

Name of the student:	Quang Nghia Phan
Title of the thesis:	NATO Membership: Changing Public Opinion and Foreign Policy Preference in Sweden and Finland during the Russia-Ukraine War
Reviewer:	Tomáš Weiss, Charles University

1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

(relevance of the research question, research objective, literature review):

The thesis written by Quang Nghia Phan focuses on the Swedish and Finnish decision to apply for NATO membership in 2022. More specifically, Phan asks how the changing public opinion influenced the governmental discourse and policy choices in both countries. The question as it stands is legitimate and connects to a well-established academic discussion on the origins of foreign policy choices. At the same time, the thesis could have done a better job in showing the connection in more detail and a bit more instructively. The literature review section spends a lot of time with the literature on small states, but it is unclear how the fact that both Sweden and Finland can be considered small relates to the research question or the hypotheses. Instead, more space should have been committed to the core debate on the link between policy choice and public opinion. There are only three paragraphs on the topic. Moreover, most of the reviewed literature focuses on the US but there is no debate to what extent these findings are relevant to Finland and Sweden with a vastly different type of democracy, political culture and the character of the state.

2. ANALYSIS

(methodology, argument, theoretical backing, appropriate work with sources):

The key idea of the thesis is to establish a causal link between public opinion and foreign/security policy choices. The thesis aims to evidence the link through political discourse. I believe that is not the most advantageous way to proceed as it runs into several major problems that are all present in the thesis.

Firstly, there is little discussion of what type of political discourse is relevant (official governmental statements, parliamentary debates, media debates) and what exactly is necessary to allow the author to conclude that a causal link has been found. As a result, the thesis reviews some statements and establishes some timelines, but we are not sure how these statements were selected and how representative they are of the “political discourse” in the countries. Nor does the author offer much evidence that it was indeed the change in public opinion that led to the change in the political discourse. We just see that both change around the same time. Wasn't it the political discourse that led to the change in public opinion? In fact, the thesis mentions that the public opinion had already been changing in Finland before the Russian invasion and there had been politicians in both countries arguing for NATO membership. Moreover, Phan himself suggests a different direction of causality when he claims that support from political groups in the country translated into public support during the WWII in Sweden (p. 17).

Secondly, and related, there is little discussion of other factors that could have contributed to the change in policy. There is little connection to the theory and alternative frameworks/explanations.

Thirdly, there is very little “discourse analysis” present in the thesis. There is a lot of discourse described, but the thesis lacks a rigorous process of analysis. The reader does not know anything about how the texts were selected, how they were approached, what signifiers were identified and looked for.

There are several places in the text that are either not very persuasive, or outright wrong. The case selection suggests that Sweden and Finland are in a similar situation but they are clearly not. Finland has shared a long land border with Russia which is vastly different from the alleged “maritime border” between Russia and Sweden. Moreover, Phan argues that “both countries have a history of territorial conflicts with Russia” (p. 4), but I do not think it is possible to claim that the Winter War and Finlandisation era have had the same impact on politics in Finland as the Finnish War of 1808-9 has had on Sweden.

Similarly, the footnote 14 on p. 5 is partially misleading and partially wrong. NATO only activated Art. 5 once in the past, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US. The restriction of the Art. 42(7) application is not because of its non-compulsory character, but because of the fact that it is implemented through NATO or not binding at all in the case of neutral countries.

The claim on p. 7 that Sweden and Finland do not run the risk of angering Russia without receiving NATO's guarantees is also misleading. As the on-going debate about a possible Turkish veto has shown, there is no automatism in the accession process. So far, the only military guarantees that Sweden and Finland received were provided by the US and the UK.

Phan's work with sources is without major problems. The thesis acknowledges the weak point of the author not speaking the language he analyses. As far as my suggestion would be not to engage in such an analysis in the first place, once he embarked on this journey, he has done so in a transparent and appropriate manner.

3. CONCLUSIONS

(persuasiveness, link between data and conclusions, achievement of research objectives):

Unfortunately, Phan's thesis is not very persuasive in its main objectives. He fails to establish the causal link between the public opinion and the policy discourse and choice. The only thing he is able to show is that the Finnish and Swedish publics and politicians moved in harmony. That is, frankly, not particularly interesting, especially given the extremely strong external push provided by the Russian renewed invasion of Ukraine.

There is no discussion of the relevance of the research for the general academic debate. What does the thesis say about what academics have thought about the link between the public opinion and policy choices?

4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

(appropriate language, adherence to academic standards, citation style, layout):

The language is appropriate and the adherence to academic standards is without problems. The inclusion of graphs in Finnish that could have been easily transformed into English should have been avoided.

5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

(strong and weak point of the dissertation, other issues)

Quang Nghia Phan has addressed a relevant and very topical issue in his thesis. He has provided a rich description of the development of the Swedish and Finnish relations to NATO. But he has not succeeded to fulfil his research objectives in a persuasive and comprehensive manner due to the lack of depth in his methodological approach.

6. QUESTIONS FOR THE THESIS DEFENCE

(1-3 questions that could be asked during the thesis defence)

Could you please elaborate how the different historical tradition of Finland and Sweden is reflected in the discourse of the two countries' elites in 2022?

What does your research mean for the broader literature on the link between the public opinion and foreign policy choices?

Grade (A-F):	D / 6.5
Date:	Signature:
25/06/2022	

