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Weird sporting with double edged swords: Understanding 'nasty rhetoric' in Swedish climate politics

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Abstract

Growing powers of populist radical right (PRR) parties in European countries has led to polarisation and a rollback of liberal democracy as well as climate policy. This is the case also in Sweden, a country that has long been seen as a stronghold of liberal democracy, a frontrunner in climate policy and home of a strong civil society and climate justice movement. Since the entry into force of a conservative government collaborating with a PRR party, Swedish climate politics has been described as a musty rant with accusations of betrayal, sin and devil pacts. Using contemporary Swedish climate politics as a case study, this paper qualitatively analyses the systematic use of hate speech and cultural violence for political purposes – *nasty politics* with *nasty rhetoric*. Based on empirical data from political debates, articles in newspapers and magazines, programmes in radio, television and podcasts, and posts social media, it is found that leading right-wing and PRR politicians, including the prime minister, cabinet ministers and leading parliamentarians, 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". They use nasty rhetoric to silence their opponents. Pro-climate advocates are also using incivil language, not to silence the parties in power, but to reveal them and their climate policy as a naked emperor. The use of nasty rhetoric can be described as a *double-edged sword*, aiming to silence the opponents to the current paradigm shift in Swedish climate policy, while at the same time mobilising followers through conspiracy theories with fantasies and symbolic threats to expand the *weird sport* of nasty rhetoric.

Keywords: Climate politics; democracy; hate speech; nasty politics; populist radical right; violence.

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1. Introduction

The world is witnessing a "third wave of autocratisation" with rising powers of populist radical right[2] (PRR) parties (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; V-Dem Institute, 2026). To reach their political aim, replacing the 'left-liberal hegemony' (Mouffe, 2005), the PRR movement disseminates conspiracy theories and lies about the state of society, and they use incivil language including hatred and threats in their political rhetoric to ostracise and silence their opponents (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013; Moffitt, 2016; Lührmann et al., 2020; Mudde, 2021; Zeitzoff, 2023).

1.1 Previous research

Use of online and offline hate speech (Chetty & Alathur, 2018; Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021; Peters, 2022; Vergani et al., 2024) as tactics in PRR politics is well-known in policy domains such as migration and family policy, targeting personal and group identities based on ethnicity, religion, gender, disabilities et cetera (e.g. Yılmaz, 2012; Gardell, 2015; Sager & Öberg, 2017; Lutz, 2019; 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 the European Union (EU) countries are harmed by online hate speech on an almost daily basis (Berecz & Devinat, 2017).

Several studies report that hate speech has now spread to climate politics (Berglund et al., 2024; von Malmborg, 2024; Bjerström, 2025; Mendy & Karlsson, 2025). Initially it was used by singular political advocates and deniers of climate change in the framing of climate change policy (e.g. Knight & Greenberg, 2011; Sharman & Howarth, 2017; Pandey, 2024). Anderson and Huntington (2017) found that online hate speech on climate change was 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 often circle climate denialism, misogyny and sexism in combination (Agius et al., 2021; Andersson, 2021; Park et al., 2021; Vowles & Hultman, 2021a; White, 2022; Arce-García et al., 2023).

The hatred of the PRR and climate sceptics is also targeting climate journalists, aiming to discredit individual journalists, newspapers and public service media but also to undermine the deliberative function of online user fora (Björkenfeldt & Gustafsson, 2023; Schulz-Tomančok & Woschnagg, 2024; Bjerström, 2025). More recently, some studies also report hate speech targeting climate scientists (Brax, 2024; Mendy & Karlsson, 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'. Addressing populist parties at the radical, far-right end of the political spectrum, the paper uses the terms 'populist radical right' (PRR) or 'radical right' in short for denoting a party or parties, and 'radical right populism' to denote the ideology. These parties are usually racist and ethnonationalist, with anti-immigration sentiments (Mudde, 2004), and could sometimes use violence but more in a structural than direct sense.

Research on hate speech in climate politics has mainly examines single target groups and lacks a comprehensive account of how such rhetoric is used across target groups. Since hate speech is increasingly described as a threat to democracy and effective climate governance (e.g. Newell, 2008; Goodman & Morton, 2014; United Nations, 2019; Lindvall & Karlsson, 2023; von Malmborg, 2024; Bjerström, 2025), better knowledge of its tactical and strategic use in climate politics could provide insights on such claims.

1.2 Aims

This paper examines the use of hate speech and other types of violence, grouped together as *nasty rhetoric* (Zeitzoff, 2023), as tactics in climate politics. While hate speech is difficult to define (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Brown, 2017; Hietanen & Eddebo, 2022), nasty rhetoric is broader and more appropriate as analytical concept. It connects hate speech to other political tools, including advocacy, budgeting and governance of state authorities. A comprehensive analysis of different tactics used to silence critics to PRR climate policy is provided by von Malmborg (2024).

Based on a case study of contemporary in Swedish climate politics, the aim is to draw attention to and provoke discussion on the use and nature of nasty rhetoric in a policy area shaped more by divergent political opinions than by personal or cultural identity. The paper raises rather than resolves questions (cf. Toulmin, 2012) about the role of nasty rhetoric in politics (Table 1).

Table 1. Research questions

Number	Topic	Questions
R1	Offenders and their use	Who uses nasty rhetoric, why, in what forms and in which fora?
R2	Targets	Who are targeted, for what reasons?
R3	Differences in use between offenders	Is there a difference in types of incivil language and level of aggression depending on who is using it and for what reason?
R4	Followers	Why are some people following suit to expand the use of nasty rhetoric?

Next section presents nasty politics with nasty rhetoric as a theoretical framework for the analysis, linking it to social disciplining in emotional governance. Section 3 presents the case study context, the method and material used. Empirical results are presented in section 4, while section 5 analyses and reflects upon the results in relation to literature on hate speech and violence from different disciplines. Section 6 draws conclusions and presents avenues for further research.

2. Theoretical framework

The concept of *nasty politics* was introduced to analyse political leaders' use of a set of tactics "to insult, accuse, denigrate, threaten and in rare cases physically harm their domestic opponents" (Zeitzoff, 2023, p. 6). The core of nasty politics is the use of *nasty rhetoric*, characterised by contentious rhetoric containing

elements of hatred and aggression to oppress and invoke fear and hatred that entrenches pernicious polarisation between an ingroup (Us) and an outgroup (Them) (Klein, 2020; Somer et al., 2021; Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022). When targeting specific people or groups of enemies, nasty rhetoric serves as state repression, which can be soft or hard (Ferree, 2004; Earl, 2011; Peterson & Wahlström, 2015; Berglund et al., 2024).

Acts of nasty rhetoric are designed to denigrate, deprecate, delegitimise, dehumanise and hurt outgroup targets emotionally to invoke fear that makes them silent (Kalmoe et al., 2018; Zeitzoff, 2023). Nasty rhetoric includes measures of soft repression, which in essence is psychological violence, but also other kinds of hateful, hate-filled or hate-fuelled actions such as economic, legal and in rare cases physical violence that involves force to control or crush oppositional action (Table 2).

Table 2. Typology of nasty rhetoric

Type of nasty rhetoric	Type of repression	Description	Level of aggression
Insults	Soft	Name-calling, including ridicule, hyperbole, stigma 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	Soft	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)
Economic sanctions	Hard	Detention, economic suspension	Economic violence
Legal sanctions	Hard	Denunciation, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP), arrest, fines, imprisonment	Legal violence
Physical violence	Hard	Assault, beating, rape, murder.	Physical violence

Based on Ferree (2004), Earl (2011), Peterson & Wahlström (2015), Zeitzoff (2023), and Berglund et al. (2024).

Nasty rhetoric is not only directed towards specific individuals or groups, the immediate victims, but also more broadly towards people in society in general. This is to prevent them from holding values, beliefs or cultural identities that deviate from those of people in power. Such *message effect* of nasty rhetoric (cf. Bell & Perry, 2014; Hagerlid, 2020; Marwick, 2025) creates *emotion rules* (Hochschild, 1983; Wettergren, 2012; Flam, 2024) used to discipline people in emotional governance of society (Foucault, 1977; Durnová, 2018).

In all, hate and hatred is central in nasty rhetoric. 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). Research 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).

Hatred towards opponents is not only conveyed explicitly by speech acts or written language, but also encompasses image-based communication with photos, pictures and videos (Bleiker, 2017; Chang, 2019; Olson (2020), as well as gesture (Goldstein et al., 2020). The PRR movement deploys a range of visual images to portray its ideas, e.g. Pepe the Frog memes (Bedford, 2017). It can also include 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 (Mendoza-Denton, 2020; Shah, 2024).

Nasty rhetoric works holistically: insults, accusations, threats and violence do not happen in isolation but often together and not necessarily sequentially (Zeitzoff, 2023). , whereby different types and expressions. Overt hate can interact with subtler forms that conceal, amplify or legitimise more aggressive rhetoric (cf. McIntosh, 2020). Deprecation may be a precursor to more targeted violent rhetoric and action. It serves as a provocation and incitement to addressees and bystanders. As for violence, "speech can and does inspire crime" (Cohen-Almagor et al., 2018, p. 38; Schweppe & Perry, 2021). This is the essence of what German linguist Victor Klemperer (2002, p. 15), stated when analysing the rhetoric of the Nazis:

> *"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."*

Nasty rhetoric has been described as a type of or trigger event of terrorism, defined as any intentional act directed against life or related entities causing a common danger (Chetty & Alathur, 2018; Piazza, 2020). In the event of nasty rhetoric instigated by politicians in power, like Donald Trump's incitement before the storming of Capitolium in January 2021, Zeitzoff (2023) refers to 'state terrorism'. Such terrorism is mediated through increased political polarisation caused by political hate speech (cf. Jamieson & Taussig, 2017; Klein, 2020).

3. Qualitative case study

The paper is based on a qualitative case study of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics from 2022 and onwards (von Malmborg, 2026). This year saw the ethnonationalist party *Sweden Democrats* (SD) becoming second largest party in the Swedish parliament (Riksdag) and thus gaining tangible powers in Swedish politics. At the same time, there was an increase in media reports on hate speech and hard state repression targeting climate justice activists.

The case is informative beyond Sweden because it combines recent pressure on liberal democracy, international climate policy leadership and strong climate justice movements. Until recently, Sweden has been considered:

1. a stronghold of liberal democracy (Silander, 2024),
2. an international role model in climate policy and governance (Duit, 2016; Matti et al., 2021), and
3. the home of strong social movements advocating climate justice (de Moor et al., 2020; Wahlström & Uba, 2024).

The entering office of the Tidö government in autumn 2022, consisting of the *Moderates* (M, conservative), the *Christian Democrats* (KD) and the *Liberals* (L) in collaboration with SD, has made the image of Sweden in all these areas crack. Despite being considered one of the world's strongest liberal democracies (V-Dem Institute, 2026), more in-depth research show that Sweden is undergoing a process of rapid autocratisation and the end of Swedish exceptionalism regarding PRR (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019; Widfeldt, 2023; Silander, 2024; Avellan et al., 2026; Novak & Sundström, 2026). Swedish climate policy is denounced (von Malmborg, 2024; Widerberg et al., 2024; Malm et al., 2025; Ergon, 2026), and Swedish civil society is repressed (Civil Rights Defenders, 2023; Berglund et al., 2024; Ardin, 2026).

3.1 Rollback of Swedish climate policy

3.1.1 Climate policy before 2022

Sweden was the second country globally to introduce carbon dioxide (CO_2) taxation on fossil fuels. 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 (Widerberg et al., 2024). To strengthen Swedish climate policy, the 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, at the latest the calendar year after national elections, a *Climate Action Plan* (CAP) with policies and measures to reach the targets; 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 climate targets.

From 1990 to 2024, Sweden's domestic emissions of GHG decreased by almost 40 %. During the same period, the simultaneous increase of economic growth and GHG emissions in previous decades was decoupled. GHG emissions per unit of GDP, the GHG intensity, decreased.

3.1.2 Tidö climate policy

The long-term trend of declining GHG emissions made a U-turn when the Tidö parties entered office in 2022. With the Tidö Agreement, they advocated a radical change of Swedish climate policy and governance, stressing that Sweden emits only 0.2 % of global GHG emissions and that further reductions would be expensive and have no effect.

While other Swedish parties have long since agreed on the need for strong climate policy, SD and other PRR parties began denying climate change in the 2010s (Jylhä et al., 2020; Vihma et al., 2021; Ekberg & Pressfeldt, 2022). Considering strong climate policy as a threat to economic growth and people's freedom and way of life, they obstruct national as well as EU climate politics (Hultman et al., 2019; Vowles et al., 2024). By including climate policy in the Tidö agreement, SD created an opportunity to not only veto but dictate Tidö climate policy. 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). Bargaining on finalising the CAP in 2023, SD managed to reduce overall climate policy ambitions by deleting short- and medium-term targets and actions important for reaching long-term targets.

Many have analysed the policy changes adopted by the Tidö parties, and how these have increased total GHG emissions by approximately 25 % over a four-year period (von Malmborg, 2024; Widerberg et al., 2024; Malm et al., 2025; Ergon et al., 2025; Ergon, 2026; SCPC, 2026). The most spectacular changes are the abortion of CO_2 taxation on fossil fuels operative since 1992, and a narrow focus on new nuclear power that has prevented all investments in renewable power production.

The Tidö CAP provides further evidence of the rollback of Swedish climate policy. While the government estimates that policies would reduce GHG emissions to zero by 2045, the government's expert authority on climate change, SWEPA (2024), estimates a gap of 35 % (Figure 1). The reason being that the government, in violation of EU and UN reporting standards, accounted for GHG reductions of policies it had aborted and policies that had neither been designed, nor decided upon.

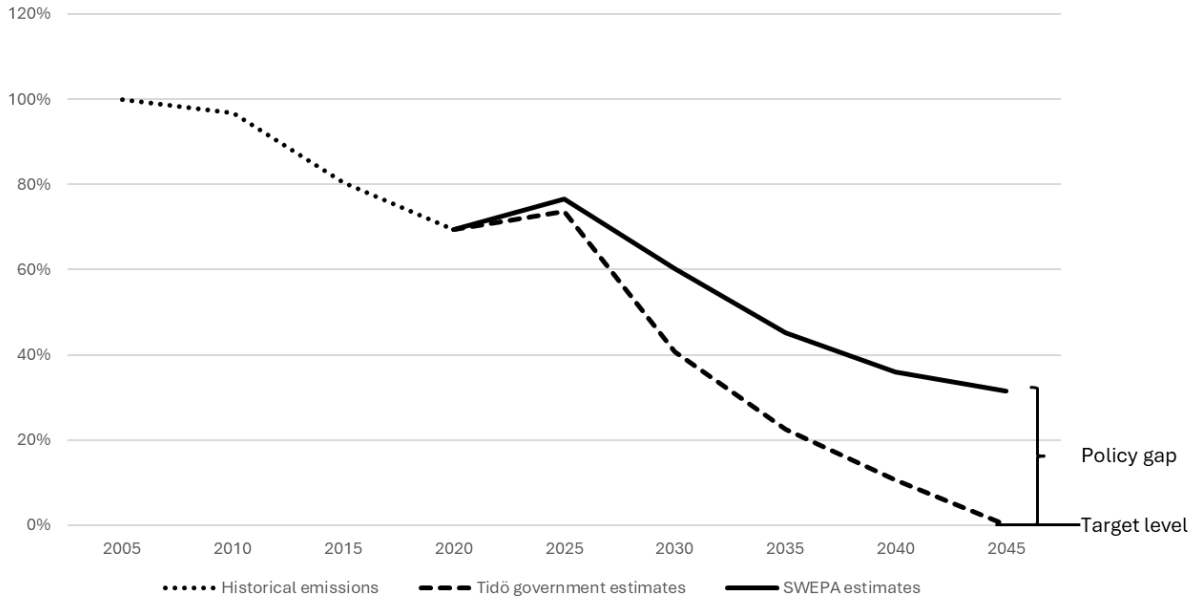

Figure 1. Policy gap to meet the long-term climate target. Data source: SWEPA (2024).

3.1.3 Critique of Tidö climate policy

Tidö climate policies have been heavily criticised domestically and internationally. In Sweden, centre-left politicians, climate scientists, economists, government authorities, the environmental and social justice movement, business associations, citizens and editorial writers in leading newspapers, are critical towards the lack of short- and medium-term domestic action. Both SCPC (2024, 2026) and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SWEPA, 2024) claim that Tidö climate policies will not suffice for Sweden to meet the binding 2045 target on climate neutrality, nor Sweden's responsibilities in relation to EU's 2030 climate target. Tidö climate policy focuses entirely on the long-term target, ignoring climate science saying that reducing every tonne of GHG emitted from now to 2045 is what counts (Lahn, 2021). In all, Tidö climate policy violates the legal responsibilities of nation states advised by the International Court of Justice (ICJ, 2025), why Tidö parties are actively contributing to climate change crime.

While the Tidö parties claim that their climate policies meet 'public legitimacy', Swedish opinion polls show that there is low support for Tidö climate policy (von Malmborg, 2024). The most recent *Global Climate Change Survey* shows that 85 % of Swedes want the government to do more to combat climate change (Andre et al., 2024). Studies also show that only 20 % of Swedes approve the cut of CO_2 taxes and renewable quotas for transport fuels (Barthel & Karlsson 2024).

Internationally, Sweden has dropped from number one to number eleven between 2021 and 2024 in the Climate Change Performance Index (Burck et al., 2024). In 2024, the European Commission clarified it would reject Sweden's application for EUR40 billion funding from the EU Recovery Fund since Sweden will meet neither national nor EU climate targets for 2030. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation

and Development has questioned Sweden's ability to meet EU and domestic climate targets, with emissions projected to increase (OECD, 2025).

3.2 Swedish climate justice activism

The critique of contemporary Swedish climate politics started before the Tidö parties entered office but has intensified since. Concerned with political inaction related to climate emergencies and an ongoing ecocide (Proedrou & Pournara, 2024; Ripple et al., 2024), Swedish climate scientists reacted and inspired the rise of climate justice movements such as *Fridays for Future* (FFF), combining environmentalism and human rights (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014; Cassegård & Thörn, 2017; Sloan & Schmitz, 2025; Fischer et al., 2024).

Climate justice activism is a response to decades of 'post-politicisation' of climate politics (Swyngedouw, 2011). Liberal environmentalism and its discourse on ecological modernisation agreed that something must be done to mitigate climate change, but what should be done was 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; de Moor et al., 2020).

Climate activists and many climate scientists claim that the neoliberal, capitalist economic system is flawed; an insight transformed into a critique of the economic growth paradigm (Bailey et al., 2011; Davidson, 2012). Instead, they advocate economic degrowth (Euler, 2019; Heikkurinen, 2021). They also criticise the liberal democratic system as opposed to a more deliberative and inclusive ecological democracy. They consider liberal democracy unable to deal with social conflicts and in favour of restricted and competitive participation where it pays off to invest in lobbying (Pickering et al., 2020). The climate movement is often discriminated in climate policymaking (von Malmborg, 2024).

Speaking for themselves and 'invisible' or 'silent' victims of climate change, e.g. ecosystems, non-human species, children and vulnerable people across the world (Spapens, 2014), climate justice activists engage to raise public concern about climate emergency, climate change crime and ecocide, and push for climate justice and degrowth in peaceful protests and acts of civil disobedience (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020; Martiskainen et al., 2020). 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).

Following the intensified critique of Tidö climate policies by climate scientists and activists from 2022 and onwards, the number of media reports on hate speech and hard state repression targeting pro-climate advocates in Sweden has increased. Calls for economic degrowth has made pro-climate advocates

'enemies of the state' in the eyes of the PRR, who respond with nasty rhetoric to ostracise and silence these 'enemies'.

Table 3. Categories of direct targets of nasty rhetoric

Victim category	Description
Climate scientist	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 taken or that could be taken by politicians, business leaders, economists, public organisations, social organisations and people to mitigate and adapt to climate change.
Climate justice activist	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). Climate justice 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). Examples of climate justice movements in Sweden are *Fridays for Future* (FFF), *Extinction Rebellion Sweden* (XR), *Mothers Rebellion* (MR) and *Fathers Rebellion* (FR), *Restore Wetlands* (ÅV), and *Reclaim the Future* (ITF), of which FFF, XR and ÅV are considered most radical, performing disruptive civil disobedience and illegal but non-violent actions such as roadblocks, disturbing on-stage culture shows and spraying water soluble paint or soup on buildings and art works. *Science activists* are sub-group of climate justice activists that usually work in universities, but not necessarily with climate research. They are organised in *Scientist Rebellion Sweden* (SR), a sub-group of XR. Being active scientists, they advocate the role of scientific knowledge in public policy. 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).
Climate journalist	Journalists reporting on climate change, climate science, climate action and climate politics in news media.

The main targets are climate justice activists, climate scientists and climate journalists (von Malmborg, 2024; Bjerström, 2025; Mendy & Karlsson, 2025), as defined in table 3. Greta Thunberg and FFF gained widespread attention internationally for several years (Mede & Schroeder, 2024; Wahlström & Uba, 2024), but she turned from pet peeve to *persona non grata* in the PRR community and part of the climate movement when she denounced Israel's atricities in Gaza as genocide (Velinder, 2025).

3.3 Data collection and analysis

While nasty rhetoric is mainly related to PRR, this study does not prejudice that also pro-climate advocates may use acts and expressions that could be categorised as nasty rhetoric. Social media provides important fora and channels for conveying hate speech, and cyberhate has expanded (Olson, 2020; Agius et al., 2021; Tom Tong, 2025). As analysed by Vowles and Hultman (2021b), SD is extensively using a troll army on social media to spread misinformation and cyberhate. However, the anonymous use of nasty rhetoric of the PRR movement and others on social media platforms such as X/Twitter, Facebook or TikTok is not systematically analysed in this study. This choice is made deliberatively since anonymous hate speech tells nothing about which persons and organisations, actively taking part in climate politics, that send and receive them, in which contexts and for what reasons.

Data were collected through qualitative text analysis of secondary material in official policy documents, political debates, newspapers, magazines, blogs, television, radio, social media et cetera. Altogether, 154

pieces of material were identified (see Appendix 1). The expressions were coded by type of nasty rhetoric (see Table 2), sender, organisational affiliation, target, context and communication forum.

3.4 Interpretation with metaphors

The concept of nasty rhetoric is a metaphor but provides only an overall image of hateful rhetoric. It does not tell why hateful rhetoric is used and how it works. To make more sense of *why* and *how* it operates strategically and tactically (cf. Béland, 2011), data is also interpreted using metaphors (cf. Durnová & Zittoun, 2011; Durnová, 2018). Metaphors are used analytically to achieve "certain communication goals within particular contexts rather than being predetermined by bodily experience" (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 247). A flexible use of metaphors is applied to capture the complexity and sometimes counter-intuitive character of contemporary political conflict and rhetoric (cf. Morgan, 2016).

4. Results

The study finds that incivil language is used across the political scale, from left to right. But as reported below, there is a difference. While pro-climate advocates only use insults and accusations, political leaders and influencers from all Tidö parties, including the prime minister (PM) and cabinet ministers, use or instigate all types of nasty rhetoric, from insults and other forms of psychological violence to economic, legal and physical violence.

The heat is on to the extent that a leading Swedish newspaper describes Swedish climate politics as a musty rant with accusations of betrayal, sin and devil pacts.

4.1 Tidö politicians, influencers and supporters as offenders

4.1.1 Psychological violence

Insults are the mildest type of nasty rhetoric. They are used by leading politicians from all Tidö parties, press secretaries and climate policy spokespersons in political debates, press conferences and social media to ridicule and delegitimise oppositional politicians, climate scientists, activists and journalists (Table 4).

The second level of nasty rhetoric includes manipulating accusations, claiming with fiction or conspiracy theories that opponents are illegal or shady (cf. Radnitz, 2021). In Swedish climate politics, accusations grasped from thin air are mainly directed towards public service media, climate scientists and climate activists, but also towards civil servants in national agencies (Table 5).

Table 4. Insults made by right-wing politicians, influencers 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
PM Kristersson (M); Climate policy spokesperson Martin Kinnunen (SD)	Press conference on CAP	Climate scientists	Climate science is "just an opinion that we don't need to care about"	Response to critique of SCPS 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[#]
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	Comment in Swedish public service radio feature on the Tidö climate policy where a climate scientist presented his opinion
Chair of the Riksdag industry committee Tobias Andersson (SD)	Face-to-face confrontation	Greta Thunberg, climate activists	Andersson redirected his steps and walked across a banner of climate activists when he identified Greta Thunberg among them.	FFF demonstration blocking the entrance to the Riksdag.
Nyheter Idag, Fria Tider (radical right online media)	News articles	Climate activists	"Leftish activists"; "muppets"	Commenting climate activist roadblocks
Timbro (libertarian think tank)	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. Available at: https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/0b09ab52d60b4f8f8212acc1b71fbbb8/sveriges-klimatstrategi---46-forslag-for-klimatomstallning-i-ljuset-av-fit-for-55.pdf. Accessed 20 Aug 2026.

Table 5. Accusations made by right-wing politicians, influencers 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
Member of the Riksdag (MR) Mattias Karlsson (SD), lead ideologist	Interview in Swedish tabloid *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
Minister of education and research Mats Persson (L)	Interview in public service television	Climate scientists	"Scientists' climate activism under-mines public trust in science."	Comment on climate actions of Scientist Rebellion
Chair of the Riksdag industry committee Andersson (SD), 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 FFF
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
Climate policy spokesperson Martin Kinnunen (SD); Social policy spokesperson Clara Aranda (SD)	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
PM 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
PM 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
Members of the Riksdag Fredrik Kärrholm (M), Jan Ericson (M)	X/Twitter	Climate activists, Extinction Rebellion	"Terrorists"	Comment to accusations of PM Kristersson regarding Extinction Rebellion
Legal policy spokesperson Pontus A Garpvall (SD)	Interview in *Aftonbladet*	Climate activists	"Terrorists"	Comment related to climate actions at airports

Svenska Dagbladet (independent conservative newspaper)	Editorial	MP	"Extreme environ-mentalism"; "Political arm of the climate justice movement".	Commenting the Tidö government's CAP
Former gas supply coordinator at Swedish Energy Agency	Interview in right-wing journal *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

Leading Tidö members of the Riksdag have accused civil servants in the Government Offices of Sweden (GOS) and national agencies of being activists, taking employment to drive their private agenda. A leading SD politician has confirmed that he always brings a blacklist of non-political staff in GOS that SD want to fire for having wrong opinions. This is like, but far behind the Trump administration's Project 2025 to reshape the federal government of the US and consolidate executive power in favour of PRR policies.

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.

Accusations are closely linked to the third level of nasty rhetoric, intimidations. These are more explicit threats of economic and/or legal violence against an opponent. Intimidations are mainly directed to climate activists, suggesting stronger state repression, but also towards climate scientists and journalists (Table 6).

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 PRR movement 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, which set in motion an online hate campaign:

> *"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."*

Table 6. Intimidations made by right-wing politicians, influencers and supporters

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
Chair of the Riksdag industry committee Andersson (SD); Migration minister Johan Forsell (M)	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
Legal policy spokesperson Garpvall (SD)	Interview in *Aftonbladet*	Climate activists	"Climate actions should be charged in courts as acts of terrorism" "Swedish anti-terrorism legislation need to be changed so that climate activists surely can be charged for terrorism"	Comment related to climate actions at airports
Conservative and PRR newspapers	Editorials	Climate activists	"Swedish Institute for Human Rights" should be abolished" "Sweden should exit the UN Aarhus Convention on the Rights of Environmental Movements"	Comment related to climate actions at airports and proposal by SD to change anti-terrorism legislation
Martin Kinnunen (SD), climate policy spokesperson	Press conference on SCPC's annual report	Climate scientists, SCPC	"I will make sure your mandate is revised."	Response to critique of SCPC and climate scientists on Tidö's climate policies
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
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
MR Björn Söder (SD)	Interview in leftish newspaper *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

Incitements are threats encouraging or facilitating physical violence against opponents, which if the statement is followed through would imply physical harm to opponents. Most incitements are targeting climate activists and made by well-known PRR extremist linked to media site Exakt24, or public PRR influencers (Table 7).

Table 7. Incitements made by right-wing politicians, influencers 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
PRR influencer, former MR (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 EU elections in 2024
PRR journalist tied to Alternative for Sweden (AfS)[#], SD and the Swedish white power movement	Telegram and PRR extremist media site Exakt24	Climate activists, particularly in XR	Posting of photos, names, addresses, phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Followers are encouraged to infiltrate and seek accommodation with climate activists.	Facilitation of hunting down climate activists for further harassment and physical violence
PRR extremists	Exakt24, Telegram	Climate journalist	"His daddy is 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
Right-wing climate deniers	E-mail	Female climate journalists	"You will be raped!"	Critique towards established media reports on climate change

[#] AfS was formed by PRR extremists when SD's youth organisation was expelled from the mother party.

4.1.2 Economic and legal violence

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

After accusations and intimidations of climate activists being saboteurs and terrorists to be imprisoned, prosecutors began to charge climate activists in district courts for more severe crimes with imprisonment on the penalty scale (Table 8). The Supreme Court decided in July 2025 that a roadblock carried out in August 2022 was not a sabotage legally speaking. However, some activists did not appeal and have served time in prison.

Table 8. Economic and legal violence

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
State prosecutors	District courts	Climate activists	Roadblock is sabotage	Between summers 2022 and 2023, 25 activists were convicted for sabotage and sentenced to prison
State prosecutors	District courts	Climate activists	Prosecution of "vandalism together and in concert" and "aiding and abetting vandalism"	Instead of prosecuting only the activists that performed the act of vandalism, all activists present were prosecuted as is if everyone was considered the perpetrator regardless of who did what
Migration Agency	Decision on application for citizenship	Climate activist	"Since you are suspect of a crime, you have shown that you do not meet the requirement of an honest way of life"	EU-citizen working in Sweden charged for vandalism together and in concert but later acquitted
National Police Authority (NPA)	Arrest and interrogation without suspicion of crime	Climate activist	Arrest and transfer to the border police and the Migration Agency's detention centre for potential deportation. NPA claimed that "participation in civil disobedience poses a threat to the democratic basic order and a serious threat to public order and security"	EU-citizen working in Sweden taking active part in climate actions
Swedish Energy Agency	Decision on employment	Civil servant active in Mother Rebellion	She was fired from her employment as national gas coordinator for being a climate activist	Decision made after accusations and intimidations by her predecessor and subsequent allegations in right-wing and PRR media and the minister for civil defence that she was a potential criminal and a threat to Swedish national security
Public Health Agency	Internal communication	Civil servants	Raising climate change issues is activistic and a violation of the state's values	Response to civil servants advocating climate change as a public health issue

The message effect of nasty rhetoric has made directors in government agencies, private media and public service turn suspicious of staff perceived as 'too engaged' in climate change, who are then fired or assigned new duties. It has also made the Police Authority act more repressively. A climate activist and scientist who is citizen of another EU state got arrested without suspicion of crime and transferred to the Migration Agency for potential deportation. In a letter to the Migration Agency, the Policy Authority claimed, in contradiction to Swedish legislation, that:

> *"Participation in civil disobedience shows that the activist is engaged in criminal acts to bring about social change that can only be achieved through political decisions. The activist poses a threat to the democratic basic order and a serious threat to public order and security and should thus be deported."*

4.1.3 Physical violence

After the 2022 name-and-shame campaign targeting climate activists, five masked people attacked a climate action and assaulted one activist. In 2024, five masked members of a neo-Nazi fight club attacked a political meeting organised by V and MP on how to deal with nasty politics and its implications for democracy. Several people, including senior citizens, were assaulted.

4.2 Oppositional politicians and pro-climate advocates as offenders

Insults from pro-climate advocates and journalists are mainly targeting the government and SD as a collective, but also individual ministers, in particular the PM and the climate minister (Table 9).

Table 9. Insults made by oppositional politicians and pro-climate advocates

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
MR 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
MR Jytte Guteland (S), 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 […] but right now it is very obvious to the Swedish people, journalists and politicians in this chamber that [she] 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	Welcome to 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
Politics journalist	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'

‡ Quotation marks insinuate that the meeting was not a real climate meeting and that civil society organisations were not properly represented.

In comparison to insults, accusations are mainly used by oppositional politicians and some groups of scientists (Table 10). Most explicit in accusing the Tidö parties and individual ministers were Märta Stenevi and Per Bolund, then party leaders of MP.

Table 10. Accusations made by oppositional politicians and pro-climate advocates

Sender	Channel	Target	Rhetoric	Context
MR Per Bolund (MP), then party leader	Party leader debate in the Riksdag	PM Kristersson (M)	"Provoking naked liar"	Response to accusation of the prime minister that the S-MP government decided to decommission four nuclear power plants
MR Andrea Andersson Tay (V)	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
MR Tony Haddou (V)	Climate policy debate in the Riksdag	Energy minister Ebba Busch (KD)	"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
MR Märta Stenevi (MP), then party leader	Climate policy debate in the Riksdag	Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	"You are a minister in an extremely weak 'puppet government' [of] 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
MR Stenevi (MP), then party leader	Climate policy debate in the Riksdag	Prime minister Ulf Kristersson (M)	"This 'puppet government' does not understand the urgency of halting global warming. It is clueless at best and cynical at worst"	Critique of PM Kristersson'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'"
MR Sätherberg (S), 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
MR Elin Söderberg (MP), 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
MR Guteland (S)	Riksdag debate on climate policy	Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	"The government communicates with the opposition through media rather than personal meetings. […] One begins to think whether this rhetoric is a way to divert thoughts from the lack of concreteness in climate policy."	Critique of the process for preparing the CAP, referring to the prime minister's claim that the government should seek broad support for the CAP from many parties
MR Guteland (S)	Riksdag debate on climate policy	Climate minister Pourmokhtari (L)	"In politics the motto 'I can do it myself' works very poorly. […] Thus, this superhero attitude of yours is not satisfactory. The climate	Critique of the climate minister constantly referring to herself as 'a liberal minister in a right-wing government

			minister stands very alone in an uncomfortable situation."	in which SD has no ministers'
Economics scholars in Swedish Finance Policy Council (SFPC)	Annual report to the government 2024 (SFPC, 2024, p. 15)	Tidö parties	"The CAP […] 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 (SCPC)	Annual report to the government 2024 (SCPC, 2024, p. 8)	Tidö parties	"The claim that the action plan leads 'all the way to net zero' is factually flawed."	Critique of the Tidö parties' climate policies

5. Discussion

What can we learn about nasty politics and nasty rhetoric from this case study? This section reflects on the results in relation to previous research on hate speech, violence and state repression from a variety of disciplines; e.g. philosophy, political science, criminology, sociology, social psychology, psychology and psychiatry. Looking into the macro-, meso- and micro-level causes and motives of hate speech and violence, it gives an account of the ebb and flow of nasty rhetoric.

5.1 Comparing the use and users of incivil language in Swedish climate politics

Use of nasty rhetoric in Swedish climate politics 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).

In the 1970s and 80s, hate speech targeting then prime minister Olof Palme (S) was prominent. Right-wing politicians and industry leaders accused him of being a "drug addict", "Russian spy", "manic liar", "double nature" and "a deformed and dangerous person with demonic traits". Between 2015 and 2022, the main target of PRR hate speech was Annie Lööf, then leader of the Centre Party. She stood up for socio-liberal and green values, a humane migration politics and criticised the use of hate speech 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 far-right extremist was plotting to kill her.

Politicians but also journalists have been among the victims for long and are specified in Swedish legislation on democracy threatening crime. Manifestation of a more widespread and subtle *banality of 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 incivil language in covert and mundane ways (Milani, 2020). 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' without questioning obvious lies and language becoming increasingly nastier (cf. Freedman, 2018).

5.1.1 Offenders and victims in Swedish climate politics

The study shows that the targets of hate speech in Sweden have expanded, beyond oppositional politicians and journalists, to also include scientists, activists and civil servants. This is not new with climate politics. It can be seen as a continuation and expansion of hate speech targeting members of 'evil' outgroups based on ethnical, religious and gender identities (e.g. Tham et al., 2011; Hagerlid, 2021; Atak, 2022). But climate politics has less to do with personal or cultural identity than ethnicity, religion and gender. People are targeted for their political opinion.

This is not to say that climate policy is not related to cultural identity. Belief in the reality or otherwise of climate change is becoming a marker for cultural identities (Dunlap & McCright, 2011; Masson & Fritsche, 2021). To the PRR, politics is largely about cultural identity (Short, 2016). It is not without reason the PRR in the US and Europe has included climate policy as a battlefield in its culture war to end the 'left-liberal hegemony' (Hunter, 1991; Cunningham et al., 2024; Förell & Fischer, 2025; Weise & Camut, 2025). Strong climate policy is considered a (symbolic) threat to the cultural identity of white supremacist men (cf. Cohen-Almagor, 2018).

With some exceptions, politicians target parties and organisations rather than named individuals. In comparison, PRR extremists target individual politicians, activists, scientists and journalists more directly. Anonymous offenders, often amplified in PRR online forums, help personalise and intensify such attacks.

5.1.2 Nasty rhetoric as a tactic in populist radical right politics

Analysing the results, the study reveals that nasty rhetoric serves at least two purposes related to social disciplining in emotional governance. It is used to harm and silence outgroup 'enemies', while simultaneously consolidating the ingroup and persuade its members to expand hunting down enemies.

Silencing the outgroup

Tidö politicians and followers use all types of nasty rhetoric systematically to delegitimise, dehumanise and threaten opponents to silence. Insults, accusations and intimidations are widely used by Tidö party leaders and cabinet ministers, including the PM. Neoliberal, libertarian and PRR influencers also use incitements The rhetoric appears in official political communication, social media, radio, parliamentary debate and extremist channels, while physical violence is used by PRR extremists.

Nasty rhetoric indirectly targets people in general to prevent them from participating in a public and democratic debate on climate policy (cf. Ilse & Hagerlid, 2025). Directors in many government agencies are cautious with staff being engaged in climate policy. People should refrain from expressing opinions that conflict with those of the Tidö parties.

Climate scientists, activists and journalists are strategic targets of nasty rhetoric. They all have important roles in the functioning of a liberal democracy. Climate scientists produce scientific knowledge, further

circulated by climate activists and climate journalists. Together, they help pro-climate partisans scrutinise current policies and provide alternative policy proposals. Climate journalists make available information on climate change and climate policy to people and voters. Silencing these groups weakens accountability and helps the Tidö parties continue dismantling Swedish climate policy.

Expanding the ingroup

Several studies show that hate speech is a powerful tactic used by politicians, particularly populists, to manipulatively persuade followers to expand and aggravate hate speech and violent actions (cf. Benkler et al., 2018; Anastasio et al., 2021; Valcore et al., 2023; Törnberg & Chueri, 2026).

Insults and accusations by Tidö leaders demonise climate scientists, activists, journalists and civil servants, and blames and scapegoats them for perceived grievances and social ills. They are portrayed as threat to the worldviews, values and identity of 'good' Swedish citizens. Such symbolic threats predict hatred, aggressive tendencies and hurting behaviour (Stephan & Stephan, 2017; Martínez et al., 2022b). 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).

Besides symbolically threatening 'good' citizens in the ingroup, Tidö conspiracy theories on climate policy and nasty rhetoric targeting scientists, activists and journalists provoke emotions of vindictiveness, disgust and hate, that calls for retribution and execution (cf. Wahlström et al., 2021; Pretus et al., 2022; Martínez et al., 2023). 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). When used by leading Tidö politicians, including the PM, nasty rhetoric is legitimised. This makes the darkness of denigration and deprecation seep into the mainstream and become habitually collectivised and normalised (Szanto, 2018).

Interdisciplinary research suggests that the expansion of hate speech and direct violence by individuals and groups towards outgroups can only be explained by addressing it as a socially mediated phenomena related to culture and ideology, in combination with psychological and neurobiological factors involving the sequencing of specific brain-behaviour processes that mobilise aggressive urges (Dunbar, 2022). Four archetypes of followers in hate and violence have been suggested (Table 11).

Table 11. Typology of hate crime perpetrators

Archetype	Description
Willing followers	Minimal ideology and low arousal who join haters for self-affirmation
Calculated believers	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 (2022).

Studies show that half of the US hate crimes are committed by willing followers, driven by neither ideological nor pathological concerns but in lack of empathy (Dunbar, 2022). Other studies show that half of all people who spread cyberhate 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. Cheng et al., 2017; Walther, 2025).

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 lonely and non-empathetic individuals in search of community who participate in spreading hatred and violence. With the advent of neoliberalism, Sweden has turned into a country with the world's most individualistic people (World Values Survey, 2023). Many lack a community. And they lack empathy for people who are portrayed as their as 'enemies' by PRR and right-wing leaders.

Social media has reshaped the media landscape, with SD running an army of anonymous trolls to deliberately and systematically spread misinformation and cyberhate to shape opinion, manipulate voters and incite further hate and violence to outgroup (Vowles & Hultman, 2021b). Orchestration of online and offline attacks by SD and AfS also confirms that production and propagation of cyberhate social media are most often not individual acts, not uncorrelated, not disorganised, but part of various social processes and systems (Walther, 2025).

5.1.3 Pro-climate advocates are incivil but not nasty

Oppositional politicians in the Riksdag, and to a lesser extent climate scientists and activists as well as climate journalists, use insults and accusations, but no intimidations or incitements. Insults and accusations 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 an obvious target, although everyone understands that she is only a "liberal minister in SD's puppet government".

Compared to Tidö politicians and supporters, they use incivil language to delegitimise opponents to make them change and to rally supporters, not to silence their opponents. Their rhetoric reflects anger with

Tidö climate policy and ministers, not hate. Thus, their sometimes incivil language can neither be classified as hate speech nor nasty 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 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.

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 Tobias 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".

5.1.4 A reflection on nasty rhetoric and environmental rhetoric

Nasty rhetoric in climate politics may lead us to think of political rhetoric and environmental rhetoric, where rhetoric based on pathos and ethos is used together with rational reasoning in rhetoric based on logos to enhance the communication in deliberations (e.g. Myerson & Rydin, 1996; Higgins, 2008; Kuyper, 2009; Dryzek & Lo, 2015; Wolrath Söderberg, 2020). Walsh (2016, p. 1) argue 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". However, nasty rhetoric is not about persuading opponents in a public or political debate or deliberation, it is about using hate speech and sometimes direct violence to silence and ostracise opponents (cf. Weintrobe, 2021).

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 Magdalena 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. von Malmborg, 2024; Avellan et al., 2026; Novak & Sundström, 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.

PRR leaders consider themselves to have the answer to all questions and solutions to all problems in public policy, often described in simple terms (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Arato & Cohen, 2017; Caramani, 2017). Like religious fundamentalists, their ideology is based on a unitary and non-pluralist vision of society's public interest, and they themselves are rightful interpreters of the Only Truth (Caramani, 2017;

Bitonti, 2020). Except for the purpose of persuading current and potential supporters to mobilise the ingroup, PRR politicians are not interested in deliberation or winning a debate.

As discussed by Mouffe (2013), the means of communication and rhetoric as we know them are hegemonic in liberal democracies, but the "third wave of autocratisation" comes with a culture war to end the hegemony of liberal democratic discourse, and to replace it with autocracy including autocratic discourse and autocratic rhetoric (cf. V-Dem Institute, 2025; Ardin, 2026). Besides harming people as individuals and groups, nasty rhetoric influences the norms and language, the emotion rules, used in society and politics.

These differences in rhetoric used by right-wing and left-wing politicians can be ascribed to different emotion-action schemes among right-wing and left-wing populists (Wettergren, 2012). Salmela and von Scheve (2018) suggest that right-wing populism is characterised by *repressed shame* that transforms fear and insecurity into anger, resentment, and hatred against perceived 'enemies' of the precarious self. Left-wing populism, in turn, associates more with *acknowledged shame* that allows individuals to self-identify as aggrieved and humiliated by 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 anger and hatred. This is confirmed by Dellagiacoma et al. (2024) that found that people adhering to right-wing authoritarianism are more likely to produce cyberhate than people with a more social liberal orientation.

5.2 Why climate politics is a battlefield

Pro-climate advocates' concern for human rights and calls for economic degrowth is perceived by SD and Tidö leaders as an intrusion upon their worldviews and dominant status in society. The situation is similar in other countries where the PRR has tangible power (Patterson, 2023; White, 2023). 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; Agius et al., 2021; Vowles & Hultman, 2021a, 2021b), SD leaders presents a fictional 'disaster' narrative (cf. Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022; Ketola & Odmalm, 2023; Abraham, 2024), which they manipulative claim are caused by pro-climate advocates (cf. Benkler et al., 2018; Törnberg & Chueri, 2026). It is a symbolic threat that predicts hatred, aggressive tendencies and hurting behaviour (Stephan & Stephan, 2017; Martínez et al., 2022b).

SD, mainly attracting older white men, look back with nostalgia to a mythical national past during the oil-fuelled record years of the 1950s and 60s (Kenny, 2018; Vowles & Hultman, 2021a; Marquardt & Lederer, 2022; Marquardt et al., 2022; Taş, 2022). Analysing the psychological roots of the climate crisis, Weintrobe (2021) argues that wealthy people in wealthy countries are stuck in a state of *exceptionalism* – a psychological state in late capitalism where people seize to compromise. If reality or conspiratory fiction

challenges that perception, the threatening challenge must be denied. Therefore, people who tell difficult, challenging things, such as climate scientists, activists and journalists, need to be ostracised.

Instead of responding pro-climate advocates with good arguments as in traditional political rhetoric, Tidö leaders use nasty rhetoric, attacking their opponents for being 'climate extremists'. Insults, accusations, intimidations and incitements are not a matter of isolated occasions and cannot be considered innocent mistakes. The message comes from high-ranking politicians, including the PM, whose rhetoric agitates that climate activists really are terrorists threatening democracy. As a consequence, government agencies, prosecutors and the policy use economic and legal violence as hard state repression. Increasing hard state repression of climate activists is seen in other European countries, e.g. Austria, France, Germany, Spain and the UK (Berglund et al., 2024).

What can be considered nasty rhetoric, including both soft and hard repression, has been used by the government to target radical activists in Sweden in other policy areas with much antagonism, e.g. agriculture and animal welfare (Schwartz, 2020; Ceccato et al., 2022) and more generally counteracting violence-affirming extremism (Wahlström, 2011; Jacobsson & Sörbom, 2015; Jämte & Ellefsen, 2020;

Climate activists are dismissed as equal human beings that should not have the same rights as Swedish citizens in general. They 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. A recent survey of 156 civil society organisations in Sweden, working for democracy from all sorts of angles, shows that PRR politicians all over the country openly use negative connotations such as 'extremist' to discredit and delegitimise civil society (Ardin, 2026). Advocating liberal or deliberative democracy is seen as extremism and antidemocratic in the Tidö discourse.

5.3 Metaphors to understand the use of nasty rhetoric

Tidö politicians use nasty rhetoric to polarise climate politics. Doing so, they emotionally harm and dehumanise some people in the outgroup directly. They also send a message to other people 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 incentivises, desensitises and legitimises more people to use it – to expand its use and normalise it (cf. Chen, 2017; Munger, 2017; Walther, 2025). The greater the desensitisation, the greater the persuasive capacity of the message and the prejudice towards the outgroup. 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 extensive 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 (cf. Bjola & Pamment, 2019; Helbing et al., 2019).

From this, nasty rhetoric can metaphorically be described as *a double-edged sword*. It is 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.*

Social gratification is a strong factor for the expansion of nasty rhetoric. Followers are generally alone and lost individuals with low empathy in search of community where they can get attention and social approval to fit into a context by sharing the fun of degrading other people (cf. Walther, 2025). Thus, we are dealing with a phenomenon that can be described as *a weird kind of sport:*

> *that does not require any training or special ability,*
> *with lots of cheering spectators who applaud the players' efforts with likes, hearts, shares, platform links and new fans, and*
> *where many of the fans also join the players on the field.*

6. Conclusions

This paper raises problems and draws attention to the use and nature of nasty rhetoric, i.e. political leaders' systematic use of hate speech and violence as a tactics to ostracise and silence political opponents throughout society. Based on Swedish climate politics from 2022 and onwards, it analyses who uses nasty rhetoric and why, who is targeted, and why it expands.

Perceiving ambitious climate policy as a symbolic threat to Sweden, political leaders of the governing Tidö quartet use nasty rhetoric as a *double-edged sword*: to demonise, dehumanise and ostracise people advocating ambitious climate policies, and to mobilise supporters against perceived enemies. Targets include oppositional partisans, climate scientists, climate journalists and especially climate justice activists.

Pro-climate advocates also use incivil language, but of a less aggressive form. Referring to real threats with acknowledged shame, they instigate anger and emancipation in their ingroup and a will to change, not ostracise, their opponents. Insults and accusations targeting the government and individual ministers aim to delegitimise and reveal Tidö climate politics and politicians as a flaw and a naked emperor. Thus, their use of incivic language cannot be considered nasty rhetoric.

Nasty rhetoric differs from traditional political and environmental rhetoric. Not only because of the systematic use of hate speech and violence for political reasons, but because of its nasty aim to silence and

ostracise the opponents. Users of *nasty* rhetoric are not interested or willing to argue, to engage in a deliberative dialogue with their antagonists using traditional rhetoric. They do not want a debate. Their opponents are enemies of the nation and heretics to be silenced and excommunicated. In all, the notion of 'nasty' in nasty rhetoric is about the inherent message sent in the communicative act – a message of division, supremacy, retribution, dehumanisation and ostracisation.

As for future research, this study indicates intersections of nasty rhetoric based on racist, religious, gender and economic motives, e.g. nasty rhetoric target climate activists and pro-Palestine activists. In close relation, many PRR parties highlight religion as the centre of culture. Thus, research could address cultural and religious roots of nasty rhetoric.

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Data availability statement

All data used comes from secondary sources. A list of data sources is available in Appendix 1.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical considerations

For reasons of security concerns of Swedish citizens, leading politicians in the government and the Riksdag are not anonymised. This meet research ethical criteria of EU legislation. All other persons are anonymised. See Appendix 2 for detailed ethical considerations.

Appendix 1: Data sources

Secondary data from newspapers and magazines was identified through Boolesk searches in Retriever Mediearkivet, the largest media archive in the Nordic countries covering more than 1 000 newspapers, magazines et cetera. Searches were made in April 2024, December 2024, October 2025 and April 2026, using different truncated terms in combination with 'climate' (Table A1). Data was also collected by screening programmes in television, radio and podcasts, webpages of state-owned and privately owned national television and radio, as well as blogs, videos (YouTube) and social media posts of the largest pro-climate, libertarian and PRR accounts. 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 A1. 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[3]
Antidemocratic	Elit*	Liberal	Roadblock	Threat*
Climate	Hate	Nazi	Sabot*	Violen*

In total, 420 editorials, op-eds, news articles, blogs, social media posts, TV programmes, and radio programmes were found in left, green, social democrat, liberal, conservative and PRR media. 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.

To identify relevant political debates, all policy debates in the Riksdag archive from January 2022 to August 2024 were screened. 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, included in the 141 sources mentioned.

Altogether, 154 pieces of written, visual, audio and audio-visual material expressing or reporting hate speech and violence were identified (Table A2).

[3] 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

Table A2. 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
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[#]Personal blog with testimony and reflections of a person who was fired from her job at a national authority due to her engagement with Mothers Rebellion.

Appendix 2: Ethical considerations

Research ethics in Sweden is regulated by EU law and guided by the European codex 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. The VR guidelines 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 (EU, 2016, p. 14):

> *"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".*

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, 2024). 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 secondary data published in the daily press, radio, television, blogs, political debates etc. By systematic analysis, a general pattern is identified in the pieces provided by secondary data. The results show that Tidö politicians use hate speech, but also economic and legal repression, in a systematic way to silence people and groups with opposing political views. From an ethical perspective the main question is: Does it hurt to mention leading politicians using psychological, economic and legal violence to harm citizens 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 and systematically use different kinds of violence towards different groups of people. Their acts normalise hate speech in society and invite their supporters to spread hate and violence in the public debate. These acts harm citizens – real people in Sweden – 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 a scholar 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 concludes 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 politicians calling for their votes 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 the 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 et cetera are mentioned if they themselves, as official, politically elected or appointed persons, have chosen to use hate speech 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 in scientific studies. Several research papers have been published about Donald J. Trump and his nasty rhetoric. What message would it convey if researchers can mention his name, but not the names of other political leaders?

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