

Annex 1 – Template Dissertation Report EPS



Joint Dissertation Review

Name of the student:	Phan Quang Nghia
Title of the thesis:	NATO Membership: Changing Public Opinion and Foreign Policy Preference in Sweden and Finland During the Russia-Ukraine War
Reviewer:	Dr. Jeffrey H. Michaels (IBEI)

1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

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

The research question is extremely relevant and timely. Given how recent the Finnish/Swedish NATO membership bids were submitted, it is still early days for scholars to begin to formulating their ideas about what led to this momentous shift. This dissertation breaks some new ground in its wide-ranging survey of Finnish and Swedish public opinion using a variety of local news sources, as well as reviewing some old ground in terms of historical analysis of Finnish/Swedish neutrality/non-alignment policies. Although the theoretical literature on realism, public opinion and small states security preferences is somewhat limited, it is probably sufficient for the purposes of this dissertation. As for the research objective, the effort to demonstrate how a shift in public opinion led traditionally reluctant foreign policy elites to embrace NATO membership is an important one, especially as a number of alternative explanations have been proposed.

2. ANALYSIS

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

In general the methodology is sound. As far as the theoretical backing is concerned, more emphasis might have been placed on the public opinion and foreign policy literature as opposed to larger IR debates about realism. It might also have been useful to present some of the scholarly perspectives (esp. recent op-eds and commentary) that are already in the public domain, and then comparing/contrasting the research findings presented here (what is new/different). As for the argument, it is mostly clear and straightforward. The student should be commended in the Conclusion for being self-critical and raising important gaps. It should also be highlighted that the student found innovative ways to gather data using Finnish/Swedish sources despite not speaking either language.

3. CONCLUSIONS

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

A key problem the student was obliged to address was why it was that the perceived threat to Finland/Sweden in 2022 was perceived to be of such great magnitude that it led these two countries to join NATO, whereas presumably the Soviet threat under Stalin was not perceived as threatening, or at least the presumed benefits of Alliance membership were not appreciated in the same way as they are today. Thus, even though the threat may have been objectively greater in 1949 than in 2022, understanding the foreign policy change requires looking at changing perceptions and the role of public opinion as a driver of policy. To substantiate the claims being made, the student provided a great deal of evidence to demonstrate the correlation between the shift in public opinion and the shift in public policy, for instance, showing how prior to 24 Feb, pro-membership views were no more than 30%, whereas after 24 Feb this would radically shift. This was then followed by important discursive and policy shifts. Considerable evidence is brought to bear in this section of the paper.

4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

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

The student is not a native English speaker and there are numerous grammatical errors throughout the dissertation which in some cases led to confusion over the meaning of certain passages. Nevertheless, overall the author's meaning came across quite clearly. For the most part there was a strong adherence to academic standards. Only on a handful of occasions was there an absence of citations. A standard dissertation layout was utilized.

5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

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

The author is clearly strongest with the recent period and with the new empirical findings generated by this research. The author is also quite comfortable with some of the key academic works on the role of public opinion on foreign policy, although some more references to this literature would have been useful. Probably the weakest point of the dissertation was the historical analysis. Although the author was obliged to summarize a long period of time characterized by a great deal of controversy on this topic, and despite referring to some key texts, the way this section of the thesis was written left the reader with some concerns about the student's depth of knowledge. In one notable instance, the student mentions in a footnote that NATO had invoked Article 5 on numerous occasions. Here the student seems to have confused Article 5 with NATO's use of force in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Libya. In actual fact, Article 5 was only invoked once, namely after 9/11. Although this may seem like a technicality, given the centrality of Article 5 to this debate, an error such as this should not have occurred.

Grade (A-F)	B/8
Date	Signature
22/06/2022	