). From these premises, there is a need for support workers such as *Victim Support Sweden* to reach out and make people victimised realise that they indeed are victims and thus in need of help in the form of support. Like climate activists are reclaiming anger, victims of nasty rhetoric have to reclaim victimhood and shift the burden of blame from victims to perpetrators. An important part of the support work is therefore the necessity "to teach individuals to recognize, acknowledge, and address their own victimization" (Best, 1999, p. 111).

As claimed by Ray (2018), it would be naïve to expect hate crime and democracy crime legislation to solve structurally and culturally embedded hate and divisions, and it does, further, carry risks of polarising divisions and reducing structural violence to individual motivations. Legislation will

not be effective unless linked to transformative practices such as antifascist resistance, civic education and engagement with communities designed to shift identities towards non-defensive openness to cultural and political difference. In this process, the law and policing are not monolithic but provide resources that can be mobilised towards this kind of transformative politics and regulate our common life effectively.

8.2.6 A role for media

Media and journalism have an important role for how the discourse on crime and victimisation is constructed (Brisman & South, 2014; Mythen & McGowand, 2017). In their recent book on critical climate journalism, Röstlund and Urisman Otto (2025) argue that established media must be better to describe that climate action and climate activism is about safeguarding the existence of humankind. That democracy is dependent on activism, but also on journalism that keeps close to the converging scientific truth about climate change – that the human species has never ever lived at global average temperatures more than 2 °C above preindustrial levels and thus that humankind is heading on its way out of the life corridor (Ripple et al., 2024). Touching upon the roles of climate science, climate scientists and climate activists, as well as climate journalists, one journalist claims that critical climate journalism must portray climate activists as protectors of the planet [J2]:

> *We must listen to what they say, not to the narrative portraying climate activists as dangerous criminals. Even if laws are being tightened in almost all countries now and activists are repressed and thrown in prison, we must be critical of the system and not just relate to the law. We must also relate to what is actually dangerous and what is not according to science.*

I agree with Röstlund and Urisman Otto (2025), that mainstream media for long has not been truly honest to readers, listeners and viewers on the climate crisis and the conflicts in climate politics. But mainstream media has also failed to cover more explicitly the threats to Swedish democracy resulting from changes to policies and governance styles by leading politicians in power, not only from 'extremist groups'. Political changes that are or can be considered criminal acts that could be filed in court.

In addition to suggestions of Röstlund and Urisman Otto that media shall report climate change based on converging knowledge of climate science, results of this study propose that established media should be better at describing what happens in society, to people and marginalised groups victimised by the state, with our democracy and human rights, based on journalism that keeps close to the converging scientific knowledge about radical right populism, autocratisation, hate speech, hate crime and nasty rhetoric. Journalists and media should be critical of the system, and

not just relate to the law, to truly serve its role as the third power – scrutinising those with political and economic power.

Both Röstlund and Urisman Otto have left their employments as climate journalists at the Swedish newspaper that, thanks to them and their engagement, has provided most, and the most elaborate, coverage of the climate crisis and climate activists. They were also the ones who started to write about nasty rhetoric targeting climate scientists. Despite its legacy in climate journalism, this newspaper betrays its readers, Röstlund and Urisman Otto claim. If Swedish mainstream media – "being stuck in old tracks and giving the appearance of *business as usual* even though the whole world has reached a *tipping point*" (italics in original text)[156] – will be able to develop the discourse on crimes and victims of climate politics when it silences engaged journalists remains to see. As claimed by IFJ (2019), weaknesses of the regulatory and self-regulatory systems in many countries do not prevent potential interest groups from interfering in the work of newsrooms. IFJ also calls on the journalistic community to work on strengthening its standards and has to be on the lookout for new models of funding and innovations in reaching audiences and conducting quality journalism.

8.3 Nasty rhetoric in nasty politics

Nasty rhetoric is at the core of nasty politics, used by Tidö parties to claim cultural hegemony in climate politics and other policy areas, e.g. migration, crime, social policy and foreign affairs. A comprehensive analysis of different tools used to silence critics to the degradation of Swedish climate policy is provided elsewhere (von Malmborg, 2024a; Ergon, 2026).

8.3.1 Nasty rhetoric as political rhetoric

Politics is very much about communication, persuading people to vote for one or another party or partisan. Political rhetoric, including environmental and sustainability rhetoric, is usually based on a blend of pathos, ethos and logos (cf. Myerson & Rydin, 1996; Dryzek & Lo, 2015; Wolrath Söderberg, 2020). Political sentiments are often emotional and affective, determined by viscerally experienced sentiments and a physically imagined sense of rightness or wrongness. The results presented indicate that most political actors use emotional sentiments, but that the Tidö parties use them much more. Aligning with notions of charismatic leadership (Weber, 1921), populists use language or images to affect emotions.

[156] News article in *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 July 2025, https://www.dn.se/kultur/magda-gad-om-egna-tidningen-etablerad-media-har-fastnat-i-gamla-spar/

As shown, pro-climate politicians, climate scientists, climate activists, and sometimes climate journalists, use insults and accusations to enhance the good argument based on facts and figures from science and statistics. They aim to delegitimise the politics of the Tidö parties, but not to silence Tidö politicians. This is very much in line with traditional political rhetoric on climate policy, and quite the opposite to the Tidö parties' nasty rhetoric aiming to silence opponents.

The PM and the climate minister accused climate activists of being a threat to Swedish democracy, but without factual grounds, only emotions. When S party leader Andersson accused SD of being a threat to democracy, and MP leader Stenevi accused Pourmokhtari of being a minister in SD's "puppet government", these accusations have concrete bearing on results and conclusions from democracy research (e.g. Silander, 2024; V-Dem Institute, 2024; Avellan et al., 2026). They were not slurs, but well-substantiated accusations. It is ironically symptomatic that SD party leader Åkesson, basing his entire politics and rhetoric on emotional governance, accuses the former S–MP government's climate policy to be based on emotions, not on facts, while Tidö climate policy is based on false hope and putative will of the people. When asked by oppositional politicians, scientists and media to present facts about how Tidö climate policies will make Sweden meet its climate targets, the PM and climate minister said that these would be presented in the climate action plan. When asked by oppositional politicians, scientists and media to explain why the climate action plan does not get the calculations right, that there are no policies that will make Sweden meet its climate targets, they were insulted and intimidated. The Tidö parties had no answers but fantasies about new nuclear power plants to be built in unrealistically short time at extremely high costs, which they tried to hide from the public.[157] They accused the previous government, scientists, activists and journalists for fictional problems and turned themselves into victims.

Nasty rhetoric is not like ordinary political rhetoric, where antagonists use logical, factual and sometimes emotional arguments in a deliberative conversation or negotiation to agree and develop policy – or to win a debate. Proponents and practitioners of nasty rhetoric are not interested or willing to argue, to engage in a deliberative dialogue with their antagonists using traditional political rhetoric. It is a core trait of populists to believe they have the answers to all questions and solutions to all problems in public policy, often described in simple terms (Arato & Cohen, 2017; Caramani, 2017). Like religious fundamentalists, their ideology is based on a unitary and non-pluralist vision of the public interest of society, the 'Only Truth', which they are the only

[157] Series of articles in *Dagens Nyheter*, 12-13 August 2024, https://www.dn.se/sverige/tomas-ramberg-mangmiljardfragan-ar-om-vi-alls-behover-ny-karnkraft/; https://www.dn.se/ledare/regeringens-karnkraftsplan-ar-en-enda-enorm-gladjekalkyl/; https://www.dn.se/ekonomi/expert-efter-karnkraftsbeskedet-tydligt-hur-dyrt-det-blir/

ones to interpret. Except for the purpose of persuading current and potential supporters, mobilising the ingroup, radical right populists are not interested in deliberation or winning a debate. They do not want a debate with their opponents, who are considered enemies of the nation – heretics and schismatics – who should therefore be silenced, banned, excommunicated. To achieve this, they systematically use and initiate nasty rhetoric.

Among other things, these differences in rhetoric used by right-wing and left-wing politicians can be ascribed to different emotional opportunity structures and distinct political strategies at exploiting these structures among right-wing and left-wing populists. Right-wingers can largely be characterised by *repressed shame* that transforms fear and insecurity into anger, resentment, and hatred against perceived 'enemies' of the precarious self (Salmela & von Scheve, 2018). In comparison, left-wingers are rather associated with *acknowledged shame* that allows individuals to self-identify as aggrieved and humiliated by libertarian and neoliberal policies and their advocates. Whereas acknowledged shame holds emancipatory potential, as it allows individuals to establish bonds with others who feel the same, repressors remain in their shame or seek bonds from repression-mediated hatred. Repressors turn to more aggressive forms of nasty rhetoric.

8.3.2 Nasty rhetoric as free speech or hate speech

Being victimised from nasty rhetoric herself, former party-leader Annie Lööf (C), was a firm opponent to nasty rhetoric. Her step-back from politics led to a short hiatus in criticism of the widespread use of nasty rhetoric in Sweden. But it has been brought back into politics when oppositional partisans realise the ongoing demounting of Swedish democracy. Oppositional party leader Magdalena Andersson (S), former PM, sharply criticised the government for its totalitarian tendencies:[158]

> *Instead of a traditional government, we have a right-wing regime led by Sweden Democrats. A regime that uses its position of power to threaten and silence critical voices. /…/ The SD led government destroys what makes Sweden Swedish.*

But DARVO is significant in the public debate on proliferating hate speech and hate crime in Sweden. These debates are wicked and nasty. When the victims of and opponents to nasty rhetoric raise their voice to safeguard democracy, right-wing and radical right haters accuse them of being antidemocratic. For instance, Magdalena Andersson was immediately accused of being totalitarian herself, wanting to limit the constitutional freedom of speech. Following her claim, 17 representatives of trade unions, civil society organisations and left-liberal think tanks called in

[158] Op-ed in *Dagens Nyheter*, 6 May 2023, https://www.dn.se/debatt/sds-hogerregim-hotar-grunderna-i-var-demokrati/

2024 for a public commission to (i) appoint an inquiry with proposals to defend and strengthen democracy, (ii) protect the right to freedom of organisation and assembly, and (iii) strengthen support for civil society and journalism.

Shortly after, 74 scientists, journalists and writers in Sweden, made an appeal in Sweden's largest newspaper that Swedish policy leaders, including the Tidö government and the Riksdag, must take measures to end nasty rhetoric due its detrimental effects on democracy. In April 2026, leaders of four trade unions responded to an outburst of minister for civil defence Bohlin criticising trade unions for criticising the government. They recalled that:[159]

> *The use of blackwashing as a deliberate rhetorical tactic to undermine opponents is a pattern we recognise from authoritarian states. To cast suspicion on and spread conspiracy theories is dangerous. It poisons the open society and makes constructive dialogue impossible. Democracy as a form of government must be nurtured. These include, among other things, freedom of speech and demonstration, freedom of the press, the majority's concern for the minority, civil society's opportunities to operate, knowledge and facts as a basis for political decisions, and the government's concern for the principles of the rule of law.*

Significantly, the nasty political climate in Sweden and the self-positioning of Swedish right-wing and radical right influencers as morally superior (Vahter & Jakobson, 2025), the appeal of scientists, journalists and writers was immediately attacked by neoliberal, libertarian and populist radical right political influencers, some editorial writers, claiming that the appeal itself, not the use of nasty rhetoric, is the real threat to democracy. A radical right extremist newspaper claimed that the signatories are "hypocritical democracy-hating journalists".[160] Notably, two of the critics have secret addresses due death threats and should know what the appeal is about. Desensitisation has made them ignorant, and symptomatically, they belittled and ridiculed the appeal and its signatories with insults and accusations, not substantial criticism. They responded to the call for an end of nasty rhetoric with more nasty rhetoric.

A well-known Swedish libertarian influencer commented that the appeal is a "loudly quivering pejorative [written by] puffed-up prima donnas who perceive their lost privilege of problem framing as a threat to democracy".[161] He and other critics claimed that insults and accusations are not a threat to democracy and that you must be able to tolerate gross insults if you want to

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[159] Op-ed in *Aftonbladet*, 22 April 2026, https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/L438Ax/svartmalning-har-blivit-ett-nytt-politiskt-verktyg

[160] News article in *Frihetsnytt*, 22 September 2024, https://frihetsnytt.se/hyckleri-bakom-demokratihatande-journalisters-upprop-mot-hat-och-hot/

[161] Post on Facebook, 22 September 2024, https://www.facebook.com/share/p/T1ZT2edcMtcdnewi/.

participate in the public debate, that insults and accusations are neither threatening nor illegal.[162] This view is either ignorant or deliberate, since an insult can potentially be considered a hate crime according to Swedish law. The critical influencers also claim that safeguarding freedom of speech is more important than restricting nasty rhetoric. One critic argued that:[163]

> *One must be allowed to express emotions and that it is perfectly legitimate to question the competence of those in power, repeatedly even, without having to be accused of witchcraft.*

Accountability, scrutinising political rulers and holding them accountable for their policies, is a central norm in a liberal democracy (Peters & Pierre, 2006). But why would it be legitimate for political rulers to delegitimise and dehumanise on emotional grounds those who critically scrutinise power? Why do leading right-wing and radical right politicians, including the PM and cabinet ministers, not respond to their critics with good arguments in substance? With a one-sided emotionally based nasty rhetoric, it appears that they have no answers – that they stand naked like the emperor in the tale of H.C. Andersen. That is what the appeal was about. The call for an end to nasty rhetoric was not about privilege of interpretation, but about the dignity as human beings and more importantly about safeguarding basic norms and institutions in a liberal, pluralistic democracy (cf. Tsesis, 2009).

Libertarians, neoliberals, pseudo-liberals, conservatives and radical right populists and extremists criticising the appeal claimed that any restriction of hate speech is a restriction of the fundamental human right of freedom of expression, provided for in, e.g., Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. This is a common argument of hate speakers (cf. Yong, 2011; Howard, 2019). They claim that it is essential to the legitimacy of democracy that citizens could choose to embrace inegalitarian principles and policies (cf. Howard, 2019). Free speech and democracy are justified by the fundamental value of autonomy. But the reasoning of libertarian and radical right critics of restricting hate speech and nasty rhetoric is flawed. They proclaim their freedom of speech and expression whilst neglecting that hate speech restricts the freedom of speech and expression of victims of hate speech. Doing so, they seem to disqualify the classical liberal harm-based moral principle of John Stuart Mill (1859, p. 13):

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[162] Essay in *Fokus*, 23 September 2024, https://www.fokus.se/kronika/forolampningar-ar-inte-ett-hot-mot-demokratin/

[163] Essay in *Dagens Arena*, 11 October 2024, https://www.dagensarena.se/essa/om-hoten-mot-demokratin-bofinkar-och-en-varg/

> *That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind is warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.*

People claiming that free speech must include hate speech defy that the central role of the individual and her pursuit of self-fulfilment arises when our actions align not only with our own desires but also with a sense of compassion and empathy towards others (Wheeler, 2019). We are responsible towards others. It is through this balance that we can truly live a life aligned with our deepest desires and freedom while fostering a more compassionate and harmonious society.

Despite using nasty rhetoric himself, the current Swedish PM seems to be aware of the negative consequences of silencing people, currently happening due to nasty rhetoric as well as criminal gangs:[164]

> *The development is really dangerous. /…/ If clear boundaries are not set early, there are no boundaries at all.*

He also underlined that what moves boundaries are the unpleasant and increasingly drastic consequences for those who speak out – that it creates fear. But he is obviously afraid of criticising the SD party leader bringing nasty rhetoric and emotional governance to Swedish politics – the man who can bring down the PM at any time and show who is in charge. An editorial in *Dagens Nyheter* claimed that the current PM may be the most afraid Swedish PM ever:[165]

> *Instead of a traditional government, we have a right-wing regime led by Sweden Democrats. A regime that uses its position of power to threaten and silence critical voices. /…/ The SD led government destroys what makes Sweden Swedish.*

The more I reflect on the rhetoric of Swedish libertarians and so-called liberal champions of freedom of speech (see e.g. Madon, 2025) in the debate on nasty rhetoric, they seem to be of greater benefit to ethnonationalist right-wing populists who want to introduce autocracy, than to those who want to defend and develop liberal democracy and positive freedom for people in terms of entitlement to health care, education and safety (cf. Snyder, 2025). Their rhetoric is downright anti-liberal and promotes autocratisation. They aim, at best, for negative freedom from

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[164] Editorial in *Dagens Nyheter* 11 October 2024. https://www.dn.se/ledare/amanda-sokolnicki-har-vi-nagonsin-haft-en-raddare-statsminister/

[165] Ibid.

economic tyranny. That no-one, particularly the state, shall prevent them from following their impulses through legislation or other norms. But consequently, they also say no to rules that prevent those in power, whose impulse is to control them or the rest of us.

Madon (2025) does not touch with a word on the dilemma that every real liberal democrat faces today: How those who really defend freedom of expression should avoid becoming a useful idiot for powerful forces that are advocating autocracy in disguise of freedom of expression. Libertarians and pseudo-liberals are pleased that the 'left-liberal' corridor of opinion is fading away, while at the same time being silent to the fact that the culture war replaces it with a much tighter right-wing populist 'ethnonationalist' corridor of opinion. Hence, anyone who really wants to defend freedom of expression today must, unlike libertarians and neoliberals, understand that the threats to Sweden or other western democracies do not come from outside, e.g., Islam, or from above, e.g. a left-liberal identity-oriented 'elite' of politicians, scientists, journalists or pro-climate advocates. The real threat comes from exactly those who point to Muslims and identity political elites as the problem, those who do not have the ability to tolerate different opinions, both on the right and on the left in the culture war – the populists. Many have witnessed and criticised the development in the US, with Donald Trump, J.D. Vance and Elon Musk, actively silencing their opponents and/or inciting violence. A similar development can be witnessed in Sweden. There is no shortage of media reports on how Swedish politicians silence opponents, which I have used as data in this report. But it is not until now that that people start to identify the development as a systematic whole, a political tactic that is analysed and addressed systematically. The behaviour of the Tidö parties is anti-liberal and anti-democratic. Thus, it is also a threat to freedom of expression.

8.3.3 Nasty rhetoric and fascism

The pseudo-liberals' behaviour as useful idiots to the right-wing populists in contemporary Sweden makes me realise how correct Klein (2024) is when she describes neoliberalism and fascism as each other's dual nature – as *Doppelgängers*. The close ties between (neo)liberalism and fascism have been analysed extensively by political scientists and historians in recent years (see e.g. Brown, 2015b, 2019; Slobodian, 2025; Klein & Taylor, 2026). From an ideological perspective, fascism is characterised by (Paxton (2004):

- compulsive preoccupation with society's decay, humiliation and victimhood, and compensatory cults of unity, energy and purity,
- in which a mass-based party of dedicated ethnonationalists collaborates effectively with traditional elites, and
- through redemptive violence of various kinds, without ethical or legal limitations, democratic freedoms are abandoned in pursuit of goals of internal purification and external expansion.

Brown (2019) argues that contemporary autocratisation takes place within the contours of neoliberalism's multifaceted attack on liberal democratic values. She argues that neoliberalism from the very beginning flirted with authoritarian ideals in conflict with a robust liberal democracy. It repelled the demands for social justice by appealing to the freedom and morality of the market. It sought to de-democratise the state, the economy, and society and restore the patriarchal family. She further argues that neoliberalism's fetish for individual (negative) freedom, legitimisation of inequality, and intensification of nihilism, combined with its unintentional wounding of white male supremacy, has created an apocalyptic populism that is willing to destroy the world rather than endure a future in which that supremacy disappears.

This line of thought is not new. In agreement with Ofstad's (1989) definition of fascism as 'contempt for weakness', German philosopher Ernst Bloch (1972) claims that fascism was launched disguised as freedom in the United States. Old forms of power are given new names and faces (Mathiesen, 1978). Bloch argued that the American mainstream culture's discourse on winners and losers is a kind of fascism, a contempt for weakness. And the advertising of capitalism is just another expression of political propaganda to create a polarisation between 'Us' and 'Them'.

Many scholars, writers and politicians urge extreme caution in drawing the fascist card against the populist radical right. The term fascism is associated with strongly negative reactions in most social groups, with images of Hitler's Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Italy, Franco's Spain, or for that matter Stalin's Soviet Union, on the retina. Leading scholar on fascism, Robert O. Paxton, called Donald Trump a plutocrat, not a fascist, when identifying several fascistic traits in Trump during his first term as US president. However, Trump's open incitement to the masses before the storming of the Capitolium in January 2021 prompted Paxton to change his mind. The fascist card was not only acceptable, but it was also necessary, considering the analytical definition of fascism as a process including five interlinked stages (Paxton, 2004):

1. *Exploration*, where disillusionment with liberal democracy is expressed in discussions about lost national power,
2. *Rooting*, in which a fascist movement, with dualistic polarisation in an era of post-politics, becomes an actor on the national stage,
3. *Coming to power*, where conservatives try to control the 'left-liberal' opposition by inviting ethnonationalists and fascists to share power;
4. *The exercise of power*, in which the radical right movement and its charismatic leaders control the state in balance with state institutions such as the police, the judiciary, and traditional elites such as the clergy and business executives; and
5. *Radicalisation or entropy*, where the state either becomes increasingly radical, as Nazi Germany did, or slips into a traditional authoritarian rule, as fascist Italy did.

In Sweden, people have been criticised for accusing the Tidö parties of being fascist on unclear grounds.[166] It is likely that some people draw the fascist card as a polemical insult, an accusation that the Tidö parties and their politicians are doing something unspecified bad, without knowing what is meant by the terms fascist and fascism. But, analysing the Tidö parties' nasty politics considering academic definitions of fascism, the fascist card is not only a polemical expression of hatred or aversion to the Tidö parties and their politics in general. The fascist card is legitimate. The political goals of the Tidö parties, their political discourse and their political style bear all the features of fascism as a political process.

Klein and Taylor (2026) find evidence that the close ties between the neoliberal tech-oligarchs and the populist radical right, at least in the US, has brought forward what they coin as *end-times fascism*, in which downgrading climate policy is a priority for the populist radical right for apocalyptic reasons. Since climate change appears to bring Earth and humanity into a global ecological, economic, social and human poly-crisis in the near future, if no action is taken now, the populist radical right refuses to take climate action and denounce climate science, climate justice activists and ambitious climate policy as conscious acts to frenetically accelerate the messianic prophecy of a second coming of Christ and the Rapture.

8.3.4 Nasty rhetoric to legitimate climate change crime

Instead of taking seriously the critique of climate change crime and arguments of climate scientists, climate activists, industry and the public for a more ambitious climate policy, leaders of the Tidö parties and their followers initiate and expand campaigns of nasty rhetoric targeting pro-

[166] Essay in *Dagens Arena*, 11 October 2024, https://www.dagensarena.se/essa/om-hoten-mot-demokratin-bofinkar-och-en-varg/

climate advocates and climate journalists, claiming that they are the real villains. DARVO is significant in Tidö climate politics. When the potential victims of climate change crime raise their voices, using their liberal democratic human rights to protest, they are blamed for being antidemocratic and criminalised as saboteurs or even terrorists. By using hyperbole to get rid of these groups, the 'enemies to the state' the Tidö parties hope to be able to legitimise continued demounting of Swedish climate policy and Swedish democracy.

8.4 Understanding the nature of nasty rhetoric

Reflecting upon the empirical results in a wider context, this section metaphorically interprets the nature of nasty rhetoric from the perspectives of its users and instigators, its followers and its victims.

8.4.1 Nasty rhetoric as a double-edged sword in a weird kind of sport

The empirical results provide evidence that populist radical right and right-wing politicians use nasty rhetoric to polarise climate politics and to silence their outgroup 'enemies' in the culture war on climate change, as one tactic in an overall attempt to autocratise and demount Swedish democracy (cf. von Malmborg, 2024a). Doing so, nasty rhetoric is used to emotionally hurt and dehumanise some target groups directly, and to send a message to other members in society that they should not raise their voices and oppose the Tidö government.

The extensive use of nasty rhetoric by PM Kristersson and other leading Tidö politicians, dehumanising the enemies, also incentivises, legitimises and desensitises more people to use it, thus, to continue and expand its use and normalise it (cf. Chen, 2017; Munger, 2017; Walther, 2025). The greater the desensitisation of the individual towards hate speech, the greater the persuasive capacity of the message and the prejudice towards the group targeted by hatred. In short, the individual becomes desensitised, normalises hate speech, and transforms it into resentment, increasing prejudice and violence towards the subjects of hate (Soral et al., 2018). SD's use of anonymous troll accounts helped to diminish the distance between political leaders and individuals, enabling a normalisation of behaviours and attitudes that would be considered unacceptable in the physical world or online a few years ago (Bjola & Pamment, 2019; Helbing et al., 2019).

From this, nasty rhetoric can metaphorically be described as *a double-edged sword*, used by political leaders and front-row warriors *to cut emotional wounds in the outgroup 'enemies', while at the same time sabring open the bottle of potential ingroup supporters and followers to intensify and expand the hate towards the outgroup*.

The study does not address the psychological traits of Tidö politicians, but recent studies indicate that populist politicians score high on personality traits such as Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Visser et al., 2017; Nai & Maier, 2018, 2024; Nai & Martínez i Coma, 2019; Samuels, 2023), and that they are more inclined to systematically engage hate speech and hate crime. But how do populist leaders persuade their followers, and what makes some people follow suit?

8.4.1.1 Populist persuasion of followers

When used by leading politicians, including the PM, nasty rhetoric is normalised and legitimised. Demonising and delegitimising rhetoric on climate activists as criminals (saboteurs and anti-democratic terrorists that should be executed), climate journalists as a 'left-liberal conspiracy' and 'moron hags' that should be raped, and climate scientists as opinion leaders to be killed, all symbolically blamed and scapegoated for perceived grievances and social ills, i.e. a threat to the 'people' and their worldview, gives rise to emotions of hate and threat offenders such as vindictiveness, disgust and hate, and calls for retribution and execution (Wahlström et al., 2021; Martínez et al., 2022a; Pretus et al., 2022). Similar findings have been reported in studies of hate crime in the US, where defensive hate crime offenders react to a perceived intrusion upon their dominant status in society, e.g. fear of lost status or economic distress (McDevitt et al., 2002). These accusations of the enemy and the fictive threats to worldviews, values and identity they are blamed for are repeated and transferred to the public so many times that they become interpreted and accepted by the popular as 'common sense' in a Gramscian way (cf. Pasieka, 2022).

Such symbolic threats predict hatred which in turn predicts aggressive tendencies and hurting behaviour. In comparison, threats to safety, goals or resources, give rise to anger and dislike, which predicts tendencies of wanting to change the 'enemy', not hurt it (cf. Stephan & Stephan, 2017; Martínez et al., 2022b). While hate is a destructive force, anger is a constructive force (Martínez et al., 2022a). The stronger emotional reactions to symbolic threats, facilitating hate and aggression, may be explained by the strong emotionality with which people endorse values, moral convictions and worldviews (Skitka et al., 2005; Pretus et al., 2022). Furthermore, compared to realistic threats, symbolic threats may be experienced as stable in time based on negative and non-malleable dispositional attributions towards the in-group targets (e.g. Hutcherson & Gross, 2011), eliciting proportional enduring hate feelings with the prospective function of keeping individuals prepared to keep hating for longer periods (cf. Roseman & Steele, 2018).

This can explain the focus of the Swedish radical right and right-wing populist politicians and policy professionals to portray climate scientists, climate activists, the political opposition and

climate journalists as a 'symbolic' and cultural threat to Sweden, and what they perceive as Swedish. The nasty rhetoric and the conspiracy theories provoke hatred among followers, not simply anger. In addition, they demonise and dehumanise the outgroup. Political leaders' legitimation of more aggressive hate and violent actions by appealing to higher loyalties is complemented by a "denial of injury by framing violence as 'educational' and denial of the victim through dehumanisation or by framing violence as 'just retribution'" (Wahlström et al., 2021, p. 3307). Nasty politics with denigrating and deprecating rhetoric is a powerful tactic of particularly populist politicians, often with dark triad psychopathological personality traits (Visser et al., 2017; Nai & Maier, 2018, 2024; Nai & Martínez i Coma, 2019; Samuels, 2023), to persuade followers to expanding and aggravating nasty rhetoric and violent actions to silence the opponents (Anastasio et al., 2021; Valcore et al., 2023; Zeitzoff, 2023).

Deprecation, i.e. insults and accusations to make claims about action, may be a precursor to more targeted violent rhetoric and action, and act as a provocation and incitement to addressees and bystanders as much as emotional sentiments that psychologically wound the targets of a speech, text, picture or video. As for violence, "speech can and does inspire crime" (Cohen-Almagor et al., 2018, p. 38; Schweppe & Perry, 2021). As mentioned by Valcore et al. (2023, p. 251), "deprecation is a perlocutionary message and permission to hate not because of some characteristic of the hated other, but for what has presumably been done by the hated other to the safe, clean, Arcadian, white world the speaker cherishes".

8.4.1.2 Why followers follow

Nasty rhetoric is partly used to manipulate ingroup people to follow suit and expand the use of nasty rhetoric. It is outside the scope of this study to analyse the motives of followers in nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics empirically. My review of recent research in sociology, social psychology, psychology, psychiatry and neurobiology, taken together, suggests that perpetration of hate speech and hate crime by individuals and groups towards outgroups can only be explained by addressing it as a socially mediated phenomena related to culture and ideology, collectively habitualising nasty rhetoric, as well as a phenomenon caused by psychological and neurobiological factors (see section 2.2.4).

Different persuasive strategies work on different personalities (Hirsh et al., 2012). While right-wing populism can be associated with different dark personality traits (Galais & Rico, 2021; Pruysers, 2021; Nai et al., 2023; Isom & Hubbard, 2025; Hofstetter & Filsinger, 2024; Vargiu et al., 2024), these studies give no convergent results on relationships between personality traits in different cultures and governance systems, why it is impossible to extrapolate to the Swedish

context. But overall, these findings highlight the political relevance of cultural and individual differences rooted in personality traits (Blais et al., 2021).

Research on hate speech and hate crime in sociology and social psychology suggests that production and propagation of hate messages on social media most often are *not* (i) individual acts, (ii) uncorrelated, or (iii) disorganised, but part of various social processes and systems (Walther, 2025). Obvious examples in the case of Swedish climate politics are the online and offline attacks on members of XR orchestrated by SD and particularly AfS. When legitimised by 'evil' political leaders, the darkness of denigration and deprecation seep into the mainstream and become *habitually collectivised*, i.e. normalised, and the opportunity to participate in a collective that allows people to feel good about themselves by being superior to others can be almost too good to resist (Cheng et al. (2017). Being exposed to hate speech not targeting yourself, such as members of the anti-climate ingroup, reduces people's ability to recognise the offensive character of such language (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). In short, the individual becomes desensitised, normalises hate speech, and transforms it into resentment, increasing prejudice and violence towards the subjects of hate (Soral et al., 2018; Szanto, 2018).

While personality traits, related to neuroanatomy and neurotransmission of biochemical agents in the expression of hate speech and hate crime affects affective dysregulation of individuals, ascription to a bias ideology has an impact on social cognition and social bonding of perpetrators of hate speech and hate crime. What drives people to follow and expand hatred, threats and violence against the outgroups is a combination of sociocultural processes and ideology and psychopathological and neurobiological factors (Dunbar, 2022a, 2022b). The former factors influence social cognition and sociocultural ties of perpetrators, while the latter affects affective regulation in individuals. Ideologically, Dellagiacoma et al. (2024) has found that people adhering to right-wing authoritarianism are more likely to produce online hate than people with a more social liberal orientation. Based on these insights, Dunbar (2022a) describes four archetypes of followers in hate and violence (Figure 6).

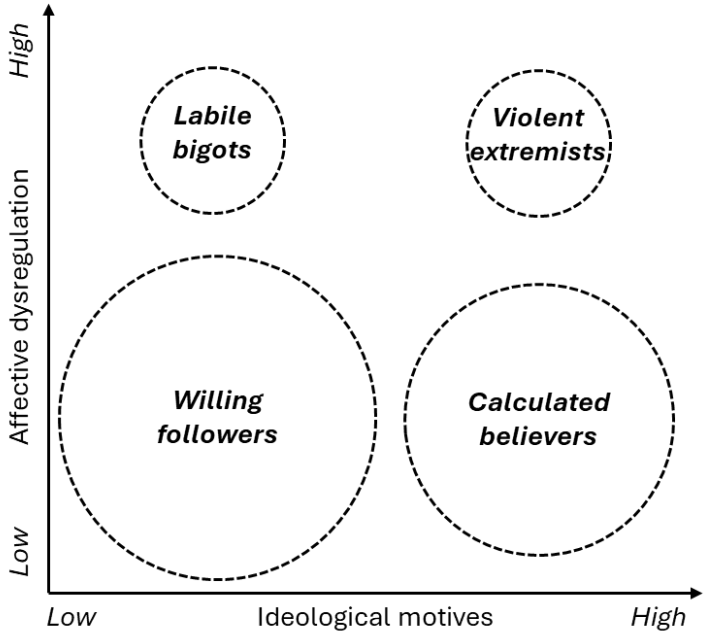

Figure 6. Archetypes of followers in hate crime. Based on Dunbar (2022a, 2022b).

Analyses of these factors for people committing hate crimes in the US show, as indicated in figure 6, that half of the crimes were committed by willing followers, who are not driven by ideological or pathological concerns (Dunbar, 2022a). One third were carried out by calculated believers. In both groups, it was about well-thought-out attacks by repeat offenders. Crimes committed by volatile, narrow-minded or violent extremists accounted for just under a tenth each. About half of all people who spread hate and threats on social media do so for social gratification, because (a) it is fun and entertaining to share the fun of degrading other people, (b) get attention and admiration for maintaining social support, and (c) get social approval to fit into a context (cf. Walther, 2025). The first two categories included more people that had prior hate activity. All groups used verbal hate, while particularly violent extremists used violent infraction.

The studies were conducted in the US. There are no similar studies in Sweden, but since the World War II, Sweden has taken strong sociocultural influences from the US. If the same distribution of offenders' ideological, sociocultural and psychopathological status applies in Sweden as in the US, it seems to be largely lost individuals in search of community in our hyper-individualistic society who hate and threaten other people. Sweden is often seen as a collectivist country, but with the advent of neoliberalism, Sweden has turned into a country with the world's most individualistic people according to the *World Values Survey*.[167] Many lack a community. And

[167] https://www.iffs.se/en/world-values-survey/

they lack empathy for people who are portrayed by populist radical right and right-wing leaders as their as 'enemies'.

In all, we are dealing with a phenomenon that can be described as *a weird kind of sport*. A sport that does not require any training or special ability. A sport with lots of cheering spectators who applaud the players' efforts with likes, hearts, shares, platform links and new fans. A sport where many of the fans also join the players on the field.

8.4.2 Nasty rhetoric as a swarm of instants

The empirical results give evidence that nasty rhetoric is not empty words. The political sentiments in nasty rhetoric appeal to emotions, aiming at persuading ingroup people to join the weird kind of sport of hating 'enemies of the nation', and at dehumanising and hurting outgroup people emotionally, psychologically, socially and eventually physically, economically or through legal avenues. Nasty rhetoric does something to people being hit.

No matter if the offender aims to emotionally hurt the target or use nasty rhetoric to socially fit in, each insult, accusation, intimidation or incitement can be considered an *emotional instant* to the victim. Even if each case comes into being after a process of thinking and preparation from the sender, sometimes carefully elaborated for timing to set the stage in a political debate, it appears suddenly to the victim. To Bachelard (1934), every instant is suspended between two voids. An instant will always die, making every moment unique, with no history or future (Helin, 2023). Victims of nasty rhetoric, reacting with fear, angst or anger (Lazarus, 1991; Cowan & Hodge, 2022; Renström et al., 2023), would wish that an accusation or incitement has no future or history – that it would die. But they keep coming, in new shapes, in new forms, from new offenders, sometimes asynchronously (Lee-Won et al., 2019), sometimes in a coordinated manner as *networked harassment* (Marwick, 2021). Not in a continuous flow in a horizontal temporality, but haphazardly as new instants in a vertical temporality. Each time, the victim hopes that the instant dies, but each new instant from multiple sources adds to a s*warm of instants* with no clear beginning and end, magnifying the effects on the victims in terms of emotional, behavioural and relational harm (cf. Lee-Won et al., 2019). The victim becomes lost in the void with contradictory feelings – afraid, anxious and angry – not knowing when hatred and threats will end and life go back to normal.

8.4.3 Nasty rhetoric as a traffic cone

Nasty rhetoric appears to victims as a *swarm of instants* in a vertical temporality, leading to contradictory feelings and different behaviours. The different behaviours used by victims to cope

with hate speech and hate crime – flight or fight – also makes me think metaphorically of nasty rhetoric as *a traffic cone*. The traffic cone is illustrative since it is normally used to block traffic in the roads, and climate activists' use of roadblocks is what ignited the escalation of leading politicians' nasty rhetoric against advocates of strong climate policy. While some victims flight, hide under the wide end and turn silent, others fight and use it as a megaphone to speak louder to mobilise followers and backfire on the perpetrators of nasty rhetoric.

8.4.4 Nasty rhetoric as newspeak

Language, but also images and gestures, invoking emotions are central in nasty rhetoric. In his analysis of Nazi Germany, German literature professor Victor Klemperer (2002, p. 15) opined that "words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all". The German American philosopher Hannah Arendt referred to the seemingly innocent words as the *banality of evil* (Arendt, 1971).

The culture war of the Tidö parties aims at shaping a new hegemonic discourse on political governance, from a liberal democratic rule-based discourse to an authoritarian discourse based on the right of the strongest. It seems that any sociocultural and political identity that displeases the Tidö parties, SD in particular, may come to be categorised as grossly criminal. We have recently seen this in the US, where FBI's proposal on acts that are to be seen as domestic terrorism include all identities, thoughts and actions that may displease the Trump administration. SD holds tangible and formal powers in Sweden and, can with short notice turn activists into saboteurs and terrorists by some pen strokes in the anti-sabotage and anti-terrorist laws, while activists have not changed their actions.

Because of this, proponents of liberal and deliberative democracy need to be aware of the changes in language, discourse and modes of communication that are taking place in the ongoing culture war (cf. Mouffe, 2013). The means of political communication and rhetoric as we know it in Sweden have been associated with the hegemony of liberal democracy for decades. SD, with good help from the Tidö government, has joined a populist radical right culture war to destroy the hegemony of the rule-based, liberal democratic discourse and rhetoric, and replace it with autocracy including authoritarian discourse and rhetoric. Some would even call it fascist discourse and fascist rhetoric (Gardell, 2015). The nasty politics of the Tidö parties affect the norms and language used in society and politics, including norms for social behaviour and political governance and communication.

Democrats need to identify manipulative and hate-filled attitudes and behaviours today in their context and understand that the context is in motion. Nasty politics with its emotional disciplining through manipulation, hatred and threats does not take place in a stable liberal democracy, but in a liberal democracy undergoing a change towards autocracy where the language of hidden discipline and emotional governance is decisive. As Klemperer described the situation in Nazi Germany, today's right-wing populists use many words and concepts that are difficult to criticise legitimately, but they have got a new meaning. Language is impoverished in a way that George Orwell describes in his novel *1984* (Orwell, 1949), making it more difficult for humans to understand what is happening. Through the culture war, an Orwellian *newspeak* is created, designed to reduce the individual's ability to think critically and obey.

With the Tidö agreement, SD has gained a 'democratic' platform for its culture war. It may have been that PM Kristersson really believed that he could rein in SD and their harmful polarisation by an including strategy (cf. Somer et al., 2021). He claimed that SD is "a party like others" and formed a coalition with them. This gave SD a veneer of democratic legitimacy – a gift that Kristersson cannot take back. And as a result, he and the rest of the Tidö government are pursuing the same anti-liberal governance and policies themselves, including manipulating language, thus actively contributing to autocratisation of Sweden.

To resist anti-democratic attitudes and behaviours in today's society, democrats must, as Jacques Lacan (2002) pointed out, take back language and further develop its meaning. A position that still applies today. It is time to ask critical questions and take back the language before right-wing populists wrench it out of our hands and transformed what is legal and legitimate in a liberal democracy into something criminal and illegitimate, and vice versa, transform what used to be illegitimate and illegal into something legal and legitimate.

8.4.5 Nasty rhetoric choking democracy

As described and explained, nasty rhetoric leads good scientists and journalists, but also civil servants in state agencies and even entire state agencies to silence to cope with mental illness and avoid being physically, economically or legally harmed. The silencing of scientists who change subject areas or withdraw from public debates reduces the creation as well as inflow of important knowledge to free formation of opinion, public policy deliberations and public scrutiny of policymakers' accountability.

The silencing of journalists who stop reporting on climate change or change job, further restricts the information flow that help people form opinions and scrutinise politicians in power. The

silencing of climate activists, which is also done via state repression with fines and prison, Climate activists are, like journalists, messengers of climate science.

Restricting the flow of scientific and other fact-based and relevant knowledge and information, communicated by scientists, state agencies or independent media, exchanging it with deepfake conforming the Only Truth, may invoke knowledge resistance. This silencing harm of nasty rhetoric can be described as the *choking of democracy*. Like a noose around the neck of the 'enemy', it slowly shuts off the flow of oxygen and blood to the brain, reducing the epistemic quality of deliberation and citizens empowered inclusion in debates and decisions that affect them. It harms free formation of opinion, collective agenda-setting and public deliberation.

8.4.6 Nasty rhetoric as the enclosure of the commons

Hard repression of climate activists is not only a way to silence them, but to get rid of people from society, deny citizenship or employment. This is an attack on civil society and the civic space that goes hand in hand with the government's cuts of state financial support to civil society organisations and civic education. Nasty rhetoric squeezes the civic (and public) space. Civil society organisations, including the climate justice movement, provide fora and spaces where people can gather, learn, discuss, form opinion and develop new policy solutions. The squeezing of civic space for free and informed formation of opinion and engaged deliberation reduces the possibilities for civil society organisations and concerned people to critically learn about climate change and other important policy issues and take part in policy debates.

Squeezing of the civic space reminds me of the strategy used to socially and economically oppress and exploit women in the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the witch hunts in Europe. As analysed by Federici (2004), the privatisation of land in Europe during the early stages of capitalism in the 16th and 17th centuries negatively affected many people, not least women. Commons such as parks, meadows and woodlands were often gathering places for small farmers and women, where in addition to herding animals and picking plants and berries, they gathered for collective decision-making and cooperation that created solidarity and community. The commons also fulfilled an important social function for women as a space for people to meet, share news, give and receive advice and more, without control from men.

With the social and economic restructuring of society at the advent of capitalism, the commons were enclosed – privatised and fenced. This made it difficult for women, especially younger and older people, to move around in society and earn their own money (Federici, 2004). Women were divided into different groups based on a sexual contract, in which their occupation was hidden; mothers, wives, daughters and widows, but also unmarried women. Married women were the

private property of men. At the same time, unmarried women were transformed from being the ones with access to the commons, with an opportunity to make a living from the sale of plants, berries, mushrooms, etc., to becoming a common asset, not least sexually. Prostitution increased. Women's task was to produce and reproduce labour. Women who retained the knowledge what life close to nature provided were often regarded as witches and became the subject of the witch hunts and witch trials that followed the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Kramer, 1486), which defined witchcraft as heresy.

In all, the use of nasty rhetoric to squeeze the civic space is like the enclosure of the commons, shutting people out from spaces where they can talk and develop new ideas without control from superiors, while climate justice activists, fighting for the right of nature, are like the witches hunted and put on trial as heretics on loose grounds.

9. Conclusions

Previous research indicates that hate speech is used systematically by political leaders as a tactic besides other tools to radically change and demount Swedish climate politics and governance (von Malmborg, 2024a). In political science, the phenomenon when political leaders' strategically and systematically use of hate speech and other hateful and threatening acts to demonise, delegitimise and dehumanise political opponents to scare them silent is analytically referred to as nasty rhetoric.

So far, research on nasty rhetoric has focussed on hate speech etcetera between partisans. Previous studies on Swedish climate politics indicate that hate speech is used to silence climate scientists, climate justice activists and climate journalists separately, but there are no studies of the systematic use of nasty rhetoric as a whole. This calls for systematic and critical research on nasty rhetoric as a phenomenon in Swedish climate politics.

Using Swedish climate politics as a case study, where a quartet of liberal–conservative and ethnonationalist parties have initiated a paradigmatic change of climate politics as part of a culture war to replace a liberal political discourse with an conservative ethnonationalist discourse, this report set out explore and explain the nature of nasty rhetoric. Why, how and by who is it used? What are the consequences for people and society – the harms and victims of nasty rhetoric? What does crime victim discourse look like? The aim is to raise problems, draw attention to, and provoke discussions about the use, harms and nature of nasty rhetoric, i.e. systematic and strategic use of hate speech and hate crime for political purposes.

9.1 Use of nasty rhetoric

It is concluded that Tidö parties and their supporters, in a fascist manner, use nasty rhetoric to silence climate scientists, climate activists, climate journalists but also civil servants and other people engaged in climate change and climate policy, being afraid of the consequences of what climate scientists describe as a climate change emergency. Professionals and other people engaged in climate policy are perceived of as schismatics and heretics in a populist radical right culture war, and they must be ostracised and excommunicated from society, or at least the political debates. Non-violent climate justice activists are pictured as "a threat to democracy", "totalitarian forces" or simply "saboteurs" and "terrorists" to be "sent to prison" and "executed". Climate justice activists are also subject to increasingly hard state repression when their actions are considered as sabotage or even terrorism by leading politicians and district attorneys, leading to more court cases with potential imprisonment if convicted. Climate scientists are accused of

producing biased opinions when they provide knowledge that contradicts the will of the Tidö parties. Thus, they are accused of being "irrelevant". Climate journalists are attacked because they write and report about climate change and climate policy based on scientific inquiry, not giving 'equal' space to climate sceptics. Nasty rhetoric targeting women often include misogynist hate speech. In addition, the message effect of nasty rhetoric has made executives in public authorities and media houses afraid and reorganise to get rid of employees considered as 'activists', a word which meaning is changing from something positive to something criminal in the culture war.

Tidö politicians, in league with libertarian and ethnonationalist thinktanks, are also using nasty rhetoric to mobilise followers in their culture war. They manipulate the public with fictive disaster narratives and symbolic threats that ambitious climate policy threatens the 'good' peoples' petro-masculine worldviews, leading to economic distress and men losing societal status and identity. They use denigrating and dehumanising language to convince the ingroups that pro-climate advocates are villains, criminals that must be punished for their alleged crimes. This is similar to Tidö rhetoric in migration policy, criminal policy and foreign affairs policy – that immigrants, particularly Muslims who are generally referred to as Islamists, are the root cause of problems facing Sweden and 'Swedish values'.

Multidisciplinary research shows that what drives people to follow and expand hate speech and violence against the outgroup is a combination of sociocultural processes and ideology, and psychopathological and neurobiological factors. The former factors influence social cognition and sociocultural ties of perpetrators, while the latter affects affective regulation in individuals. Ideologically, people adhering to right-wing authoritarianism are more likely to produce online hate than people with a more social liberal orientation. Sociocultural similarities between Sweden and the US, with high degrees of individualism, indicate that half of the followers in nasty rhetoric could be willing followers, not driven by ideological or pathological concerns. One third could be calculated believers. In both groups, it was about well-thought-out attacks by repeat offenders. Only ten per cent each of the followers could be volatile, narrow-minded or violent extremists. About half of all people who join in nasty rhetoric on social media seem to do so for social gratification. They do it for fun, to get attention and to get social approval to fit into a context. In all, it seems to be largely lost individuals in search of community in our hyper-individualistic society who hate and threaten other people.

The targets of nasty rhetoric, pro-climate advocates and climate journalists, are also using uncivil language but of a less aggressive form – only insults and accusations. This is done in a more traditional kind of political rhetoric, to augment their argumentation targeting the government

and individual ministers. Pro-climate advocates accuse the Tidö government and ministers, mainly the PM, the climate minister and the energy minister, of lying and being puppets to SD. With the eye of a child, they want to show that the PM and climate minister are "naked emperors" – that the Tidö parties lack credible political reforms and visions of building a climate neutral society. Referring to real threats, they instigate anger and emancipation and rally more supporters to their ingroup, and a will to change, not silence, their opponents and Tidö supporters. Thus, their uncivil language cannot be considered nasty rhetoric.

9.2 Harms of nasty rhetoric

It is concluded that nasty rhetoric harms people in different ways on different levels, from the individual person being targeted and victimised, to group level and sociopolitical level, with negative consequences for liberal democracy. Three main groups of victims are identified: climate scientists, climate activists and climate journalist. Two subgroups are also identified: scientists acting as climate activists, and civil servants worrying about climate change and joining climate activism. They are all targeted by nasty rhetoric for their pro-climate stance and critique of the governments climate policy, or because they are reporting about it in media. In addition, people in general are targeted by an intentional message effect aimed at scaring people from participating in a public and democratic debate on climate policy, to refrain from be engaged, 'activistic' and expressing opinions not in line with the Tidö policies. If people obey in advance, they will not the subject to nasty rhetoric in person.

In all, people are harmed emotionally, cognitively, behaviourally and normatively, but also economically and more rarely physically by nasty rhetoric. There are similarities but also differences in harms to different groups of individual victims, depending on their occupational role related to climate change.

Climate scientists and climate journalists, but also civil servants, are targeted as individuals for what they do professionally or in their spare time but used against them as professionals, for being climate scientists and climate journalists or for being engaged in climate policy. Beyond insults and accusations, they report sexual harassment, intimidations and threats of losing their jobs, of being repositioned at work, of physical violence, and of death threats. As victims, they react with fear and anxiety of violent crime, and a perceived risk of being followed or chased. This leads to feelings of personal insecurity, angst, exhaustion, and sometimes anger. Some scientists and journalists also come to doubt themselves and their professional role. To cope with

mental stress, both scientists and journalists withdraw from the public debate or changing their research area or changing job. Many self-censor and turn silent, as intended by Tidö leaders.

In comparison, climate activists and scientist activists are targeted with hate speech for their political opinions and their actions outside their professional occupations. As victims of hate speech, they are mainly targeted as a group, less so as individuals. Activists known by name to the public after legal processes become individual targets of hate speech. Victimised as a group, activists spur each other to learn individually and collectively to ignore insults, accusations, intimidations and incitements. They seem to undergo a process of desensitisation, becoming less sensitive to hate speech in person. They also claim that they are more afraid and anxious about the climate emergency itself and get angry that politicians and business leaders are not acting appropriately fast and ambitious given the severe situation.

Climate activists are also harmed from hard repression like strategic lawsuits following acts of civil disobedience. Tidö politicians criminalise several democratic and human rights, such as the right to demonstrate, and accuse activists of increasingly severe crimes, such as sabotage and terrorism. State attorneys are following suit and continue to press charges in court. The more severe crimes activists are accused of, the broader the repertoire of instruments for crime prevention and repression for legal authorities. Beyond arrest, activists can be detained and held in custody prior to prosecution. Categorising climate actions as sabotage or terrorism further gives the police the right to preventive interception of people without concrete criminal suspicions, and a person can be charged of sabotage for just planning a climate action.

Climate activists targeted with hard repression experience surrealistic emotions, and mental and physical exhaustion, because they find it difficult to combine job, family, court trials and climate actions while the Earth is burning and flooding at the same time. Activists involved in court cases mention anxiety from not knowing when to go to court next time, if they will be sentenced and to what sentence. Compared to climate scientists and climate journalists, this group of activists is also referring to violations of human rights, being discriminated and humiliated by the state.

Some activists withdraw in response to nasty rhetoric, but some continue with actions of civil disobedience as resistance to the current regime. Thus, they are considered radicalising by leading Tidö politicians, leading a vicious circle and trench war manifesting the pernicious polarisation initiated by the Tidö parties.

A recurrent theme of people harmed by nasty rhetoric is the reference to loss of dignity as human beings, a second-order harm to individual people. This is in line with scholars in philosophy of law claiming that attacking of peoples' dignity is the principal harm of hate speech. Expressions of nasty rhetoric are designed to dehumanise people in the outgroup, eroding the fundamentals of basic reputation that entitle the targets to be treated as equals in the ordinary operations of society. The loss of human dignity is closely related to the use of hyperbole in accusations and manipulation of language, where climate activism is made equal to sabotage or even terrorism by leading right-wing populists.

As for harms to liberal democracy, it is concluded that nasty rhetoric is a central tactic to polarise society and politics by emotional governance. The pluralism of liberal democracy is exchanged with a pernicious division between 'We', the 'good people' and the 'Others', the 'enemies to the state'. Nasty rhetoric serves to punish everyone with different identities or political opinions than the leaders holding the 'Only Truth' by dehumanisation and silencing. In the end, there shall be only one legitimate group in society – an autocratic and totalitarian society. This polarisation violates the victims' dignity and equality, their freedom of expression, the free formation of opinion and right to demonstration. The conscious manipulation of language, shifting the meaning of central concepts in a liberal democracy from something good to something bad, or something bad to something good, facilitates this process as populists appear to stand up for what the people value highly, but in fact denounce it. Vagueness is key for populists.

Victims of nasty rhetoric respond to the harms in different ways, which in turn harms liberal democracy in different ways. The silencing of scientists who change subject areas or withdraw from public debates to cope with mental illness and avoid being physically hurt reduces the creation as well as inflow of important knowledge to free formation of opinion, public policy deliberations and public scrutiny of policymakers' accountability. The silencing of civil servants and public authorities reduce the inflow of expert information necessary to develop policies. The silencing of journalists who stop reporting on climate change or change job, further restricts the information flow that help people form opinions and scrutinise politicians in power. The same holds true for climate activists being silenced.

The climate justice movement is also a space for people to gather, form opinion and develop new solutions. Squeezing the civic space by hard repression with fines and prison goes hand in hand with the government's cuts of state financial support to civil society organisations and civic education. It reduces the possibility for people in general to critically learn about climate change since activists are conveying the messages from climate science. In turn, this risk reducing free

formation of opinion, public deliberation and citizens ability to evaluate public policy, hold politicians accountable and make informed votes. In the end, the legitimacy of the democratic system as such risk being eroded.

In all, restricting the inflow of information and squeezing the civic space harm liberal democracy by making it difficult for the real people of Sweden to keep themselves informed about climate change and Tidö climate policy. Restricting the inflow of information undermines the free formation of opinion, peoples' scrutiny of power, collective agenda-setting and public deliberation by threatening the epistemic quality of deliberation and citizens' empowered inclusion in debates and decisions that affect them. Squeezing the civic space further undermines freedom of expression, free formation of opinion, collective agenda-setting and public deliberation, as well as freedom to demonstrate. There are fewer places to meet and protest. In turn, this all contributes to undermining the democratic processes by corrupting political discussions and citizens' mutual empathy and respect for people and politics.

Cabinet ministers and other leading Tidö politicians attacking scientists, civil servants, journalists, activists and other people for having wrong opinion is a clear sign that the Tidö government does not realise, or ignores, its responsibility to protect Sweden's fundamental rights and freedoms. When people are not allowed to express what they think, the spaces for protest are eroded, and informed and dignified political conversation are silenced by nasty rhetoric, liberal democracy is under attack. Sweden is turning autocratic.

9.3 Crime victim discourse

Public and media discussions on nasty rhetoric is mainly addressing harms to democracy, not harms to the people and organisations who are the primary targets of nasty rhetoric. The crime victim discourse on nasty rhetoric in climate politics is yet immature, which may have negative consequences for people harmed. Addressing the assumptions, expectations, attitudes, and ways of talking (and thinking) about crime victims, it affects rationales for punishment of perpetrators, equality before the law for victims, and other legal safeguards. The low maturity in this case can be attributed to different factors. Mainstream media seems to be afraid and anxious of being engaged, to be accused of 'activism'. The discourse is influenced by powerful perpetrators employing DARVO, blaming climate scientists, climate activists, civil servants and climate journalists for being the real criminals, threatening Swedish citizens way of living, and use this as an excuse to perform their (criminal) acts of nasty rhetoric. Most victims of nasty rhetoric do not meet the stereotypical norms of an 'ideal victim' and victims do not consider themselves as

victims. There is no crime victim movement related to nasty rhetoric voices of victims are silenced.

Activists, media, scientist in political science, sociology, psychology, criminology and victimology, and victim support workers all have a role to play for developing the crime victim discourse and reclaim victimhood. Based on this study, it is suggested that media should be better at describing what happens in society, to people and marginalised groups victimised by the state, with our democracy and human rights. Journalism should keep close to the converging scientific knowledge about radical right populism, autocratisation, hate speech, hate crime and nasty rhetoric. This study highlights the importance to address topics such as power and politics in (a) the contestation of space, transgression, and resistance, and (b) the way(s) in which crime is constructed and represented by the media, including DARVO and criminalisation of victims. Journalists and media should be critical of the system, and not just relate to the law, to truly serve its role as the third power – scrutinising those with political and economic power. In doing so, they should address that nasty rhetoric is part of a system of crimes in climate politics.

9.4 From climate change crime to democracy crime

Taking a systems approach to nasty rhetoric, it is concluded that nasty rhetoric includes potential hate crime and democracy crime, which are linked to climate change crime. The entering office of the Tidö government marks a two-fold shift in Swedish climate politics, substantially and process-wise. After decades of increasingly ambitious climate policy and reduced GHG emissions, several policies have been adopted that increase GHG emissions and undermine possibilities to meet the Swedish long-term climate target of net-zero emissions by 2045. In all, the substantial policies contribute to climate change crime as defined by ICJ.

Climate justice activists became activists in response to inappropriate action of governments and companies in dealing with climate change. They are potential victims using their agency to act. The same holds for climate scientists and climate journalists, providing and spreading more knowledge about climate change, its effects on different scales, how it can be mitigated, how societies can adapt to climate change events, and what leaders and societies do and do not to deal with climate change.

But instead of taking seriously the science-based critique and arguments of climate scientists and climate activists for a more ambitious climate policy, climate denying and right-wing populist leaders of the Tidö parties, neoliberal thinktanks and radical right media, initiate and expand campaigns of nasty rhetoric targeting pro-climate advocates and climate journalists. Climate

activists are also criminalised by the Tidö parties for using their liberal democratic and human rights. The aim is to eliminate them from influencing politics in what is a yet a liberal democracy but under transition. Acts of nasty rhetoric, including hate speech and hate crime, can be linked to the broad framework of democracy-threatening crime, including (i) hate crime, (ii) democracy crime, (iii) violent extremism, and (iv) influence crime. In all cases, the crimes are characterised by the offender's motive to damage democratic values, which is obvious for nasty rhetoric. To these categories shall be added a ban on SLAPPs, following EU's anti-SLAPP directive adopted in 2024.

The targeting of scientists, activists and journalists reflects well the strategic approach of SD and other Tidö parties in radically changing Swedish climate policy and governance. The target groups have important roles for developing strong climate policy and the functioning of a liberal democracy. By getting rid of these groups, the Tidö parties hope to be able to continue demounting Swedish climate policy and Swedish democracy.

Many of the acts of hate speech in Swedish climate politics analysed in this study are potentially criminal according to Swedish legislation, either as hate crime or democracy crime targeting real people. The perpetrators could be legally reported and investigated for crime. But for this to happen, those who are victimised by nasty rhetoric must see themselves as victims of nasty rhetoric. Except for the activist being dismissed, no case of hate speech or hate crime in Swedish climate politics have been reported to the police or filed in court. The discourse on victims and victimhood from nasty rhetoric in climate politics is currently not mature enough for this to happen.

9.5 Metaphors of nasty rhetoric

Interpreting the nature of nasty rhetoric with metaphors helps to make sense and produce an emotional image of why and how it is used, how victims are harmed and respond, and how it affects society, politics and democracy. Metaphors refer to symbolic expression that embodies a particular frame that guides individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label events and conditions around them. They involve the conjunctions of whole semantic domains in which a correspondence between terms or concepts can be deciphered from comparing with pre-existing attributes or constructed by creation of new meaning beyond previously existing similarities.

As claimed by Morgan (1986), all social science theories and models are metaphorical in their nature. Every metaphor is at its core normative because it promotes one point of view over another. Often metaphors are hard to get rid of and become a sort of prison of mind. Still by

seeing theories and models as metaphors, we become aware that one theory is not enough to describe reality. As analysed in this report, nasty rhetoric is a multidimensional and complex phenomenon that can be viewed from many different perspectives, angles and levels. Hence, it would be a failure to interpret it with only one metaphor, promoting one point of view. Consequently, I follow the advice of Morgan (1986, p. 1029) that a more "flexible use of metaphor[s] can help us engage and understand the multidimensional and paradoxical nature of organisational life", stretched to understanding the nature of humans, politics and society. In all, I propose seven different metaphors to describe the nature of nasty rhetoric from the perspectives of the perpetrators, people as victims, and democracy as a victim. These are not independent discourses but should be understood as direct embodiments of political behaviour as they crystalise the meaning of different behaviours.

From the perspective of users, the perpetrators, nasty rhetoric can be described as a weird kind of sport. A sport that does not require any training or special ability. A sport with lots of cheering spectators who applaud the players' efforts with likes, hearts, shares, platform links and new fans. A sport where many of the fans also join the players on the field.

In this sport, political leaders and front-row warriors use nasty rhetoric with hate speech and more aggressive forms of repression as a double-edged sword, to cut emotional wounds in the outgroup 'enemies', while at the same time sabring open the bottle of potential ingroup supporters and followers to intensify and expand the hate towards the outgroup.

Nasty rhetoric is also used by political leaders in the creation of Orwellian newspeak. While silencing critics and mobilising followers, nasty rhetoric manipulates ideologically and reinterprets in a propagandistic way the meaning of words and concepts central to a liberal democracy, e.g. democracy, accountability, legitimacy, justice, freedom, learning, engagement, activism but also terrorism and sabotage.

To the victims, each act of nasty rhetoric appears suddenly out of nowhere as an emotional instant, suspended between two voids. An instant will always die, making every moment unique, with no history or future. Victims of nasty rhetoric, reacting with fear, angst or anger would wish that an accusation or incitement has no future or history – that it would die. But they keep coming as new instants, adding to a swarm of instants with no clear beginning and end, magnifying the effects on the victims not knowing when hatred and threats will end and life go back to normal.

Victims respond behaviourally in different ways depending on how they were harmed emotionally. But they all use a traffic cone. While some victims flight, hide under the wide end of the traffic cone and turn silent, others fight and use it as a megaphone to speak louder to mobilise followers and backfire on the perpetrators of nasty rhetoric.

Besides polarising society and politics, nasty rhetoric aims to silence the outgroup, restricting the flow of scientific and other fact-based and relevant knowledge and information, communicated by scientists, state agencies or independent media. More aggressive acts of nasty rhetoric shrink the civic space. Liberal democracy is harmed in both ways.

By silencing pro-climate advocates, nasty rhetoric is choking democracy. Like a noose around the neck of the 'enemy', it slowly shuts off the flow of oxygen and blood to the brain, reducing the epistemic quality of deliberation and citizens' empowered inclusion in debates and decisions that affect them. It harms free formation of opinion, collective agenda-setting and public deliberation.

By squeezing the civic space, nasty rhetoric works like the enclosure of the commons in the 16th and 17th centuries, shutting people out from common spaces where they could talk and develop new ideas without control from superiors. Climate justice activists, fighting for the right of nature, are treated like the witches hunted and put on trial as heretics for knowing how to live in harmony with nature.

9.6 Core elements of nasty politics

Section 2.2 introduced nasty politics as an analytical concept, describing the phenomenon when politicians systematically and strategically use a set of tactics including soft and hard repression to entrench polarisation between 'the people' and 'the Others' to denigrate, delegitimise, dehumanise and psychologically, physically, economically or legally hurt the 'the Others' to make them silent in public debates. Zeitzoff (2023) outlines and describes different aspects of nasty politics, but he fails to identify and explain the core elements of nasty politics, and thus to really define the nature of the phenomenon. Adding to previous analyses of nasty politics, this study shows how it is closely related to emotional governance used by radical right populists in a culture war on the pluralist 'left-liberal hegemony' that have allegedly destroyed society, the nation. This culture war aims at gaining legitimacy and hegemony for the 'Only Truth'. Nasty rhetoric is not only used to silence people, but also to make it easier to reach the overarching political aims and goals. A systematic meta-analysis of the results identifies five core elements of nasty politics (Figure 7).

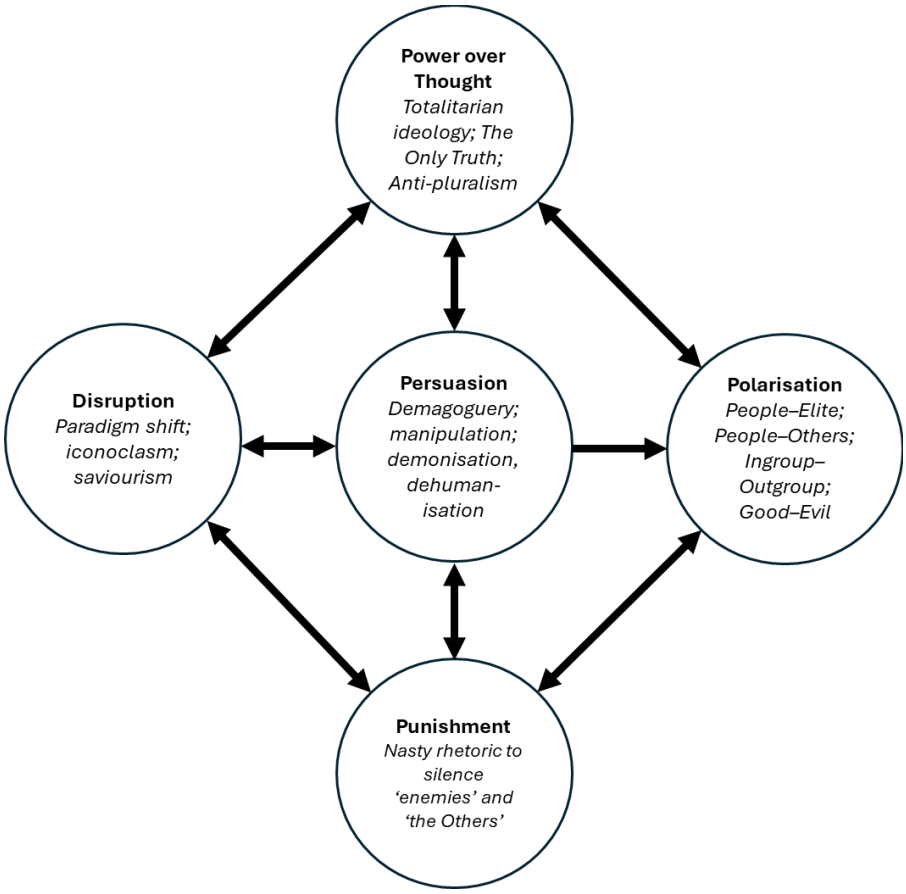

Figure 7. Core elements of populist radical right nasty politics

Radical right populism is based on a substantive, unitary and non-pluralist vision of society's public interest, defined as the 'Only Truth', that one or more self-appointed leaders or ideologists are the only rightful interpreters of. conception of the public interest which focuses on content. While sometimes talking the language of the 'people', populists are not responsive to popular will. They act on their own will to form peoples' emotions and understandings of themselves and the popular will. The aim is to shape the people and control the culture, to gain *Power over Thought* (cf. Bengtsson & Nathansson, 2018; Lamour, 2022).

A key strategy of nasty politics with nasty rhetoric aimed at by the populist radical right is *dualistic polarisation* (Zeitzoff, 2023). Adhering to totalitarianism and autocracy, they despise the pluralism of liberal democracy. Reducing the number of views and antagonists in politics to two makes it easier for them to gain power over thought.

Populism as political discourse is very much about polarising emotional storytelling and rhetoric of charismatic leaders, demagogues. The storytelling is based on conspiracy theories and nasty rhetoric to spin a good yarn containing heroes, villains and plotlines promising change to take

Power over Thought. They act on their own will and *persuade* their audience by charismatic manipulation to identify with them, constructing a putative will of the 'people'.

Populists use nasty rhetoric to *punish* the 'enemies' to the nation. Hate speech and hard state repression are used to delegitimise, dehumanise and silence people who are deemed not to fit in. This can be seen as iconoclasm – a revolutionary presentation whose departure from worldly norms is evidence of divine patronage (Weber, 1946). Populists attack and destroy the alleged enemy and symbolic institutions of pluralistic liberal democracy, e.g. independent science, independent media and civil society, to silence them, to erase their ability to express themselves, contribute to and take part in pluralistic and free-spirited discourse, or even to erasing them from history.

The persuasive and emotional polarisation of politics and society into Us vs. Them, followed by punishment of 'the Others', is a strategy of radical right populists to enforce a transformational change – a disruption of *status quo* or paradigm shift – making away with the left-liberal hegemony that they believe has damaged society. *Disruption* is a strategy to gain hegemony and Power over Thought. When SD gained powers in Sweden in 2022, they announced rapid paradigm shift in eight policy areas: climate and energy, criminality, economic growth and household economy, education, migration and integration, and public health.

9.7 Final reflections

Nasty rhetoric is an analytical concept used in political science. To understand and explain it, one must draw from many other academic disciplines. Analysing nasty rhetoric from a social systems perspective, aiming to understand it from the perspectives of offenders as well as victims, and perspectives of society and liberal democracy, I use a whole set of theories and theoretical frameworks to guide my analysis and draw conclusions. Notwithstanding the limitation of a case study for generalisation on nasty rhetoric and emotional governance in general, the report structures a very large amount of dispersed scholarly literature on emotional governance and disciplining, emotion sociology, nasty rhetoric, hate speech and hate crime, criminology, victimology and democracy.

Compared to previous research on nasty rhetoric, this study provides new knowledge about victims of nasty rhetoric other than politicians, thus contributing to theory of nasty politics and political rhetoric. Doing so, I draw particularly on theories of criminology and victimology. The results show the importance of listening to the victims' voices, to avoid lumping victims together in public and policy debates on climate policy, as well as debates on how to curb hate speech and

hate crime. Such knowledge is also important for how to reciprocate and take care of victims. Different groups of victims are victimised differently to similar hate speech and hate crime. Their resilience differs. The report addresses not only the characteristics of the victim and the victim–offender relationship, but also victims' sense of threat and subsequent coping, and society's interests and values at the time of victimisation (cf. Bosma et al., 2018). In addition, the report advances a more theoretically grounded analysis of nasty rhetoric by explicating the liberal democratic goods it harms.

Adding not only cultural but also feminist criminology to the analysis of victims of nasty rhetoric in climate politics provides novel perspectives and contributes to theory of green criminology and climate change criminology and related victimology. The study shows the interlinkages between victims of climate change crime and victims of hate crime and democracy crime. Victims of climate change crime who use their agency to protest become victimised for their protesting, both with soft and hard repression. Such multiple victimisation is rather unusual and understudied.

Critical and emotional writing about emotional governance and nasty rhetoric, explaining its harms to people, society and democracy as felt and told by the people harmed, is an important step to mobilise supporters for its ending. But it must be followed with talk and action to shape a durable discourse that questions nasty rhetoric. It would be possible. Four out of five Swedes and three out of four voters for parties in the Tidö government are critical to Tidö climate policy and nine out of ten believe that liberal democracy is the best governance model (von Malmborg, 2024a). Talking about climate politics and climate change crime, we must also talk about threats to liberal democracy with dignified dialogue based on the good argument. People with informal and formal power must collaborate and take responsibility and table concrete proposals for how to combat nasty rhetoric and its harms.

This may provide a basis for more expedient policy and societal responses – albeit considering that impacts of policies to restrict nasty rhetoric on democracy, in turn, must always be analysed critically (Howard, 2019; Tenove, 2020). We must be aware of the counter argument that banning nasty rhetoric restricts freedom of speech. But freedom of speech must not be understood as freedom to say or communicate whatever you want. Recalling Mill's definition of liberal freedom, you can do what you want only if the act does not hurt anyone else. Nasty rhetoric aims at restricting the freedom of speech of others, to make them silent.

As for future research, effects of nasty rhetoric on climate scientists, climate journalists and climate activists should be studied in different geographies and jurisdictions and related to

gender. Future research should also analyse and compare victims of nasty rhetoric in other related policy domains, e.g. climate policy and migration policy, and the intersections between racist or religious hate crime and climate change hate crime, as indicated in this study by the links between the climate justice movement and the pro-Palestine movement. Given the culture-oriented focus of many populist radical right parties, including an increasing focus on religion, more research is needed on the cultural and religious roots of nasty rhetoric in climate politics and other policy areas.

Future research should also analyse if and how nasty rhetoric can be restricted by the judicial system in place, by educational and other preventative measures, or if new policies and legislation are needed, either as hate crime or democracy crime or targeting the tech platforms that make widespread nasty rhetoric possible. In doing so, research should consider that the objectives of invoking victimhood discursively may lie in different interpretations of achieving justice for victims (Schwöbel-Patel, 2018). Seeing justice done for the harm caused may lie in (i) psychological benefits of overcoming trauma, (ii) material benefits of receiving reparations, (iii) gaining information to understand responsibility, or (iv) broader societal functions of advancing efforts of post-conflict transformation. Research should also consider how the victim narrative is shaped. Speaking on behalf of victims has symbolic rather than practical benefits, while speaking in sympathy with victims has more practical than symbolic benefits.

Annex A. Data sources

Type of source	Documents and audio-visual material analysed
Policy documents	- *The Tidö Agreement: An agreement for Sweden*, 14 October 2022; https://www.liberalerna.se/wp-content/uploads/tidoavtalet-overenskommelse-for-sverige-slutlig.pdf - *Tidö state finance bill for 2023, Prp.* 2022/2023:1, https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/def2026cac0b4ef7acf4afeb988326ed/budgetpropositionen-for-2023-hela-dokumentet-prop.2022231-.pdf - *Tidö government's Climate Action Plan*, 2023; https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/990c26a040184c46acc66f89af34437f/232405900webb.pdf - *Tidö government's* energy and climate action plan to the EU, 2024; https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/0b8182fb427d434caee89090457dab6f/sveriges-uppdaterade-nationella-energi--och-klimatplan-for-2021-2030.pdf - *Constitutional committee* scrutiny report on the government, 2023; https://data.riksdagen.se/fil/A7ADEA2E-FDB8-4136-9484-809FE4C4BD2B - Information from the *Riksdag* on the motion on non-confidence against climate minister Pourmokhtari, 17 January 2024; https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/aktuellt/aktuelltnotiser/2024/jan/9/omrostning-om-misstroendeforklaring-mot-romina_cmsb96e46b0-deff-43b2-a12f-6a9c7e9c1480sv/; https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/aktuellt/aktuelltnotiser/2024/jan/17/ingen-misstroendeforklaring-mot-klimat-och_cms402569eb-17b1-4da9-8b7a-1074371827aesv/ - Government bill 2024/25:155, *Stronger Constitutional Preparedness*; https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/f2279c1bacfe45ce8708eed4c3cbb1fb/starkt-konstitutionell-beredskap-prop.-.pdf
Political debates in the Riksdag	- Party leader debate, 16 November 2022; https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/partiledardebatt/eu-politisk-partiledardebatt_hac120221116pd/ - Interpellation debate on Sweden's climate target for the transport sector, 11 November 2022; https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/sveriges-klimatmal-for-transportsektorn_ha104/ - Interpellation debate on policies for climate change mitigations, 6 December 2022; https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/atgarder-for-att-na-klimatmalen_ha1039/ - Interpellation debate on the government's climate action plan, 26 January 2023; https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/klimathandlingsplanen_ha10112/ - Interpellation debate on negotiations on the climate action plan, 14 March 2023; https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/forhandlingen-om-sveriges-klimathandlingsplan_ha10224/ - Interpellation debate on green transition, 11 April 2023; https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/den-grona-omstallningen-_ha10280/ - Interpellation debate on measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 2022–2026, 2 June 2023; https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/atgarder-for-att-minska-vaxthusgasutslappen-under_ha10322/ - Interpellation debate on Sweden's national climate targets, 17 October 2023; https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/interpellationsdebatt/sveriges-nationella-klimatmal_hb1044/

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	- Statement on Instagram by Sweden's PM (@kristerssonulf), 4 October 2023. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cx_RMVuMawb/
	- Statement on X/Twitter by Jan Ericson (M) (@Ericson_ubbhult), 5 October 2023, https://riktpunkt.nu/2023/10/moderat-riksdagsledamot-terroristanklagar-klimataktivister/;
	- Statement on X/Twitter by Fredrik Kärrholm (M), (@FredrikKarrholm), 23 September 2023, https://twitter.com/FredrikKarrholm/status/1705600537448587714
	- Video on YouTube-channel of Riks, previously communication office of SD, 14 March 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlBy2uc6JuU&t=2s
	- Statement on X/Twitter by minister of civil defence Carl-Oskar Bohlin (M), (@CarlOskar), 4 April 2024, https://x.com/CarlOskar/status/1775974564738089126
	- Post on Facebook by Henrik Jönsson, libertarian influencer, 22 September 2024, https://www.facebook.com/share/p/T1ZT2edcMtcdnewi/
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Annex B. Data on uncivil rhetoric in Swedish climate politics

Table B1. Insults made by right-wing politicians and supporters

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
Party leader Jimmie Åkesson (SD)	Party leader debate in Swedish Riksdag	S, MP	"Your climate climate policy is emotional, not based on facts; It's all about the children."	Commenting previous governments' climate policy
Climate minister Romina Pourmokhtari (L)	Invitation to national climate meeting	Extinction rebellion, Fridays for Future, Greenpeace	The climate movement is "irrelevant"	The Tidö government promised to have a dialogue with business, public authorities, academia and civil society in preparing the CAP, but the climate movement and climate scientists were deliberatively discriminated and not invited.
PM Ulf Kristersson (M)	Press conference on CAP	S, MP	"Symbol politics is now replaced by things that have a real effect"	Commenting previous governments' climate policy
Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	Press conference on CAP	Journalists	"Quiz questions"	Response to journalists asking about short- and medium-term actions
Prime minister Kristersson (M), climate policy spokesperson Martin Kinnunen (SD)	Press conference on CAP	Climate scientists	Climate science is "just an opinion"	Response to critique of Swedish Climate Policy Council and climate scientists on the CAP
Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	Climate policy debate in Swedish Riksdag	S, C, MP, V	"You are strawmen, claiming that we abolish climate laws and targets"	Commenting allegations of the opposition about a leaked document from the Tidö parties' climate strategy investigator, published the day after the debate[#]

Table B1 (continued)**.** Insults made by right-wing politicians and supporters

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
Press secretary of climate minister	Personal X/Twitter account	Climate scientist, public service radio	Incredibly negative feature about climate policy on Swedish Radio today where 'environmental debater' N.N. got a lot of space	Commenting a in Swedish public service radio feature on the Tidö climate policy where a climate scientist presented his opinion
Nyheter Idag, Fria Tider (radical right online media)	News articles	Climate activists	"Leftish activists"; "muppets"	Commenting climate activist roadblocks
Timbro	Timbro online magazine *Smedjan*	Climate activists	"Climate alarmists"; "religious doomsday prophets"	Commenting climate activist roadblocks

[#] In his report to the government, presented 18 October 2023, Prof. Hassler suggested that Swedish climate targets should be reviewed and revised, which the opposition interpreted as abolishment. https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/0b09ab52d60b4f8f8212acc1b71fbbb8/sveriges-klimatstrategi---46-forslag-for-klimatomstallning-i-ljuset-av-fit-for-55.pdf

Table B2. Accusations made by right-wing politicians and supporters

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
Stockholm initiative (climate denying scientists)	Op-ed in newspaper	Established media	"Censoring the climate debate; climate alarmist propaganda centres."	Traditional media reporting on climate change
SD	Radical right media	Established media	"Left-liberal conspiracy"	Media reporting on climate change
Mattias Karlsson (SD), member of the Riksdag, lead ideologist of SD	Interview in Swedish Newspaper *Expressen*	UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres	"He lacks grounding in science when he says that humanity is headed for climate hell."	Climate speech by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres
Tobias Andersson (SD), member of the Riksdag, then legal policy spokes-person	Infiltration, humiliating videos on radical right social media	Climate activists	"Hippies estranged from the world"	Infiltration and confrontation at climate demonstration organised by Fridays for Future
Radical right journalist tied to AfS, SD and the Swedish white power movement	Radical right extremist media site Exakt24	Climate activists, particularly in Extinction Rebellion	"Climate extremists"	Campaign for the national elections in 2022
Martin Kinnunen (SD, climate policy spokesperson), Clara Aranda (SD, social policy spokesperson)	Interview in newspaper	Climate movement, MP and C	"Infantile rhetoric that scares children and young people to climate anxiety."	Campaign for the national elections in 2022
Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	Press release	Climate activists, Extinction Rebellion, Scientist Rebellion	Extinction Rebellion is a "security risk".	Pourmokhtari cancelled participation in the launch of an industry roadmap for fossil free competitiveness since one of the notified participants was a retired engineer and member of Scientist Rebellion
Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	Communication with journalists	Climate journalists	Long-term refusal to be interviewed by journalists, restricting and delegitimising journalists from doing their job to scrutinise the Tidö parties' climate policies.	Response to critique of the Tidö parties' climate policy

Table B2 (continued)**.** Accusations made by right-wing politicians and supporters

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
Prime minister Ulf Kristersson (M)	Instagram	Climate activists, Extinction Rebellion	Extinction Rebellion is "totalitarian" and "poses a threat to Swedish democratic political processes".	Members of Mother Rebellion sang at an open after work meeting organised by the government
Prime minister Ulf Kristersson (M)	Facebook	Climate activists, Extinction Rebellion, Mother Rebellion	They "pretend to care about the climate but destroy the opportunities for a constructive conversation about climate policy. It's really, really bad."	Follow-up on actions of civil disobediance
Fredrik Kärrholm (M) and Jan Ericson (M), members of the Riksdag	X/Twitter	Climate activists, Extinction Rebellion	"Terrorists"	Comment to accusations of prime minister Kristersson regarding Extinction Rebellion
Pontus A Garpvall (SD), legal policy spokesperson	Interview in *Aftonbladet*	Climate activists	"Terrorists"	Comment related to climate actions at airports
Svenska Dagbladet (independent conservative newspaper)	Editorial	MP	Represents "extreme environ-mentalism". Is "the political arm of the climate justice movement".	Commenting the Tidö government's CAP
Former gas supply coordinator at Swedish Energy Agency	Interview in *Fokus*	New gas supply coordinator at Swedish Energy Agency, privately active in Mother Rebellion	"She is a huge risk to national security and also to other countries"	Indignation over being fired from Swedish Energy Agency due to misconduct

Table B3. Intimidations made by right-wing politicians and supporters

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
Tobias Andersson (SD), chair of the Riksdag's industry committee, Johan Forsell (M), minister of migration	Debates in the Riksdag, interviews in newspapers	Climate activists performing roadblocks at demonstrations	Climate activists are "saboteurs" to be "charged with sabotage, not disobedience to law enforcement".	Response to climate activist roadblocks
Justice minister Gunnar Strömmer (M)	Interviews in newspapers, debates in the Riksdag	Climate activists performing roadblocks at demonstrations	"Climate activists should be sentenced to long periods in prison."	Response to climate activist roadblocks
Garpvall (SD), legal policy spokesperson	Interview in *Aftonbladet*	Climate activists	"Climate actions should be charged in courts as acts of terrorism"	Comment related to climate actions at airports
Martin Kinnunen (SD), climate policy spokesperson	Press conference on Swedish Climate Policy Council's annual report	Climate scientists, Swedish Climate Policy Council	"I will make sure your mandate is revised."	Response to critique of Swedish Climate Policy Counciland climate scientists on the Tidö parties's climate policy
Former gas supply coordinator at Swedish Energy Agency	Text messages	New gas supply coordinator at Swedish Energy Agency, privately in Mother Rebellion	"Do as I say, or you will be fired. I know people in the government."	Indignation over being fired from Swedish Energy Agency due to misconduct
Civil defence minister Carl-Oskar Bohlin (M)	X/Twitter	Climate activist engaged in Mother Rebellion	"Important that measures are taken to ensure that something like this never happens again"	Response to news articles on climate activist working at Swedish Energy Agency, after calling the Director General of the Agency
Minister of education and research Mats Persson (L)	Interview in public service television	Climate scientists	"Scientists' climate activism undermines public trust in science."	Comment on climate actions of Scientist Rebellion
Anonymous radical right climate deniers	E-mail	Climate journalists	"Damn you, I pay your salary and will make sure you're fired."	Critique towards public service reports on climate change
Björn Söder (SD), member of the Riksdag	Interview in *Dagens ETC*	Civil servants, including climate activists	"Civil servants illoyal to SD shall be fired"	Response to 261 civil servants in the Government Offices of Sweden

Table B4. Incitements made by right-wing politicians and supporters

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
SD-linked media profile engaged with radical right extremist Exakt24	X/Twitter	Climate activists, Återställ våtmarker (Eng. Restore wetlands)	"I am a little sceptical that the state should execute people. But when it comes to @vatmarker, I am willing to make an exception to my principles."	Commenting climate activist roadblocks, attacks on paintings at museums and attacks on tv shows
Populist radical right influencer, former member of the Riksdag for (S)	Instagram reel	MP	Video showing what represents a dead person wrapped in a black garbage bag, with a sign tied around the body: "I regret that I voted for the Green Party last election".[#]	Campaign for the national elections in 2022
Radical right journalist tied to AfS, SD and the Swedish white power movement	Radical right extremist media site Exakt24	Climate activists, particularly in Extinction Rebellion	Campaign with Nazi symbols and Nazi rhetoric to encourage radical right extremists, including members of the neo-Nazi NMR, to infiltrate and seek accommodation with activists in Extinction Rebellion.	Facilitation of hunting down members of Extinction Rebellion
Radical right journalist tied to AfS, SD and the Swedish white power movement	Telegram and radical right extremist media site Exakt24	Climate scientists, climate activists, climate journalists	Posting of photos, names, addresses, phone numbers and e-mail addresses.	Facilitation of hunting down enemies
Anonymous radical right extremists	Exakt24, Telegram	Climate journalist	"His mother is from Norway, have not examined her. But the daddy is an imported vote cattle from Chile. The Social Democrats picked up thousands of communists in the 70s to secure the election win."	Including family members in threat campaigns
Anonymous right-wing climate deniers	E-mail	Female climate journalists	"You will be raped!"	Critique towards established media reports on climate change

[#] https://www.expressen.se/tv/nyheter/jan-emanuels-likvideo-anvands-som-hot-mot-miljopartister/

Table B5. Insults made by left, social democrat and green politicians, climate scientists, journalists and the climate justice movement

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
Anna-Caren Sätherberg (S), climate policy spokesperson	Riksdag debate on climate policy, with focus on the CAP	Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	The CAP is a "napkin sketch and a broken promise".	Critique of the Tidö parties' CAP
Jytte Guteland (S) member of the Riksdag, former member of the European Parliament	Riksdag debate on climate policy, with focus on the CAP	Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	"The climate minister is rhetorically skilled and eager to get into debates but right now it is very obvious to the Swedish people, journalists and politicians in this chamber that the climate minister is standing in front of an empty shop window."	Critique of the Tidö parties' CAP
Greenpeace, Fridays for Future	Op-ed in newspaper, invitation to demonstration#	Tidö government	Demonstration outside the national "climate meeting" with "civil society organisations".‡	Response to not being invited to the government's national climate meeting
Climate scientists	Op-eds in newspapers	Tidö government	The government's climate meeting was a "joke", a "play for the galleries" and a "spectacle".	Response to not being invited to the government's national climate meeting
Tomas Ramberg, politics journalist at *Dagens Nyheter*	Commentary in newspaper	Industry and energy minister Ebba Busch (KD, the government	The lure of nuclear power is an erogenous zone to the government.t	Critique of minister Busch's claim that the reason for the government to provide state finance to new nuclear power is 'a law of physics'

https://www.greenpeace.org/sweden/pressmeddelanden/klimat/pressinbjudan-demonstration-utanfor-regeringens-klimatmote-16-juni/

‡ Quotation marks insinuate that the meeting was not a real climate meeting and that civil society organisations were not properly represented.

Table B6. Accusations made by left, social democrat and green politicians, climate scientists, journalists and the climate justice movement

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
Per Bolund (MP), former party leader	Party leader debate in the Riksdag	Prime minister Ulf Kristersson (M)	"Provoking naked liar"	Response to accusation of the prime minister that the S-MP government decided to decommission four nuclear power plants
Andrea Andersson Tay (V), member of the Riksdag	Climate policy debate in the Riksdag	Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	"You let climate policy cover the bubbling frustration over society's injustices."	Critique of Tidö parties' climate policy
Tony Haddou (V), member of the Riksdag	Climate policy debate in the Riksdag	(M) and (KD)	"M and KD deny the need for strong climate policy: The finance minister (M) shrugs; 'It's no big deal if Sweden misses the climate targets. If we don't do it, we don't do it'. KD have been mostly happy to move money from rail to road and are in some kind of 'nuclear Tourette's state of mind'."	Critique of Tidö parties' climate policy
Märta Stenevi (MP), former party leader	Climate policy debate in the Riksdag	Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	"You are a minister in an extremely weak 'puppet government' that could only take office after a comprehensive agreement was made with the right-wing extremists in SD, /…/ We are debating with a liberal climate minister who runs SD's climate policy."	Critique of Tidö parties' climate policy and climate minister Pourmokhtari

Table B6 (continued)**.** Accusations made by left, social democrat and green politicians, climate scientists, journalists and the climate justice movement

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
Märta Stenevi (MP), former party leader	Climate policy debate in the Riksdag	Prime minister Ulf Kristersson (M)	"This 'puppet government' does not understand the urgency of containing global warming. It is clueless at best and cynical at worst – you increase emissions today and hope that someone else will solve the situation in the future."	Critique of the prime minister's ambition to "calmly sit down with researchers, industry and various bodies to 'chisel out the policy that will take us to the finish line"'
Daniel Vencu Velasquez Castro (S), member of the Riksdag	Riksdag debate on the government's policy for a green transition	Industry and energy minister Ebba Busch (KD)	What does it mean for the green transition when the government is controlled by SD, who do not want any change?"	Critique of the weak puppet government
Anna-Caren Sätherberg (S), member of the Riksdag, climate policy spokesperson	Riksdag debate on climate policy	(L) and climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	"You are ambiguous. You said: 'No, SD are not involved.' Then your party leader, minister for education Johan Pehrson (L) said that 'SD must be involved in designing the CAP to the highest degree'. Is there a crack in the Liberals?	Critique of the process for preparing the CAP
Elin Söderberg (MP), member of the Riksdag, climate policy spokesperson	Riksdag debate on climate policy	Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	The government seems to "abdicate on the CAP and present it as a government letter rather than a government bill, which sidesteps the Riksdag".	Critique of the process for preparing the CAP
Jytte Guteland (S) member of the Riksdag, former member of the European Parliament	Riksdag debate on climate policy	Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	"The government communicates with the opposition through media rather than personal meetings. I represent the largest party in the Riksdag – it is not far-fetched to think	Critique of the process for preparing the climate action plan, referring to the prime minister's claim that the government should seek broad support for the climate

			that we could be one of these parties. Yet we have seen no such contacts. Then one begins to think about whether this rhetoric is a way to divert thoughts from the lack of concreteness in climate policy."	action plan from many parties
Jytte Guteland (S) member of the Riksdag, former member of the European Parliament	Riksdag debate on climate policy	Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	"In politics the motto 'I can do it myself' works very poorly. In politics, it's about creating trust and making sure that you get joint decisions and can make them together with others – not least in Sweden's Riksdag, this is completely decisive. Therefore, this superhero attitude of yours is not satisfactory. The climate minister stands very alone in an uncomfortable situation."	Critique of the climate minister constantly referring to herself as 'a liberal minister in a right-wing government in which SD has no ministers'
Economics scholars in Swedish Finance Policy Council	Annual report to the government 2024 (SFPC, 2024, p. 15)	Tidö parties	"The climate action plan does not provide clear and concrete information about how the climate targets are to be reached; it rests on hopes that future actions will lead to the achievement of the targets."	Critique of the Tidö parties' climate policies
Climate scientists in Swedish Climate Policy Council	Annual report to the government 2024 (SCPC, 2024, p. 8)	Tidö parties	"The Tidö parties provide a misleading picture of the action plan's expected contribution to achieving the goal. The claim that the action plan leads 'all the way to net zero' is factually flawed."	Critique of the Tidö parties' climate policies

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