



SALAR

WORKS TO PREVENT AND MANAGE THREATS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST ELECTED POLITICIANS

The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) focuses on strengthening the ability of local elected politicians to carry out their democratic mandate. It's important to enable them to continue to play their vital role in Swedish local democracy, even during periods of uncertainty and change.

SALAR's work in this area started in 2016, and is funded by central government. The work aims to support local municipalities and regions to develop systematic structures and approaches to prevent and confront threats and other crimes directed against local politicians.

The Politician's Safety Survey

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) has since 2014 carried out the Politician's Safety Survey (Politikernas trygghetsundersökning - PTU), with funding from Swedish

central government. The survey maps the experiences among elected politicians, at local, regional and national level, of harassment, threats and violence. The survey, which has been carried out four times so far, provides an updated snapshot of levels of vulnerability among politicians, as well as detailed information about which types of politicians are most exposed to threats, as well as insights into what motivates hate and threats against politicians.

The PTU reports are a foundation for SALAR's work. You can download an English summary at <https://www.bra.se/>

Among the results

- › In 2016 one-fourth of all elected representatives (25 per cent) stated that they have been the victim of harassment, threats, or violence in connection with their political work as an elected representative. In respect of attempted corruption, 3.4 per cent of the elected officials stated that they were exposed during 2016.
- › Taken as a whole, the percentage of elected representatives who state that they were victims of these crimes has increased since 2012, when slightly less than 20 per cent stated that they had been victims.
- › Municipal and county politicians in Stockholm state more often that they are victimised than do elected representatives in other regions. Members of the Swedish Parliament (Riksdag) are victimised significantly more (66 per cent) than members of municipal and regions (25 per cent and 34 per cent, respectively).
- › Elected representatives who were more active on the Internet and in social media also state that they are victimised to a greater extent than those who are less active.

Threats and violence against local politicians have different effects on different groups

A deeper analysis of the survey results over time shows that the proportion of politicians who choose to self-censor in response to treats or violence has increased.

A fifth of the elected politicians who responded in 2016 stated that they at one point or another in the past year have self-censored. Self-censorship is more common among politicians in paid positions than it is among lay politicians.

Almost a third of the politicians who have experienced an incident have chosen to self-censor. With increased exposure to threats and violence self-censorship among politicians also increases.

SALAR provides support to local municipalities and regions by...

Disseminating knowledge and information

SALAR offers training to politicians.

In order to increase the awareness of threats against local politicians and their consequences SALAR offers all municipalities and regions a free training session. The training highlights the importance of developing local policies and

activities to systematically prevent threats and strengthen the capacities of politicians in fulfilling their democratic mission.

The training is delivered in two forms:

- › Local delivery in municipalities/regions
- › An online e-course

Support to elected members who are exposed to threats, hate or violence

Local municipalities and regions are politically led organisations and need elected politicians who can make decisions without being affected by threats or violence. SALAR's policy is that the best source of support for politicians who experience such incidents is local, through their own municipalities or regions.

SALAR therefore collaborates with central government to support municipalities and regions in the work against threats and violence against politicians. Support is provided when individual politicians have been targeted through:

- › SALAR provides information and guidance through its web page, which is continuously updated.
- › SALAR offers municipalities and regions telephone based support.
- › SALAR shares knowledge through live webinars 6–8 times per year.

Systematic work

Systematising the work to prevent violence and threats against politicians is very important. SALAR has worked with networks of municipalities and regions, to develop systematic and better joined up approaches.

Useful cases are presented on SALAR's website around the preventative work undertaken in local municipalities and regions to eliminate hate, threats and violence against politicians.

A developmental network with local politicians and municipal staff from 5 municipalities and 3 regions have supported each other in developing local policies and action plans to prevent and manage threats and hate directed towards elected members.

Strengthened legal protection

SALAR has worked over ten years on a mandate from its member congress to strengthen legal penalties for threats and violence directed towards people who are elected members. In 2018 Swedish Government has put forward a proposal for new laws around threats aimed at politicians. Betänkandet "Brott mot förtroendevalda" (Ds 2018:29)

Beyond this new law, the legal responsibilities for safeguarding the health and safety of politicians needs to be clarified further.

FIVE FILMS

'Threats and hate' is a series of five films about strengthening the role of politicians in the face of threats. The films are based on actual cases and reflect how politicians are impacted.

Link to English page:
<https://skl.se/27023.html>

Deepening our knowledge of threats and hate

SALAR works to deepen the knowledge base around threats and hate towards local politicians. Below you will find short summaries of three published documents in this area.

Digital hate

SALAR has, in collaboration with The Swedish Defence Research Agency (Totalförsvarets Forskningsinstitut - FOI), done a study about the prevalence of online hate and threats towards politicians. The purpose of the study is to gather new knowledge and focus attention on the prevalence of digital hate and threats aimed at local political representatives. The study has been carried out by Lisa Kaati (FOI), Nazar Akrami (Uppsala university) and Björn Pelzer (FOI). The document gives a short overview of how Swedish Mayors or Chairs of the Executive Committee are mentioned in digital fora and related comment fields. The study shows that elected members are mentioned on the online sites studied and it is also

clear that there are many hateful comments directed towards them. Many of the comments studied are very likely to constitute hate crimes under Swedish law. To draw more general conclusions a more detailed study is necessary. Despite this reservation the following findings can be identified:

- ▶ Around 20 percent of all comments about a Mayor contained some kind of hate, threat or abuse.
- ▶ Female politicians receive more abusive comments than male politicians, and the comments are more aggressive and malicious.
- ▶ Sexist comments are exclusively aimed at female politicians.
- ▶ In several digital sites all that is needed to start a discussion containing a large number of hateful comments is for someone to link to an article in a local paper.
- ▶ Comments are concentrated in a short space of time. After two days 94 percent of the comments have been posted.

The effects of threats and hate against politicians

SALAR has carried out case studies of five elected politicians who have been affected by threats and/or hate speech. The five politicians serve on different posts, including as members of committees or chairs of assemblies or executive committees. The study gives a description of the experiences and thoughts that the interviewees have had in response to their lived experiences of threats and hate. They agree that social media has increased the ability of citizens to express themselves and to contribute to society, while at the same time leading to more threats and hate aimed at local politicians.

The study shows that:

- ▶ Hate and threats have effects on the individual, their personal life and their democratic role.
- ▶ A shift in norms of the democratic conversation is noticeable - in the form of a harsh and aggressive tone of debate. Hateful expression is more common in social media and digital environments than in other environments.

- Female politicians are exposed to sexist comments on top of other threats and hateful comments. Many female politicians feel that men struggle to really understand the impact that these kinds of comments have on female politicians.
- Sensitive topics which can generate threats and hateful expression include issues such as integration, equality and gender, as well as changes in welfare services.
- There are four areas that create strong reactions and that can lead to increased exposure to threats: changes in welfare services, questions around basic societal values, administrative decisions as well as extremists and non-democratic movements.

Always report hate, threats and violence

SALAR has, in collaboration with The Swedish Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority and the Swedish Police, developed a document about a number of cases where reporting incidents of hate, threats and violence against politicians has led to convictions of the perpetrators. The document presents some authentic cases – including the reporting stage, police investigations, the court case and what led to the perpetrator being convicted. The document also provides advice to those who have experienced hate, threats or violence in their role as a politician. The purpose of the document is to get more people reporting these types of crimes. It makes it easier for the police and local security coordinators to see patterns and to develop a systematic approach, to prevent and prosecute crimes.

Strengthening the ability of elected politicians to carry out their democratic role

SALAR supports local municipalities and regions in preventing threats and violence aimed at politicians, as well as enabling them, in a dialogue with the political parties, to support those politicians who are unfortunate to be exposed to threats. SALAR also works to strengthen legal protections for local politicians.

Municipalities and regions are democratically governed organisations, where citizens elect politicians to make decisions. For this reason the role of elected politicians is central to a functioning local democracy. Every election leads to many new politicians being elected around Sweden. SALAR seeks to actively support politicians so that they can carry out their democracy role in the best way possible.

Support is provided, both through broad initiatives to all members to clarify and strengthen the role of elected politicians, but also by supporting members systematic work against threats and violence aimed at politicians. The goal is for no politicians having to live with threats and/or violence directed at them.

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