



Former US ambassador: "We are under attack – and we must fight back"

Former US ambassador to Stockholm Erik Ramanathan was part of Sweden's accession to NATO and strengthened support for Ukraine. Now he is back in Sweden with a new mission: to build trust in a new post-Trump US, and to defend the rights of LGBTQ+ people in an increasingly harsh climate. QX met him in a sunny spring day in Stockholm.

THE WORLD • 2026-04-18



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Former US ambassador to Stockholm Erik Ramanathan on one of his many return visits to Sweden. Photo: Jon Voss

It's a freer life **Erik Ramanathan** describes, when we meet over lunch on Strandvägen in Stockholm.

During his years as US ambassador, he was driven between meetings, official visits and trips around the country. Now he speaks almost with delight about having learned the subway, about being able to walk in the city and move more unnoticed. When the interview is over, he will move on to the next meeting at Östermalmstorg.

But it is not nostalgia that brings him back to Stockholm, but politics, relationships and concerns.

Ramanathan was ambassador during a time when ties between Sweden and the US were rapidly deepening. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine changed Europe's security situation, Sweden began sending weapons to a nation at war and the NATO issue went from unthinkable to decisive. For him, it is the word trust that explains both the core of diplomacy and why the years in Sweden became so significant.

– In the end, trust is what it's all about. That's the real currency of diplomacy, he says. Being a reliable partner, standing up for shared values and being able to speak openly even when you don't agree, he tells QX.

He believes that trust in the US was already high when he came to Sweden, but that it grew further during his time here, even though Sweden simultaneously took several historic steps.

– Sweden sent weapons to Ukraine after 90 years of a different line, and went through a long and painful process to actually enter NATO. I can't take credit for that, but it was important to show that we stood behind Sweden, through military overflights, ship visits, congressional delegations and by simply being visible and clear.

He repeatedly points out that relationships are not only built between governments, but between people. During his time in Sweden, he traveled to the country's 10 regions, participated in Pride, worked against anti-Semitism

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respect for the entire country, its culture and its differences. That's also how you build trust, he explains.

The personal vulnerability

When the conversation shifts to present-day America, the tone darkens.

"We have a hunker down mentality now. We know that we are under attack as a gay community, as an LGBTQ community, and that we have to work together and fight back."

For Ramanathan, it's not just a political analysis. It's also personal. He says the attacks feel especially brutal because they're aimed at people close to him, not least his daughter, who is part of the community.

"It's shocking to see attacks not just on my own family and my own child, but also on friends and others in the community."

He describes how vulnerability looks different depending on class and living conditions. Those who have financial resources cope better. Those who are dependent on an employer, a landlord or a more uncertain safety net live significantly more dangerously.

– The further down the socio-economic ladder you are, the greater the stress. Then it is not just about representation or debate, but about work, housing, care and security in everyday life.

New forces are trying to slow the backlash

Ramanathan describes how the hardening political climate in the US has also directly impacted LGBTQ+ organizations. Activities that previously relied on public support have been weakened, while needs are growing.

He mentions, among other things, how suicide prevention efforts for young LGBTQ+ people **have lost federal funding**. This has weakened important

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from cutbacks and political attacks.

– Many of the non-profit organizations are under severe stress. That is why

we are now seeing how private donors, allies and new groups are stepping forward. They are trying to capture the messages that are coming from federal authorities and conservative groups in order to respond with their own campaigns before the damage is done.

The US LGBTQ+ movement has been forced into a kind of crisis and defense mode. Lawyers who were forced out of government service are being recruited to work against the new policy. Funding must increase.

Preparedness must increase.

- We realize that this is the moment. We must greatly increase resources, both financially and legally, to defend the community.

When asked why the administration is targeting the LGBTQ+ community, he says that transgender people have become the focus of the attacks. Which Ramanathan believes is both cynical and politically effective.

- Trans issues have become a clear point of attack. There was progress on transgender rights and care, and that became the next front line.

He believes that the right has succeeded in making trans issues a powerful symbolic issue in election campaigns, especially by simplifying, mocking and repeating messages until they stick.

At the same time, he does not believe that same-sex marriage will be the first thing to be attacked at the federal level, because support among Americans is too strong.

Instead, he sees greater risks in rights that are already unevenly distributed between the states: It's about concrete things in people's everyday lives. In some states there is protection, in others almost none at all. Such as the right to adopt as a same-sex couple, access to gender-affirming care, protection against discrimination in the workplace, or the possibility of not losing your job at all.

- In some cases, they are now trying to push the line that it should be a

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Self-criticism: "We got caught in the wrong fight"

When Ramanathan is asked whether the LGBTQ+ movement itself may have made mistakes in how the issues were communicated, he is cautious. He does not want to say that the movement has done anything "wrong" in substance. But he believes that certain issues have come to dominate in a way that has made them easy to exploit politically.

– I do not think we did anything fundamentally wrong. But I think some of the messages ended up wrong, he says.

Ramanathan particularly highlights how the pronoun issue came to receive disproportionate space in the debate despite the fact that it is in practice a small part of the reality of transgender people.

– Respecting people's pronouns is important. But it is a very small part of the whole issue. However, it became what was highlighted in political speeches and in the debate, because it is easy to understand and easy to make into a slogan.

It also made it easier for the opposing side to use the issue of "she", or they/them in English, as a political tool.

– It is much easier to talk about a word than about access to healthcare, legal rights or discrimination in everyday life. And that was exploited, he says, giving an example of how presidential candidate **Kamala Harris** was attacked with the message " *She's for they/them, I'm for you.* "

He believes there is also a bigger lesson in how political messages work today. "We have often focused on policy and details, while the other side has been much better at short, repeated messages that actually stick," he says, pointing out how repetition itself can change public opinion.

"If a message is repeated enough times, people eventually start to wonder if there is anything to it. We have seen this in many issues in the US.

For the LGBTQ+ movement, he says, this means getting better at formulating simple, recognizable stories without giving up facts or complexity.

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We also see a division in the community, where some are behind the Trump administration.

– There are a few wealthy, often white gay men. But they live in protected environments and are not affected in the same way. They care more about taxes than about rights. But I don't think that changes the overall picture.



Erik Ramanathan with her husband Ranesh in the Pride Parade in Stockholm 2025 where they participated with their own float together with Democrats Abroad. Photo: Pär Bäckström / TT

A diplomatic tone about Sweden

Ramanathan becomes more cautious when the conversation turns to Sweden. During his time as ambassador, Sweden was often described internationally as open and progressive on LGBTQ+ issues. But when he is asked if he could also criticize Sweden, it is noticeable that the former ambassador still chooses his words with diplomatic care.

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Swedish transgender people, such as problems with safety, access to gender-

affirming care and difficulties for minors to get the right help in a timely manner.

He wanted, he says, to raise issues of inclusion, better care, security and work against hate crimes, but he did not see himself as someone who would drive Swedish domestic political opinion-forming.

JD Vance's support for Orbán didn't help

Ramanathan repeatedly points out that developments in the US do not occur in a vacuum. He sees clear parallels to countries where authoritarian forces have used LGBTQ+ people as scapegoats.

- The autocratic playbook is often the same. We have seen this in Hungary, in Uganda, in Russia and many other places.

He still wants to nuance the image of Hungary as a political role model for the American right. When asked how developments after the election there affect the US, he points out that the effect is not clear-cut.

- But I am sure that it is being taken into account, he says.

He mentions how American representatives openly showed support for **Viktor Orbán**, something that did not necessarily have the effect that was hoped for.

- The US vice president was sent to Orbán's side before the election. And I think it is fair to say that it did not help him, maybe even the opposite, because it drew attention to this way of conducting politics.

He continues:

- It also evokes associations with Munich, to the kind of concessions and the political direction that many perceive as a departure from the values that we say we stand for.

In this way, according to Ramanathan, Hungary becomes not only a source of inspiration for parts of the American right but also an example that can backfire.

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- There is a notion that Europe will always be there, no matter what we do.

That the ties are so strong historically and culturally that they cannot be broken, he says.

But that is, according to him, a mistake.

– It ignores the fact that it is actually the values that hold us together. And if you start attacking them, then you also risk the relationship. It is about values such as democracy, human rights, freedom. We took them for granted for too long. Now we must actively defend them again. And that is where we must cooperate with Europe.

Want to build trust for 2028

Today, Ramanathan is working to keep the contacts between Europe and the US alive and to start thinking ahead towards a new political situation in Washington.

He travels between the US, Stockholm and London, meets people in politics, business, culture and civil society and tries, as he describes it, to remind Europeans that many Americans still share the same fundamental values as before.

– We already need to start thinking about how to rebuild trust. It was easy to destroy it, but it will take longer to build it.

Here he talks about 2028 as a possible turning point, as an opportunity when the balance of power can change and a new course becomes possible.

"We need a plan well in advance for what it will look like when that happens." It is, he says, about defending NATO, transatlantic ties and shared values, but also about reminding us that the current administration does not define all Americans.

"Gay rights are family rights"

When asked what effective messages the "good side" should convey, he hesitates at first. Opponents have been skilled at making politics short, harsh, and easy to repeat, while the liberal side has often gotten stuck in more

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Gay rights are family rights.

This, he believes, is a way to break the idea that LGBTQ+ people should stand

outside of ordinary social life.

– Many in our community live in families, have children, take care of foster children, and build homes and relationships. We must not let them make us "the others." This is not anti-family. It is pro-family.

Erik Ramanathan still arouses great interest in Stockholm. Not only for what he did as ambassador during some of the most crucial years in Swedish security policy, but because today he is trying to do something that right now seems at least as difficult: to convince Europe that there is still a USA to believe in.

Published 2026-04-18

ERIK RAMANATHAN

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