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‘Swedish’ civic nationalism as both immigration  
scepticism and opposition to the Sweden Democrats

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**Abstract**

The radical right-wing Sweden Democrats are no longer the only party in Swedish politics to advocate a more restrictive immigration policy. This study explores how immigration sceptics who do not support the Sweden Democrats position themselves in relation to the party and how they construct the need for a reduced immigration, as well as how both their positionings and constructions can be understood in relation to nationalism. The nationalism of the Sweden Democrats has been described as ethnic in character, but less is known about the nationalism of immigration sceptics who do not support the party. This study draws on constructionist discourse analysis and theoretical concepts of the nation as an imagined community and banal nationalism in analysing qualitative interviews with ‘non-Sweden Democrat’ immigration sceptics. It is found that both the ways in which they construct the need for a reduced immigration and the ways in which they position themselves to the Sweden Democrats can be attributed to a ‘Swedish’ civic nationalism.

**Key words:** Swedish civic nationalism; ethnic nationalism; banal nationalism; immigration scepticism; the Sweden Democrats.

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## 1. Introduction

Sweden entered the 2010's on a trajectory where the immigration was increasing in tandem with an increasing positivity towards it in the population. 2010 also saw the establishment of the radical right-wing Sweden Democrats in the national parliament, where they became the only party to advocate a reduced immigration, and were isolated from influence by the remaining seven parties as a result (Demker 2014). In 2014, as war was stirring in Syria, Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt of the liberal-conservative Moderate Party issued a famous (and notorious) speech where he urged the Swedish population to “*open your hearts to people fleeing under great stress*” (Scarpa 2018). In 2015, the refugee crisis reached its culmination for Sweden when the country received 163 000 migrants (Migrationsverket 2020), which prompted a U-turn in the immigration policy that was drastically restructured to match the EU-imposed minimum quota, to not risk, in the words of the Social Democratic Foreign Minister Margot Wallström, a “*system collapse*” (Scarpa 2018). The refugee crisis marked a reversal of the attitudinal trend, and the Swedish population has become increasingly negative to immigration ever since (Martinsson & Andersson 2020), where now a majority seeks that the refugee admissions be reduced even further than the EU-minimum level (SVT 2020).

The Sweden Democrats, the party that “*we love to hate*” (Hellström et al. 2012), no longer have a monopoly on opposition to immigration, and the party appears to be breaking the walls of the *cordon sanitaire* that they have been subjected to for most of their time in the national parliament (Demker 2014; SVT 2021). The anti-immigration rhetoric of the Sweden Democrats is characterised by ethno-nationalism (Elgenius & Rydgren 2018), but less is known about the immigration scepticism of the parts of the Swedish population that do not support the Sweden Democrats, and how these parts of the population perceive the Sweden Democrats. This is what this study seeks to explore.

### 1.1 Purpose and research questions

Much academic effort has been directed at answering the question of why radical-right wing parties grow and prosper, without there being much in terms of a consensus. With regards to the Sweden Democrats, economic shock and socioeconomic status have been put forth as explaining factors (Dal Bó et al. 2018; Dehdari 2018). Other commentators argue that the Sweden Democrat sympathisers are quite similar to the ‘average Swede’, albeit them having a slight overrepresentation among working class men (Sannerstedt 2014). David Art (2011) turns the question around, arguing that it is not the presence of radical-right wing parties that should be explained. If one considers that their resurgence has coincided with neoliberal restructuring of societies, diminished economic growth, increasing unemployment and austerity politics, is it not reasonable that many voters feel attracted to the radical-right wing rhetoric? Art thus urges us to ask why such parties *fail* (Art 2011: 14-15).

An important factor that may explain why people refrain from voting for radical right-wing parties lie in the anti-racist norm that is prevalent in Europe, and in Sweden in particular (Demker 2014). In this area there is a gap in the research (Ivarsflaten et al. 2010), that goes hand in hand with an underexplored ‘Swedish’ nationalism that makes ‘us’ ‘love to hate the SD’ (Hellström et al. 2012). This provides the vein in which this study operates.

The purpose of this study threefold. First, it is to explore the social processes that make people refrain from supporting the Sweden Democrats, even for those who agree with their core tenet: that the immigration to Sweden needs to be reduced. This population will henceforth be referred to as ‘Non-Sweden Democrat’ immigration sceptics, a category that stems from the interviewees’ own accounts, in which they make it very clear that they would “*never vote for the Sweden Democrats*”. It also seeks to explore how this group constructs the need for a reduced immigration, as this will give a greater insight into the kinds of anti-immigration attitudes that are prevalent in contemporary Sweden. In addition, the study has an overarching purpose of exploring the form of nationalism that guide the immigration-sceptic, non-Sweden Democrats, as well as if and how it differs from the ethnic nationalism of the Sweden Democrats. It aims to do this by answering the following questions:

*i: How do ‘non-Sweden Democrat’ immigration sceptics position themselves in relation to the Sweden Democrats?*

*ii: How do they construct the need for a reduced immigration?*

*iii: How can these constructions and positionings be understood in relation to nationalism?*

## **2. Previous research**

This section begins by providing a brief historical outline of immigration, and attitudes thereof in Sweden, followed by a closer look at the history and characteristics of the Sweden Democrats. Finally, an attempt will be made to triangulate a form of ‘Swedish’ nationalism that has functioned as a counter force to the Sweden Democrats.

### **2.1 A brief history of immigration, and attitudes to immigration in Sweden**

Following the end of World War two, Sweden went from being a country of emigration to becoming a country of immigration. In the post-war years, up until the 1970s, labour migration stood for the lion’s share of the immigration to the country. This lasted until 1974, when the immigration to Sweden changed from primarily consisting of labour-migrants to refugees (Demker 2014: 81-2). Today, Sweden is the non-colonial country that has received the most immigrants per capita in Europe in the post-war period (Demker 2016). In 2019, 25,9 percent of the Swedish population consisted of people of foreign origin, meaning that they were either born abroad or born in Sweden to two foreign-born parents (SCB 2020). During this era of immigration, the public opinion has undergone great shifts.

The scarce research conducted on attitudes towards immigration in Sweden prior to the 1980’s, shows a trend towards an increased ‘generosity’ towards immigrants from the 1950’s to the 1980’s (Demker 2014: 83f). Since 1990, the national SOM-survey (Society Opinion Media) has included the question: “*What is your opinion on receiving fewer refugees?*”. In 1990, 61 percent found it to be a good proposal, whereas 17 percent found it bad. The trend towards a positive stance towards refugees reached its peak in 2015, where there was almost a balance in

opinion, where 40 percent wanted to accept fewer refugees, and 38 wanted more. The refugee crisis marked a shift in this trend. In 2016, 52 percent sought a reduced reception, and 23 percent sought an increase. The negative trend has continued ever since the turning point, and data from 2019 shows that 58 percent wanted to accept fewer refugees, and 20 percent wanted more (Martinsson & Andersson 2020).

In 2018 and 2020, SVT/Novus conducted a more specialised quantity-oriented survey that added the dimension of informing the respondents with the amount of asylum seekers that came to Sweden in the past year and asked whether the respondent wished to see an increased or decreased reception compared to the given quantity. In 2020, 63 percent wished to see a decreased reception in relation to the 22 000 asylum seekers who came to Sweden in 2019, while a mere 8 percent of the population wished to see an increase in reception. Compared to the results of the original survey in 2018, here too there is an observable trend towards a more restrictive stance on average (SVT 2020).

The picture is one of a country that has undergone significant shifts in its attitudes towards immigration. Following the second world war, the country became increasingly open to immigration in tandem with a high reception. The peak was reached at the point of the refugee crisis, which marked a reversal both in attitudes and reception, as the immigration policy was altered in accordance with the EU minimum level (Rydgren & Van Meiden 2016).

## **2.2 The Sweden Democrats**

The Sweden Democrats were founded in 1988 as a result of the merging of various nationalist, anti-immigration organisations, including the extra-parliamentary Keep Sweden Swedish (Jungar & Jupskås 2014). An environment that has been described as extreme right wing (Elgenius & Rydgren 2018) and fascist (Demker 2014: 66). The party entered the Swedish parliament in 2010 when they received 5,7% of the votes. A number that increased to 12,9% in 2014, and 17,5% in 2018 (Jylhä et al. 2019). That it took twelve years for the party to attain seats in the national parliament has been argued to be because of a failure to present themselves in a respectable manner (Rydgren 2002). But over time, the party has undergone efforts to tone down the rhetorical message, signalling “signs of moderation” (Elgenius & Rydgren 2018). On their official website it is stated that: “We have been eyed thoroughly and we have been in the wrong sometimes, not least in the early years. But we have matured, and we have learned from our experience” (SD 2020).

Until just a few years ago, the Sweden Democrats were the only established party in Sweden to advocate a reduced immigration. For most of the time that they have been part of the national parliament, they have been subjected to a *cordon sanitaire*, where the other parties have refused all forms of cooperation with them (Demker 2014: 165). This arrangement has since unravelled. Since the demise of the bourgeois alliance during the government formation of 2018, there have been hints at the formation of a ‘conservative block’, including the Sweden Democrats, the Moderate Party, and the Christian Democrats, and on May 2, 2021, the aforementioned parties in addition to the Liberals put forth a joint proposal for a future immigration policy. Jimmie Åkesson, the party leader of the Sweden Democrats referred to the proposal as ‘historic’, but maintained that the proposal is far from as strict as he had hoped but nevertheless the ‘better’ of the two options (SVT 2021).

Sweden was long considered an ‘exceptional case’ in that it did not house a radical right-wing party in the national parliament (Rydgren & Van der Meiden 2016). Demker proposes three explanations for why this was the case, as well as for why the Sweden Democrats fail to attract more voters than they do. First, she points to the historically large-scale immigration to the country, the majority of which has been well integrated into Swedish society, due to them having come as labour-migrants. Second, she argues that immigration has been largely unpoliticised. Aside from a one-term appearance by the anti-immigration New Democracy in 1991, anti-immigration sentiments were absent in Swedish politics until their re-emergence with the Sweden Democrats in 2010. Seeing as how the book was written in 2014, Demker could posit, with a clear conscience, that aside from these two parties, there had been a universal rejoicing among the other parties under the banner of a ‘generous’ immigration policy. Third, and for the purposes of this paper most pressingly, she argues that ‘Swedish’ nationalism is centred around openness, equality and justice as opposed to more generic nationalist appeals to history, ethnicity, and culture (Demker 2014: 105).

### **2.3 ‘Swedish’ nationalism**

This section will be an attempt at mapping the form of ‘Swedish’ nationalism that Demker argues has functioned as a counter force to the growth of both the Sweden Democrats and anti-immigration attitudes. In a wider discussion regarding how European democracies should act to prevent the growth and proliferation of racist and xenophobic parties, Demker claims that one must: “maintain a civic public debate that reaches the criteria of reason, rationality and decency” (Demker 2014: 168), and this type of debate is contrasted with a form of debate where blatantly racist statements are allowed to pass. “Against the background of the anti-racist norm that most of us have internalised and want to live up to, we can affect the development” (ibid). Here, she is using the syntax of hegemony (Billig 1995: 87ff) in constructing a picture of ‘we’ as an anti-racist majority that must act to prevent the racist or xenophobic ‘other’ from encroaching on ‘our’ Sweden. Arguably, this statement tells us more about this form of ‘Swedish’ nationalism than the list of virtues such as justice and equality.

In an examination of the Swedish national day, Schall (2014) argues that the Swedish national identity has become interlinked with diversity, where multiculturalism emerges as a focal point and the National Day functions as a form of ‘multiculturalism in practice’. The Swedish national day, which takes place on June 6, is a relatively new institution. Remade from Flag Day to National Day in 1983, it only became a public holiday in 2005. Most Swedes also remain unaware that the National Day officially commemorates the crowning of Gustav Vasa. Elgenius (2011) argues that the holiday can in some sense be considered a failure, in that it has failed to appeal to the *imagination* of the Swedish population. The Swedish National day is a top-down, ‘invented’ tradition that celebrates a particular vision of the Swedish Nation (Schall 2014; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). So, what exactly is celebrated?

The official narrative as put forth by the media has seen a focus on ‘new Swedes’, which is an official term employed in government documents, pertaining to immigrants intended to become permanent residents in the country. This focus is mirrored in the actual festivities, where speakers of immigrant backgrounds are overrepresented, and most of the cultural utterances consist of pop and classical music, with a relatively smaller space being given to traditional

Swedish folk music and dance. In addition, the National Day festivities host ceremonies for the public celebrations of citizenship received by ‘new Swedes’. Thus Schall (2014) argues that the Swedish National day can be seen as forwarding and representing a form of ‘multicultural nationalism’, that puts diversity and inclusion before history and common roots. This represents the flagging *per excellence* of a form of nationalism that celebrates the same Sweden that Demker imagines. They share in an embodiment of the anti-racist norm, as well as a common enemy, or ‘other’, in the Sweden Democrats.

#### **2.4 ‘Swedish’ nationalism in media discourse**

Having identified a form of ‘Swedish’ nationalism that is in some sense ‘multicultural’, ‘anti-racist’ and grounded on principles of openness and equality as opposed to history, ethnicity and culture, this section will proceed to outline how this form of ‘Swedish’ nationalism has been predominant in the mainstream media, and that this becomes especially salient when looking at the media discourse on the (un)contested matters of immigration and opposition towards it.

Hellström et al. (2012) come to understand the conflict between the Sweden Democrats and their opponents - which at the time of writing included supporters of all other established political parties, as per the *cordon sanitaire* - as a battle between nationalisms. The ‘evil’ and ‘morally despicable’ nationalism of the Sweden Democrats on the one hand, versus the ‘natural’ and ‘morally good’, common-sense nationalism of the wider population: “we love to hate the SD, yet ‘we’ have not ceased to claim affinity to the Swedish nation” (Hellström et al. 2012).

While not delving into the explicitness of conflicting nationalisms, more recent studies give further support for this thesis. In comparing the press coverages in different European countries during the refugee crisis of 2015, Hovden et al. (2018) finds Swedish media to be an outlier. Compared to the rest of Europe, the Scandinavian media were overall less prone to write about the negative economic consequences of receiving migrants, but Sweden stood out the most in having the media with the strongest focus on the positive moral consequences of immigration. Similar results were found in the long term in an analysis of the Scandinavian immigration discourse from 1970 to 2016, which concluded that the Swedish press was dominantly immigration friendly. Where Denmark had a consistent, and increasing, focus on immigration as a national threat, Swedish newspapers had a constant humanitarian emphasis in portraying the immigrants as victims, and a propensity to frame racism as a primary issue in the matter (Hovden & Mjælde 2019). Focusing on Sweden, Yantseva (2020) analyses media discourse on migration between 2012 and 2019, with a particular aim of addressing the alleged ‘change’ in discourse that is claimed to have occurred as a result of the refugee-crisis. She finds that insofar as there was a change, it did not occur in the mainstream media, but rather in participatory media such as twitter and flashback that serve as arenas for counter-discourses. Such counter-discourses have also been found in ‘alternative’ media, with outlets such as *Avpixlat* and *Fria Tider*, that converge around anti-elite and anti-immigration sentiments (Haller & Holt 2018). Nygaard (2020) analyses mentions of alternative media in the mainstream media and finds the coverage to be uniformly negative. Most commonly, the negative evaluations pertained to the ideological orientations of the alternative media outlets, portraying them as ideologically deviant. Nygaard summarises it succinctly in saying that Swedish mainstream media has a narrow ‘corridor of opinion’ on immigration. In the theoretical section below, it will be argued

that the mainstream discourse on immigration signifies a textual *flagging* of the same ‘Swedish’ nationalism that is found in the Swedish National Day as well as in Demker.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informs this study builds on the concept of the nation as an *imagined community* (Andersson 2016), ‘banal’ nationalism (Billig 1995) as well as the typological distinction between ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ nationalism (Smith 1986; Ignatieff 1994).

It held true at the time of publishing *Banal Nationalism* in 1995, and rings perhaps even truer now, that the generic usage of ‘nationalism’ depicts it as a ‘hot’ phenomenon, a force that ebbs and flows. It might be the guerrillas, the separatists, or perhaps most pressingly: the right-wing radicals who are nationalist. Here, nationalism is understood as a property of someone ‘other’, not of ‘us’ (Billig 1995: 5-6). The Swedish case presents a familiar picture. Here, it is the radical-right wing Sweden Democrats, as well as other even more unseemly actors on the extreme right who are seen as nationalists. Understood in this sense, nationalism becomes equated with ‘hot’ ethnic nationalism.

By this orthodox account, nationalism is something that is currently on the ‘rise’. A peripheral force that threatens ‘society’ or the civil order, that just so happens to be comprised of nation states. The question thus becomes by which ideological habits ‘our’, allegedly non-nationalistic nation is reproduced as a nation? Who are ‘we’? What makes ‘us’ Swedish? These processes remain unnamed and therefore they go unnoticed (Billig 1995: 5-6). By employing the concept of ‘banal’ nationalism one is able to discern ‘invisible’ forms of nationalism that are taken for granted. It is by doing so that Hellström et al. (2012) arrive at the idea of conflicting nationalisms, the ‘hot’ and ‘bad’ ethnic nationalism of the Sweden Democrats versus the invisible, taken for granted but ‘good’ nationalism of their opponents. Before turning to more specific concepts that help to uncover ‘banal’ nationalism, the underlying notion of what a ‘nation’ is must be introduced.

#### 3.1 The nation as imagined community and place

This paper follows Billig in drawing on Benedict Andersons concept of the nation as *imagined community*, and as such, it is *imagined* as inherently *limited* and *sovereign*. The *community* is *imagined* in the sense that a member of the nation will never meet, let alone know, most of the members of the *community*. It is *limited*, since it must have borders that delineates it from other nations. It is being *imagined* as *sovereign* due to its historical roots in an era in which enlightenment and revolution overthrew the divinely ordained dynastic realm, thus signifying its freedom. Finally, it is a *community* due to it being imagined as a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (Andersson 2006: 7).

In parallel to the *imagining* of the national *community* is the *imagining* of the national land or territory: “The imagining of a ‘country’ involves the imagining of a bounded totality beyond immediate experience of place” (Billig 1995: 74). Just as a member of any nation will never meet most of the members of the community, the member will only ever visit some parts of the national territory which she imagines as ‘hers’. Members can be tourists, or even strangers in ‘their’ own territory. Still, the places within this bounded totality are still *imagined* as ‘theirs’.

It follows from this that a loss of territory within the *imagined* homeland invokes a certain pain; that ‘our’ home has been taken by someone else. Billig makes a play on Ernest Gellner, who claims that modern persons see their national identities as being as natural as their noses and ears. Thus, in the case of homeland, a loss of territory is not just a loss in the sense of disappearance. But rather as if one’s own ear turns up on someone else’s face (Billig 1995: 75).

In analysing how the interviewees construct the societal problems relating to immigration one will be able to discern the way that the community is imagined, or perhaps most importantly, how one imagines that the community should be. Thus, one will be able to understand how immigration, in various ways, conflicts with the imagined community in the eyes of the respondents. The incorporation of national place in the analysis is fruitful for understanding the ways in which segregation is constructed as a primary issue facing the imagined community. Which is particularly interesting, seeing as how none of the interviewees live in or near majority-migrant areas, and come in little contact with those kinds of places in their daily lives.

### **3.3 Text as flag**

A key component of Billig’s argument for a ‘remembering’ of banal nationalism is the way that nationhood is constantly flagged. Flagging, it is argued, is the general condition of contemporary democratic politics (Billig 1995: 99). This concept can be understood in a literal sense, as the presence of physical, national flags. Ubiquitous, perhaps, depending on your particular place. But flagging can also be understood as a discursive practice, and political discourses, given their grounding in the national context, function as flaggers of nationhood (Billig 1995: 98). Just as the physical flag with its distinct pattern and colours serve as a reminder of who ‘we’ are and what is ‘ours’, so does the textual flagging function as a reminder of national identity.

In the previous research section, the argument was made that the Swedish National day celebrates and *flags* a nationalism that imagines Sweden in a certain way that is distinct and directly opposed to how it is imagined by the Sweden Democrats. An illustrative example of textual flagging of this form of nationalism was found in Demker above: “Against the background of the anti-racist norm that most of us have internalised and want to live up to, we can affect the development [of racist and xenophobic parties]” (Demker 2014: 168). It is telling of an imagining of a Swedish community as consisting of anti-racists, in which parties like the Sweden Democrats have no place. The mainstream media discourse on immigration is another example of the same nationhood being flagged textually, in that it signals that immigrants are welcome into ‘our’ community and that it is the Sweden Democrats, and opponents to immigration that are constructed as deviant ‘others’ who do not qualify as members of the community. The concept of textual flagging will be employed further in the analysis for understanding the nationalist sentiments that situate the stances of the participants.

### **3.4 National identity**

Given that nationalism, as an ideology, tells ‘us’ who ‘we’ are, it must also be an ideology of the third person, as there can be no ‘us’ without a ‘them’; ‘we’ are who ‘we’ are because of who ‘we’ are not (Billig 1995: 78; Zolberg 2008: 200). The case made by Billig is that the ‘foreigner’ serves as the primary imagined other that the ‘we’ in ‘our’ imagined community can

project and differentiate ‘ourselves’ from. These distinctions are made through stereotypes, which are shared cultural descriptions of social groups (Billig 1995: 80). The stereotypic traits become the deviation from the standard that ‘we’ embody and contain implicit reference to ‘our’ normality. Among Swedes, there is a shared stereotype of Americans as loud, which implies that we as Swedes consider ourselves perhaps more ‘tactful’ in our choice of vocal volume. However, stereotypes must not necessarily be negative. Take for instance the idea of Germans as neat and organized, which implies that ‘us Swedes’ would be operating in relative disarray.

As will be shown in the analysis, the aforementioned ‘Swedish’ nationalism becomes visible in the material when one begins to discern the ‘us’ from the ‘them’. There are both explicit and implicit aversions towards stereotyping immigrants, and in the cases where immigrants are constructed as constituents of problematic phenomena that conflict with the *imagined community*, they often become subject to a form of sociological analysis, of varying rigour, by the interviewees; where the blame for the problems at hand is shifted upwards, towards the politicians and the systems of which the immigrants have been victims of. The use of stereotype is used in a much higher degree towards the Sweden Democrats, who are constructed as a vice-laden outgroup through which the interviewees understand themselves as virtuous. It will be argued that this is part of a greater *imagining* of Sweden as a *community* through which one, as a member, should embrace a certain political *creed* that the Sweden Democrats fail to uphold.

### 3.5 Civic Nationalism

That a nationalism is ‘banal’ does not make it devoid of particular substance, its banality only pertains to it being taken for granted and made invisible. The banal Swedish nationalism that was conceptualised in the previous research section has integral characteristics that can be characterised as a form of ‘civic’ nationalism that opposes itself to the ethnic nationalism of the Sweden Democrats.

The distinction traces back to Kohn’s (1967) historical works, and his dichotomy between the nationalisms that arose in western and eastern Europe. Kohn argues that the western nationalism held the nation as a rational union between citizens who share territory and common law, whereas the eastern form took its basis on ethnic origin and a common culture. The distinction has since been subjected to developments by several scholars. Anthony Smith distinguishes between ethnic and ‘territorial’, or civic nations, where members of the latter are unified by a common code and have equal rights and obligations, regardless of race, colour or religion. As opposed to ethnic nations that unite under assumptions of shared descent and origin (Smith 1986: 135-7). Through this focus on genealogy, ethnic nationalism holds that the national community defines its people, and that the people inherit characteristics and attachments to the nation (Larin 2010). This is related to the idea of ethno-pluralism, which holds that different peoples should be kept separate, as to preserve their unique national identities. Such ideas have been found in the rhetoric of the Sweden Democrats, in that they hold a ‘mutual culture’ of shared memories, loyalties and religion etc. to be generationally transmitted through an ‘inherited essence’ in each human being (Elgenius & Rydgren 2018).

Self-proclaimed civic nationalist Michael Ignatieff argues that civic nationalism can function as an ‘antidote’ to ethnic nationalism. Drawing on Smith, he maintains that “This nationalism is called civic because it envisages the nation as a community of equal, rights-bearing citizens, united in a patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values” (Ignatieff 1994: 6). Anyone can be a member of the community, as long as they adhere to the nation’s political *creed* (ibid).

Tamir (2019) criticises the distinction for being more normative than descriptive, and for framing the matter as a higher and lower form of nationalism, a critique that certainly applies to Ignatieff. Furthermore, Tamir argues that even ostensibly ‘civic’ nations have elements of ethnic nationalism. Smith agrees with this last point, and he concedes that nationalisms tend to undergo changes over time and can encompass elements of both types (Smith 2010: 44). However, that Sweden faces internal tensions of conflicting nationalisms is a premise, not a problem for this study. For its purposes, the typology between civic and ethnic nationalism as rational abstractions provides a fruitful tool for understanding the interviewees accounts. As both the ways in which they position themselves to the Sweden Democrats, and how this positioning affects the way they construct the needs for a reduced immigration best can be understood in terms of them as uniting under a civic nationalist *political creed*.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Semi-structured interviews**

Data was collected through semi-structured digital interviews which were based on an interview guide (see Appendix A), whose content was created to cover relevant themes that stem from the research questions. This approach serves as a middle ground between structured-, and in-depth interviewing (O’reilly 2009: 126), and it comes with the advantage of allowing for a focus on certain areas of concern while making it possible for the interviewees to step beyond that which is pre-formulated in the interview guide, as well as granting the opportunity to ask meaningful follow-up questions (Bryman 2018: 561). In most interviews, the participants proceeded to cover many of the areas of the interview guide in long, rich monologues without there being a need to ask each specific question. In such cases, the guide was used more as a checklist for ensuring that the matter had been covered before ending the interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after being finished.

### **4.2 Sampling**

An objective of this study is to explore how immigration sceptics who do not vote for the Sweden Democrats position themselves in relation to the party. At the early stages of the research process, it remained an open question whether this population would consider the Sweden Democrats to be ‘just another party’, deviant ‘others’, or anything in between. To capture this population, and to not pre-emptively steer the sample towards those who are especially negatively inclined towards the party, while simultaneously ruling out those who might vote for them in the coming election, the following criteria were posed:

- 1) The participant should want to see a reduced immigration to Sweden.
- 2) The participant should not have voted for the Sweden Democrats, or any party further out on the radical-right axis.
- 3) The participant should not plan to vote for the Sweden Democrats, or any party further out on the radical-right axis.

To access this population, I drafted a recruitment sheet which provided brief information regarding the purpose of the study, the criteria for participation as well as my contact information. The sheet was given to friends and family, who in turn disseminated it to whichever degree they felt comfortable with. This way, participants were able to contact me directly instead of having to go through the ‘middleman’. It resulted with the following setup of participants:

Pseudonym	Age	Party voted for in 2018	Planning to vote for in 2022
Niklas	51	Moderate Party	Moderate Party
Bengt	53	Moderate Party	Moderate Party
Judith	54	Non-disclosed	Undecided, left leaning
Kristin	61	Social Democrats	Social Democrats
Maria	46	Moderate Party	Moderate Party
Peter	50	Liberals	Medborgerlig Samling
Milos	30	Social Democrats	Undecided
Johan	28	Liberals	Moderate Party

### 4.3 Methodological challenges

The recruitment process ended up becoming more difficult than envisaged and I believe that this can largely be explained by the social stigma that opposition to immigration carries. Evidence for this arose in the interviews, where almost all participants stated that they rarely, if ever, discuss matters regarding immigration.

With regards to the setup of the participants, a few things can be noted. There is a skewness towards white-collar occupations, where Milos is the only blue-collar worker. Unfortunately, attempts at reaching this part of the population came up mostly empty handed. This could be explained by the Sweden Democrats being somewhat overrepresented among blue-collar workers (Sannerstedt 2014). It is also fair to assume that blue-collar workers who do not vote for the Sweden Democrats are more likely to vote for the Social Democrats and given the state of the public debate on immigration is not unlikely that Social Democrat immigration sceptics may feel less keen to voice such matters in an interview, than for instance a Moderate Party voter. The table also displays a skewness towards people above middle age. Before or after the interviews, most of the older participants mentioned that they were glad to be able to ‘help a student’, something that the two younger participants did not. Therefore, it is possible that the will to help served in favour of participating to a greater extent for the older participants in weighing factors such as time investment and stigma.

It is possible that social media advertising could have resulted in a greater outreach, and it was kept as a back-up strategy. However, once the eight interviews were finished and I began to

gain a robust overview of the material it struck me as extensive enough for the achieving of theoretical sufficiency, meaning that the collected data was sufficient for making well-informed theoretical inferences (Marshall & Rossman 2011: 2020).

#### **4.4 Analytical framework**

The theoretical core of this study lies in the concept of the nation as an *imagined community* (Anderson 2006), as it is posited that both opposition to immigration and to the Sweden Democrats can be traced back the specific ways in which Sweden is *imagined*. The Swedish *imagined community* is taken to be socially constructed, in that it is produced and reproduced by shared meanings (Barlebo Wenneberg 2001; Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009: 35).

Given the social constructionist approach, the method of analysis is inspired by constructionist discourse analysis (Börjesson 2003). The object is to understand how the participants position themselves in relation to the Sweden Democrats, how they construct the need for a reduced immigration as well as to discern underlying nationalist sentiments. To study discourses and social constructions is to think about that which is said, how it is said, in what other ways it could have been said, and what is *not* said. Discourses dictate what can be said by drawing boundaries for what is socially and culturally deemed as true, credible, and good etc. (Börjesson 2003: 21). The very concept of the ‘immigrant’ builds on a national discourse that constructs him as an ‘other’ with his ‘own’ homeland that stands separate from the country to which he has now immigrated. With that said, different forms of nationalism (nationalist discourses, if you will), which exist within the overarching national discourse, construct the immigrant and his potential belonging to the recipient nation in different ways. As such, the idea is that by studying these constructions one will be able to discern the discourses that set the rules for how those constructions are made, and that this will give an insight into the forms of nationalism that situate these constructions. The analysis treats key concepts, such as ‘integration’ and ‘humane’ as ‘floating signifiers’ that lack a fixed meaning and which different discourses strive to fill with their own meaning (Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 35). The idea being that the meaning of such concepts will reflect particularities in nationalist discourse.

National identity is essential to nationalism, and this approach takes both collective and individual identity to be a result of contingent discursive processes (Jørgensen & Phillips 2000: 41). The analysis integrates Billigs stereotyping as such a discursive process, where the self is constructed by its opposition and difference to the ‘other’, which are here both the ‘immigrant’ and the ‘Sweden Democrat’. This exclusionary discursive process of identification is taken to be significant for the battle of how Sweden should be defined or *imagined*, and it involves giving equal attention to that which is *not* said beyond the explicit semantic content.

#### **4.5 Ethical considerations**

This study has been conducted in accordance with Swedish Research Council’s research-ethical principles for the social sciences (VR 2002). 1: *Information* and 2: *Consent*. Prior to the interviews, each participant was sent an ‘Information and Consent Form’ (see Appendix B), providing them with information regarding the general purpose of the study, the voluntariness of participation and their full right to terminate their participation at any time. At the end of this document, the participants were given a chance to give their written consent but seeing as how the interviews were carried out digitally, there was also an option to give consent verbally. 3:

*Confidentiality.* The audio files from the interviews as well as the transcripts have been stored on a password-protected stationary computer, and the files have been given names based on their numerical order, e.g., ‘Interview 1’ and ‘Transcript 6’. In addition, the names of the participants have been pseudonymised and potential items of information that can lead to their identification have been omitted from the quotations. In total, these efforts serve to make it impossible for readers to identify any of the participants. 4: *Usage.* The material generated by their participation will only be used for research purposes. Matters relating to both *Confidentiality* and *Usage* are also included in the ‘Information and Consent form’.

## 5. Analysis

The following analysis explores the three areas of concern that are formulated in the research questions. As will become apparent, these three areas are intimately inter-connected and cannot be distinctly separated. However, for the sake of clarity, the analysis is divided under four headings. Section 5.1 begins by looking at how the Sweden Democrats are constructed as deviant ‘others’ and discusses the situating effect that the interviewees’ positioning against the party has on the ways in which they construct the problems of immigration, which is dealt with in sections 5.2 and 5.3. Finally, section 5.4 connects the dots of the previous sections in looking more closely at how the above relates to nationalism.

### 5.1 The Sweden Democrat ‘other’

All interviewees participate based on the criteria that they have not voted, nor plan to vote for the Sweden Democrats. In and of itself, such a stance does not necessitate an aversion. However, interestingly, regardless of their party of preference, all participants make statements that bear witness to the following sentiment: *“I would never vote for the Sweden Democrats”*. It is this from this sentiment, in conjunction with the distinct ‘othering’ of the Sweden Democrats that will be accounted for below, that this paper gathers the ‘Non-Sweden Democrat’ as an empirical category that stems from the material. Throughout the interviews, the people who represent and vote for the Sweden Democrats are continuously and consistently constructed in negative terms. The accounts overlap and bear witness to a shared idea of Sweden Democrats as inferior people.

They are constructed as people who cannot discern fact from fiction, and who mindlessly indulge and share ‘fake news’ (Maria, 46); as people who put more faith in Putin’s ‘troll factories’ than in Swedish authorities (Peter, 50); as lonely white men who get drunk and go on racial hate-campaigns online (Bengt, 53); as small-minded people whose ‘horrendous’ views might be remedied if they got to travel the world (Judith, 54); as people who try their best to appear respectable, but who seethe of racism within the confines of their own homes (Niklas, 51); as ‘EPA<sup>1</sup>-guys’ from the ‘bush’, lonely middle aged men, and white trash [sic] families (Johan, 28).

These stereotyping accounts all stem from a shared cultural idea of the Sweden Democrats as morally, intellectually, and socially inferior persons. By continuation, in reproducing the construction of Sweden Democrats as deviant in this way, the participants construct themselves

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<sup>1</sup> ‘EPA’ as in EPA-tractor, a colloquial term for ‘A-tractor’ which is a modified car that may run at a maximum of 30 km/h by people over the age of 16.

as belonging to the ‘good’ and ‘virtuous’ normality; by this process the Sweden Democrat becomes an ‘other’ that the participants differentiate themselves from (Billig 1995: 80).

This provides the ‘baseline’ for the participants’ positioning against the Sweden Democrats. In bearing this ‘othering’ in mind when looking at the rest of the material, one will be able to discern what can reasonably be interpreted as this anti-Sweden Democrat discourse having a continual situating effect on the participants’ construction processes on all issues regarding immigration. Given how the Sweden Democrats are constructed as undesirable ‘others’, the participants need to construct their immigration-sceptic stances in ways that do not put themselves in an unfavourable light.

A key aspect of this process lies in how the participants handle the fact that they have come to some form of agreement with the core tenet of the Sweden Democrats, i.e., that immigration should be reduced. Hints at the existence of this agreement are made when the participants assume a less polarising tone:

There are probably some of them who have opinions that aren’t completely crazy [Judith, 54].

But insofar as the Sweden Democrats are granted some quantum of ‘reasonability’, it is something that is reserved for a select few and it is only hinted at in passing. More efforts are put towards constructing images of the Sweden Democrat policy as lying beyond the item of agreement. In various ways, these depictions serve to construct the Sweden Democrats as extreme, with an anti-immigration agenda that lies beyond their own.

It’s just that a lot of it is the refugee-question. That’s the foundation of everything they stand for and most importantly this where ”we shouldn’t have any f\*\*\*\* blacks, out with them”, like and “they shouldn’t be here, and we don’t want them here”, and I mean my core principle is that we have to help other people in other countries [Niklas, 51].

Most of the respondents share the idea that the Sweden Democrats will not settle for a reduced immigration, but that they ‘actually’ want to deport most, if not all immigrants. The respondents oppose themselves to this construction on various grounds. Niklas’ account above represents a moral opposition, whereas: *“I mean “out with all immigrants”, how would that look with an elderly care where half-Swedish speaking assistant nurses are taking care of so much?”* (Kristin, 61) is more pragmatically oriented. Other accounts: *“Even if you were to stop everything one hundred percent then there’s still a lot of people who are already here and you can’t just throw people out however you want to”* (Peter, 50) is more ambivalent.

There are other strategies as well. Bengt is arguably the participant who is the least opposed to the Sweden Democrats. What he does is to construct them as narrow-minded fanatics who cannot see beyond the immigration question. A matter which he himself considers just one out of many political issues. In this sense, his opposition takes more of an intellectual character. Another strategy is found in Maria: *“I’m very much against, like all this with Nazism and stuff [...] I really believe that if they were to get too much power that stuff would become really clear”*. While Maria does not explicitly mention deportations, the implications of Nazism stretch much further than that.

While the strategies differ in substance, they all follow the pattern of discursively ‘pushing’ the Sweden Democrats further away and in different ways constructing them as extreme. This, as a way of keeping them at arm’s length and distinguishing themselves as rational, intelligent, decent and moral compared to the various vices of the Sweden Democrat ‘others’.

Another aspect to consider in the coming steps of the analysis is the taboo of being opposed to immigration. All respondents express a disillusionment with the state of the public debate, and six of them clearly state that one cannot speak openly about the problems of immigration. Unless you are for open borders, you will do best in keeping your views close to your heart. They see this as applying to both the private social sphere, as well as to the politicians at the top of the pyramid.

Utter a single thing about this then the racist card comes immediately. Then it’s pulled right away and it silences everything [Bengt, 53].

This speaks to the stigma that immigration scepticism carries, and it connects to the anti-racist, anti-Sweden Democrat discourse. However, it becomes essential for the participants to oppose themselves to this stigmatisation, seeing as how they understand the very content of the interviews as something that could subject them to it. It is necessary to keep this in mind when looking at the rest of their statements, as the very interviews become a form of balancing act where they are aware of breaking the taboo, and therefore tread with caution in constructing the problems of immigration so as to prove that it can be discussed in a ‘productive’ way that steers clear of racism. To the degree that the participants wish to position their own immigration scepticism on the side of the ‘good’ non-Sweden Democrat majority, this carefulness becomes imperative.

## **5.2 Segregation as loss of *national place***

There is a consensus among the respondents regarding the primary issue that Sweden faces because of the large-scale immigration of the past decades, namely that it takes too long for the immigrants to become part of ‘Swedish society’. It is against the background of this problem that the participants argue that the immigration to Sweden should be reduced, or even put to a complete, albeit temporary stop. Throughout the interviews, segregation emerges as a symbol for the extreme form of this problem.

When the respondents speak of segregation, they refer both to what are officially referred to as ‘vulnerable areas’ and ‘particularly vulnerable areas’ (Polisen 2015), as well as areas that are not considered vulnerable, but are primarily inhabited by people of foreign background. None of the respondents have any personal connections to the ‘vulnerable areas’, but they all speak of smaller areas in their respective hometowns and cities that they understand as being more or less entirely inhabited by immigrants. These majority-migrant neighbourhoods are thus perceived as small-scale representations of the phenomenon that manifests as a more dangerous form of segregation in ‘vulnerable areas’.

If you look at Gothenburg, they have these small societies where not even the police can go in or yeah, rescue personnel get attacked, it’s crazy [Maria, 47].

Segregation is understood as giving rise to these ‘vulnerable’ areas that are constructed as chaotic, gloomy, crime laden ‘small societies’ that constitute a mounting societal challenge; symbols of the failure that they consider Swedish immigration policy. There is a shared idea that a point has been reached where the problems of segregation are growing at an unprecedented pace, and that it is moving towards a point where: “*it’s gotten so bad that I don’t know how we’re going to get out of it*” (Niklas, 51). This is a reason why they argue that immigration needs to be halted, because the situation within the ‘vulnerable’ areas is understood as being atrocious enough as it is, and that further immigration will only make the problems grow exponentially.

To understand why this form of ‘dangerous’ segregation is hailed as a primary issue one may look to the nationalist ideological consciousness. The segregation in this form signifies a loss of *national place* (Billig 1995: 74-5) These areas are part of the bounded totality that *should* fall under the *sovereign* rule of Sweden. But in different ways, these areas are constructed as non-adhering to Swedish rules; the police has lost its authority; blue-light personnel cannot operate in the areas without being attacked; anti-Semitism is prevalent; and criminality is rampant. In a metaphorical sense the areas are constructed as being under occupation by ‘others’ whose ways and customs are not deemed appropriate in the *imagined* Sweden. By continuation, the inescapable nationalist ideological consciousness prompts a feeling of loss, that these areas have been ‘taken’ from Sweden, and that they are no longer ‘Sweden’ in a metaphorical sense. Given how the respondents do not come into contact with ‘vulnerable’ areas in their daily lives, one could argue that their existence does not affect them personally. However, segregation comes to signify a personal loss in the sense that it implies a perceived loss of *national place*.

The vulnerable areas are constructed as antithetical to ‘Swedish society’ on multiple levels. The first is that they appear to stand beyond the *sovereignty* of Sweden, in that they harbour aspects that are understood as incompatible with ‘Swedish society’, such as criminality and general non-adherence to Swedish law. However, this constitutes the extreme form of the problem. A high incidence of criminality does not make all the inhabitants criminals, which is underlined by continuous statements of a character that opposes negative generalisation.

Billig (1995: 80) argues that the ideological consciousness of nationalism constructs the foreigner as the primary imagined other that ‘we’ can differentiate ‘ourselves’ from, and that these distinctions are made through shared cultural descriptions of ‘other’ social groups, i.e., stereotypes. As discussed above, the Sweden Democrats are constructed as a such a deviant ‘other’. With regards to the ‘foreigner’, here in the form of the ‘immigrant’, the interviewees make efforts not to stereotype. For instance, when discussing criminality and referring to statistics which show the overrepresentation of foreign-born individuals (Adamsson 2020):

It’s the individuals who are criminal, not as a people or the skin colour or whatever it is [...] it’s so damned easy to just blame it all on “those black f\*\*\*\*”, and of course that’s racist, but people in general don’t think that’s OK [Niklas 51].

The efforts not to stereotype go hand in hand with an understanding of the Sweden Democrats as practitioners of negative stereotyping, as illustrated by the second part of the quote above where Niklas contrasts his own individualistic view with a racist view that he ascribes to the Sweden Democrats. This effort not to subject immigrants to negative stereotype is also clearly visible in recurring efforts to do the opposite:

There are loads of wonderful people who come from different countries who sit here with various competences, but we haven’t taken advantage of that [...] there are tons of surgeons and doctors and stuff who we are in need of, but they’re sitting in the subway, stamping tickets [Bengt, 51].

Bengt acknowledges that immigrants as non-contributors become an economic liability for the community, but he opposes the idea that this is due some inherent characteristic of ‘them’ that makes them incompatible with ‘Swedish society’. Thus, he constructs non-contributing migrants as liabilities due to ‘our’ failure to include ‘them’ in society and make use of ‘their’ competence. As such, Bengt constructs the non-contributing immigrants as victims of the system, towards which he shifts the blame. Judith takes the aversion to negative stereotyping even further:

At my previous job I was hiring technical physicists and I had a really hard time finding skilled technical physicists of Swedish background, so it ended up being second generation who came from former Yugoslavia, very capable, very driven, wanted to do right by themselves. While the Swedes of the same generation just sat and said ”I want everything handed on a silver platter, what’s in it for me?” [Judith, 54].

Throughout the interviews one can observe consistent efforts not to construct the immigrants as perpetrators, but as victims of a broken system that creates and reproduces marginalisation, where the immigrants “*are not given a chance*” to become part of ‘Swedish society’ but are left to their own devices in the vulnerable areas.

Segregation is so dangerous! I mean, these kids, young boys first and foremost they end up in these gangs, I mean if you’re choosing between making a lot of money, really high status, bling-bling, or studying pronouns I mean it’s obvious. [Kristin, 61].

Communities are distinguished by the style in which they are imagined (Andersson 2006: 6), and segregation is constructed as antithetical to ‘Swedish society’ in that it conflicts with the imagining of Sweden as a ‘humane’ community. Here most respondents take a reflexive stance on the ‘humane’, where they question the humanism of allowing immigrants to come here, only to leave them to a life of marginalisation. From this one can begin to gather an aspect of the civic nationalist *creed* that will be discussed in section 5.4, that pertains to what ‘we’ must do as members, that is to provide ‘help’.

### **5.3 Refugees Welcome – to ‘contribute’**

The problem of segregation is perceived as something that gets worse by the hour; an infinite stacking and lumping of migrants in ‘vulnerable’ areas, where they are barred off from ‘Swedish society’ in their own ‘small societies’. To combat this, the migrants need to be spread across Sweden.

You hear these sunshine stories from the Northern inland where some poor fellow ends up and then gets well taken care of and yeah, gets an opportunity [Kristin, 61].

Here an idea begins to crystalise, that as long as the migrants are kept away from ‘Swedish society’, they will remain non-Swedish. The migrants need to be brought to ‘us’, so that ‘they’ can become more ‘integrated’, and more like ‘us’. Here, the respondents are all very careful in how they construct the meaning of integration, both implicitly and as a form of explicit reflexivity:

I’m thinking about our Iranian friends who I talked about, what is it that makes me think they’re integrated? They have like a hundred percent Persian culture still, but they’re integrated. But they have their angle on it. I mean we

share values with them, like some common sense and so, but I don't know, it's possible that they've freed themselves from the religion I think, we don't talk about it much. But in reality I guess they're different from us in many ways, so. But then it's just exciting, you know, if you like flip it around. So what integration means at the end of the day, that I think is a difficult question [Peter, 50].

Peters' reflection is telling of how the discourse makes it impossible to define 'Swedishness' and 'integration' as a path thereto, in terms of cultural assimilation, as that would imply an ethno-pluralist idea of different cultures as incompatible (Elgenius & Rydgren 2018). Peters' friends are said to have a "*hundred percent Persian culture*", still they are considered integrated members of the *community*. So, in what sense must the migrant others become like 'us'? What have Peters Iranian friends done to earn their right as members of the community?

The immigrants I meet are well educated, and they have usually taken care of this bit, they've taken care of the language [Peter, 50].

The most significant item of meaning that is injected into 'integration' is that one speaks the Swedish language. It is stressed time and time again and becomes the object of most of the interviewees' prescriptions for what needs to be done to solve the problems they perceive, and this is part of why segregation is constructed as a primary practical problem, that the Swedish language is not *the* language of the 'small societies of others'. The Swedish language is understood as a minimal prerequisite for attaining employment in Sweden; and it is precisely that one 'contributes' to 'Swedish society' that is constructed as the criteria for membership in the community. The need for a reduced immigration is, as such, also constructed in terms of there being too high a degree of migrant 'others' who are currently not contributing to 'Swedish society', and that this threatens to erode the community.

If you have the possibility to contribute, then you have to contribute. You can't just come here and receive, because then you destroy the Swedish model. And I think that maybe, in some way maybe we should have a demand that you must learn the language, a demand that you should be able to work somehow, so that you don't just come here and like, cost [Johan 28].

From this one can begin to gather a further understanding of the form of civic nationalism that situates the interviewees' problem construction. If the civic nationalism can be understood in terms of adherence to a *creed* (Smith 1986: 135; Ignatieff 1994: 6) before ethnicity and cultural particularity, then a principle of this *creed* is increasingly taking form along the lines of contributing, or at least striving towards contributing. This theoretical interpretation is given

further validity when looking at what meaning the participants ascribe to the immigration of the past. When talking about their first memories of immigration or encounters with immigrants, these things are spoken of in a descriptive, matter-of-fact manner where insofar as it is valued, it is positively so.

We had some labour migration, so there were some people who came from Yugoslavia and they were never, I mean, they came from another country but as labour migrants it was all very well adjusted and not strange at all, I mean they worked at the factory like everyone else [Kristina, 61].

The way the respondents understand the immigration of the past rhymes well with the idea that the Swedish population embodies a collective positive relationship with the labour migration of the post-war era (Demker 2014: 105). But labour migration is not only understood as having been a well-functioning cog in some Sweden of the past. It is rather projected to be something that will be required in the future as well, which is stated with emphasis by most of the interviewees:

We are going to be in need of labour migration because we're going to, when you look at health and care services and school and we see it in several sectors, we're going to be in need of labour migration! [Bengt 53].

This further adds to the interpretation of 'contribution' as a central principle of the political *creed* that members of the community must adhere to. The labour migration of the past was sound because the migrants immediately became contributing members of 'Swedish society', whereas the immigration of the more recent era has migrants remaining non-contributing, and therefore, non-members for too long. In constructing membership along these lines, the participants avoid making appeals to ethnic or cultural differences, which serves as an implicit positioning against the ethno-pluralism of the Sweden Democrats.

#### **4.4 Two sides of the Swedish civic nationalist flag: 'Demands' and 'Help'**

Above it was argued that the Swedish national day as well as the mainstream media discourse on immigration functions as *flagging* of a form of national identity that includes immigrants but excludes Sweden Democrats from the imagined community. This section will connect the dots of the previous sections of the analysis, in mapping the form of civic nationalism that situates the constructions and positionings in the material and providing an understanding of the *national identity* that underlie these processes.

The immigration scepticism that is visible in the material is not rooted in a questioning of immigration *per se*. The scepticism pertains to the ways in which it is, and has been, governed.

To halt immigration is not seen as an end in itself, but as a means towards gaining the necessary breathing room for the creation of effective institutions that serve to ‘help’ the immigrants who are already here, delivering them from marginalisation and into a membership of the community. Only once this has been taken care of should Sweden resume to accept additional immigrants within its borders. Because ‘we’ as a rich country, *should* help people, of this there is an agreement. But if you as an immigrant is welcomed here, then ‘we’ expect if of you to contribute:

Of course we have to help people! But then we can make demands and we are way too soft on making the right demands [...] It becomes an integration problem, for all those who are here who struggle to become part of society. These people have to become employed so that they can start contributing [Niklas, 51].

Here, Niklas is textually flagging nationhood (Billig 1995: 98). The statement builds on an imagining of the Swedish community as consisting of contributing members. Thus, this form of flagging tells the ‘immigrant’ what he must do in order to become a member of the Swedish community. This is the ‘demands’ side of the textual civic nationalist flagging. Interestingly, the two interviewees who are most adamant regarding ‘demands’ provide the caveat that the demands apply: “*Regardless of if you’re Swedish or whatever nationality you have*” (Bengt, 53), and that “*Everyone has to be treated equally, it’s the same thing with our own native-born Swedish citizens*” (Niklas, 51).

It is fair to assume that what this caveat signifies, above all else, is a will to avoid the unfavourable ethnic implications of constructing the *creed* and membership in terms of contributing. The caveat appears directly following statements prescribing tougher demands on immigrants. Of course, the interviewees are aware that there are, in their own words, native-born Swedes who do not ‘contribute’ to society. Thus, the caveat represents a choice, where they would rather choose to exclude non-contributing native Swedes from the imagined community, rather than granting them rights of membership on purely ethnic grounds. Because to exclude non-contributing immigrants, while including non-contributing natives would necessarily make ethnicity or nativity essential for membership. As such, this serves a further positioning against the Sweden Democrats and it strengthens the interpretation of their nationalism as civic, due to it being constructed in opposition to ethnic grounds for membership.

This side of the textual flag is directed outwards, in that it signifies that ‘we’ are Swedish because of our contributing, and for you to become a member of ‘our’ community, you too must adhere to the *creed* which demands that you contribute. The other side is directed inwards, in that it tells ‘us’ what is expected of ‘us’ as Swedes, and that is to ‘help’.

Milos, whose parents immigrated to Sweden from Serbia in the early 1990s recounts the experiences of the recently immigrated spouses of his siblings. Both his brother- and sister-in-

law have expressed a disillusionment over the lack of ‘help’ provided to them by the government, as well as of the quality of SFI (Swedish for immigrants).

*My brother’s wife, she came alone, she immigrated when was it, in 2012, and it was the same then you know. SFI, you’re going to do SFI, period, nothing else. It was just, you’re going to go at these times, nothing else, she didn’t get any other tool. If she had questions or needed help with anything, no, it was just SFI in that case [...] Same thing with by sisters’ husband, he’s also from Serbia. He did SFI for a month or two, then he felt, no this isn’t working, I’m not getting anything done, I learn better on my own, so he quit too. He learned Swedish all by himself [Milos, 30].*

Aside from Milos, Judith is the one who has the most first-hand insight into the experiences of immigrants. She is engaged in local church programmes that seek to help immigrants on the ground, and she is also in contact with a migrant from Afghanistan whom she helps financially, and she has also allowed him to register himself to her address, as a way of helping him along the residence-bureaucratic process.

I feel that the government should take its responsibility and take better care of and make better programmes for those who are already here so that they become integrated, now they’re just tossed to the wind [Judith, 54].

The other participants who have less first-hand knowledge of the immigrants’ situations in Sweden share the idea that not enough is done to help those who are already reside within the Swedish borders. Here one can observe a discursive struggle over the meaning of ‘humane’. The interviewees agree that those who are currently for ‘open borders’ most likely base their sentiment on a will to be ‘humane’. But the participants question the ‘humanity’ of allowing people within the Swedish borders just to subject them to a daunting bureaucratic process “where you get people who sit and become apathic at a refugee shelter for years without moving forward in the process, that’s not humane, it’s disgusting” (Niklas, 51), where if they are finally deemed worthy to stay, they are then left to a life of segregation, marginalisation, and exponentially worsening living conditions in ‘vulnerable’ areas. This is compounded with an idea of people that currently promote ‘open borders’ as being ‘naïve’ and ‘dislocated from reality’, blind to the allegedly rapid deterioration of the situation at hand. The labelling of this conflicting notion of ‘humane’ as ‘naïve’ serves to discredit it, and by extension to further their own meaning as the true one (Börjesson 2003: 21).

I think that immigrants in countries where they take in a limited amount, and a smaller amount than Sweden, I think they have a better quality of life, because they get the attention and the tools that they need, in comparison to how it is in Sweden [Milos, 30].

Therefore, this is not an opposition to the ‘Swedish’ nationalism that has historically been pro-immigraton, but rather a different configuration of it. The focus on ‘help’ in creating better systems and programmes for integration is still an expression of a Swedish national identity as ‘humane’ and ‘helping’, but it is being constructed as a ‘reflexive’ and ‘pragmatic’ humanism that stands in opposition to a ‘naïve’ humanism’, that some respondents concede that they themselves used to harbour.

This with ‘open your hearts’, I agreed you know. I thought it was completely right, but I didn’t think one step further then [...] To open our hearts, to take care of these poor people in a humanitarian way overshadowed that there would be problems down the line [Niklas, 51].

The underlying point is that for themselves as ‘good’, ‘rational’, and ‘reflexive’ ‘non-Sweden Democrats’ the purpose is that immigrants should be ‘helped’ and be given a chance to become members of Sweden, and a reduced immigration is constructed as a means towards this end. Therefore, the focus on ‘help’ can be understood as an inward textual flagging. It tells ‘us’ that it is in ‘our’ national identity to be ‘humane’ and ‘help’ those less fortunate. So, where the outward flagging of demands excludes non-contributors from the national community, this inward flagging excludes Sweden Democrats, on the basis that they do not live up to the ‘Swedish’ civic nationalist *creed*, which decrees that the immigrants should be ‘helped’. This form of flagging can also be understood as a rallying cry for the ‘saving’ of a Sweden that distinguishes itself from other countries based on its ‘humanitarian’ national identity, on the basis of a fear that a continued immigration without the necessary systems for integration, might undo the prerequisites for its existence:

I think the stability of a society is very much about the cleavages not being large enough for society to tear itself apart. Even if you say that the cleavages are widening, which they are, as a society we can still kind of see from one side to the other [...] the bigger the inequality the more unrest you get, so we can’t just bring in an unlimited amount [of immigrants], [Kristin, 61].

## 6. Concluding discussion

Non-Sweden democrat immigration sceptics position themselves against the Sweden Democrats by constructing them as deviant ‘others’ that are morally, intellectually and socially inferior. The need for a reduced immigration is constructed in terms of it taking too long for immigrants to become members of the imagined community, and that this can be attributed to segregation in the sense that immigrants are ‘lumped together’ in ‘vulnerable’ areas that stand outside of ‘Swedish society’. To be ‘integrated’ is understood in terms of working or otherwise contributing to ‘Swedish society’, and for this reason immigrants must learn the Swedish language, as this is understood as a prerequisite for attaining employment.

Nationhood is textually flagged in two primary ways, by stressing that one must contribute to become a member, and that ‘we’ must place higher demands on immigrants towards ‘their’ integration towards becoming contributing members of society. The other side of the flagging signifies that ‘we’ who are already members must do a better job in ‘helping’ the immigrants to become integrated, so that they may enjoy the fruits of membership, away from marginalisation. Both forms of flagging are part of a ‘Swedish’ civic nationalism, whose *creed* dictates both ‘contributing’ and ‘helping’ as core principles, and this *creed* is discursively reproduced in direct opposition to the racism and ethno-pluralism that is attributed to the Sweden Democrats.

Previous research points to the existence of a nationalism that makes ‘us’ love to hate the Sweden Democrats, this study shows how this aversion remains a powerful social force even for immigration-sceptics, and that their form of immigration scepticism becomes heavily coloured by this underlying ‘Swedish’ civic nationalism. Based on the results of this paper, there is little reason to believe that this nationalism is any different from the one that has historically made the Swedish population open and generous towards immigration, and that has worked as a counterforce to the Sweden Democrats. In line with a Swedish national identity as ‘humane’, they maintain that immigration is a morally ‘good’ thing, but they oppose it based on a contextual perception of the current situation as ‘inhumane’ for immigrants and unsustainable for the Swedish imagined community.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Interview Guide

1: Uppvärmingsfrågor – Skulle du kunna berätta lite om dig själv? Yrke, ålder, utbildning, partisympatier etc.

2: Jag skulle vilja att vi börjar med att du får berätta hur du har sett på invandringen, genom ditt liv. Så om du tar utgångspunkt vid, baserat på vad du kan minnas, var den första tanken, åsikten eller känslan du hade kring invandringen så tar vi det därifrån och går framåt.

3: På vilka sätt är invandringen ett problem?

4: Hur tycker du att Sverige borde gå till väga för att lösa problematiken som du målar upp?

5: De som inte delar din åsikt i den här frågan, varför tror du att de inte gör det?

6: Vad innebär integration för dig?

7: Vad tycker du om samtalsklimatet i invandringsfrågan?

8: Kommer du ihåg Reinfeldts 'Öppna era hjärtan'-tal?/ Hur reagerade du på det?

9: Hur ser du på Sverigedemokraterna?

10: Hur tror du att Sveriges framtid ser ut?

## **Appendix B: Information and Consent Form**

### **Information till deltagare**

I det här dokumentet får du information om studentprojektet "Immigration scepticism and positioning among non-Sweden Democrat voters" för en Masteruppsats, och vad det innebär att delta i detta. Masterprojektet utförs av Alexander Johansson med ansvarig handledare Denis Frank, universitetslektor på Institutionen för Sociologi och Arbetsvetenskap vid Göteborgs universitet.

### **Vad är det för projekt och varför vill ni att jag ska delta?**

Projektet "Immigration scepticism and positioning among non-Sweden Democrat voters" handlar om svenskarnas förändrade attityder gentemot invandring, med ett särskilt fokus på hur invandrings skeptiska icke-Sverigedemokrater framställer dels problematiken med invandringen, men också hur de positionerar sig gentemot Sverigedemokraterna.

Syftet med studien är att bidra till kunskapen om invandrings skeptiska attityder i samtidens Sverige där en majoritet nu vill se en minskad invandring. I tidigare forskning har mycket fokus lagts på Sverigedemokraterna och andra radikala högerpartier. Som tillfrågad för denna studie så tillhör du den gruppen av svenskar som vill se en minskad invandring men som inte röstar på Sverigedemokraterna, och just denna grupp och dess förhållande till Sverigedemokraterna har den politiska sociologin ännu inte utforskat.

Du uppfyller kriterierna för denna studie, och att jag får ta del av dina åsikter och resonemang kommer att möjliggöra för mig att skapa den nödvändiga förståelsen som forskningen behöver.

### **Hur går studien till?**

Om du vill delta blir du intervjuad via Zoom/Teams/Skype i uppskattningsvis 60 minuter.

Ditt namn och personliga detaljer är konfidentiella och kommer inte att användas muntligt eller skriftligt i någon text som studien leder till. Jag skulle vilja spela in intervjun för att ha möjlighet att lyssna på den och skriva ner den efteråt. Intervjufilen kommer förvaras på en lösenordskyddad dator. Ditt namn kommer inte att synas på någon av dessa filer – bara en kod som döljer din identitet.

Om du ångrar dig kan du när som helst välja att avsluta sitt deltagande. När studiens resultat presenteras/publiceras kommer alla deltagares identitet skyddas med hjälp av pseudonym.

### **Vad händer med mina uppgifter?**

Det insamlade materialet kommer att användas för att skriva en Masteruppsats och materialet kan komma att användas i en akademisk tidskrift eller rapport som är riktade till användargrupper och diskuteras på seminarium. Informationen hålls i säkert förvar och är endast tillgänglig för relevanta forskare. Dina svar kommer att anonymiseras så

att obehöriga inte kan ta del av dem. Materialet kan eventuellt senare bli publicerat i någon rapport eller artikel i en akademisk tidskrift.

### **Hur får jag information om resultatet av studien?**

Resultaten kommer publiceras i en Masteruppsats som blir färdig juni 2021. Deltagare kan ladda ner uppsatsen via GUPEA [<https://gupea.ub.gu.se/>].

### **Deltagandet är frivilligt**

Ditt deltagande är frivilligt och samtycke ges muntligt eller skriftligt. Du har möjlighet att ställa frågor om projektet innan du signerar ett samtyckesformulär. Om du ångrar dig kan du när som helst välja att avsluta ditt deltagande under pågående intervju och du behöver inte uppge varför du inte längre vill delta. Du har också rättighet att radera uppgifter i efterhand.

### **Kontaktuppgifter**

Masterstudent Alexander Johansson  
gusjohalbn@student.gu.se

Ansvarig Handledare Denis Frank  
denis.frank@socav.gu.se

### **Samtycke till att delta i studien**

Jag har fått muntlig och skriftlig informationen om studien och har haft möjlighet att ställa frågor. Jag får behålla den skriftliga informationen.

- Jag samtycker till att delta i studien.
- Jag samtycker till att uppgifter om mig behandlas på det sätt som beskrivs ovan

Plats och datum	Namnförtydligande och Underskrift (medverkande)
Plats och datum	Namnförtydligande och Underskrift (student)