

European Politics and Society

Václav Havel Joint Masters Programme

**NATO Membership: Changing Public
Opinion and Foreign Policy Preference in
Sweden and Finland during the Russia-
Ukraine War**

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Declaration

I, the undersigned [Quang Nghia Phan], candidate for the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree in European Politics and Society, declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of works of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of this thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Barcelona, 17 June, 2022

Quang Nghia Phan

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Abstract

The academic community has not yet reached a consensus on the role of public opinion in shaping foreign policy. To contribute to this theoretical debate, this research investigates how public opinion influenced Sweden and Finland's foreign policy preferences, especially security policy, in response to the increasing security tension following the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war. After Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, both Sweden and Finland witnessed gradually deteriorating relationships with Russia, with many efforts to improve their security arrangements through both domestic empowerment and international cooperation. Nevertheless, both countries, well-known for their long-standing military neutrality and non-alignment traditions, remained consistent in opting out of military alliances, most significantly NATO, until 2022. The 2022 war between Russia and Ukraine fundamentally changed this strategic atmosphere, most significantly with the increase in domestic public support for NATO membership. Both countries seriously considered and eventually pursued NATO membership as not only a viable but also a necessary decision to ensure their national security. Though the past pattern was strategically favourable to both Sweden and Finland, why did they embrace a seemingly riskier direction (embracing NATO membership and facing Russia antagonism)? How did the Swedish and Finnish public opinion influence this riskier policy that Sweden and Finland pursued?

Keywords:

Public Opinion, Foreign Policy, Small States, NATO

Introduction

Before 2014, Russia was generally not considered a major security threat to most EU and NATO member states, including Sweden and Finland, despite some concerns raised by the Central and Eastern European countries after the precedent 2008 Russian attack against Georgia.¹ However, many aggressive behaviours by Russia and most prominently, the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 completely changed the security landscape throughout Europe, especially among the Central and Eastern EU member states. Among the Scandinavian countries, the perception of Russia changed from a “difficult partner” to a “main security challenge”.² In response to this rising “challenge”, the Scandinavian countries have prepared themselves by improving their military capacities and integrating their defence systems among themselves and with the Western countries.³ However, unlike the neighbouring Norway and Denmark (founding members of NATO), Sweden and Finland had consistently refused the possibility of formalising their defence alliance with NATO due to their century-old tradition of neutrality and non-alignment.

The early 2022 once again witnessed a fundamental degradation in the East-West relation, with an increase in Russian military presence in Ukraine. Sweden and Finland also recorded many activities of Russian warfare ships, drones, and aircraft in the Baltic Sea region, with frequent violations of territories

¹ In the early 2010s, the US, under the Obama administration, even attempted to “reset” the US-Russia relationship and effectively the NATO-Russia relationship to “reverse ... a dangerous drift in [US-Russia] bilateral relationship,” which reflected the general positive outlook of the West towards Russia.

White House, “U.S.-Russia Relations: “Reset” Fact Sheet”, *White House: President Obama*, June 24, 2010, accessed April 28, 2021, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet>

² Håkon Lunde Saxi, “The Rise, Fall and Resurgence of Nordic Defence Cooperation,” *International Affairs* 95 (2019): 659.

³ Konstantin V. Voronov, “Security Modus Operandi of the Northern Europe,” *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia* 65, no. 1 (2021): 82-89, DOI:10.20542/0131-2227-2021-65-1-82-89.

and key security destinations of Sweden and Finland, as well as of other countries in the region.⁴ This tension was further escalated with the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, a clear violation of Ukrainian territorial sovereignty and international law. In response, both Sweden and Finland not only increased their defence spending in preparation in case of expanding conflicts but also provided both humanitarian and defence support towards Ukraine. Most importantly, the governmental discourse of both Sweden and Finland towards the prospect of NATO membership also changed, with explicit acknowledgements by both governments of the viability and, to some extent, the vital necessity of NATO membership, with the eventual official application in May 2022. Though both countries have increased their security cooperation with NATO member states and NATO itself in previous decades, this policy change towards NATO membership marks a fundamental shift in both Swedish and Finnish political discourse and policy preference.

Both Sweden and Finland, with regards to their relations with great powers like the US, NATO, the EU, and Russia, represent a typical case of small states prioritising neutrality and non-alignment within the relations with great powers.⁵ The neutrality of both countries, though long-standing and traditional, were precarious from the beginning, dependent on a fragile balance between domestic and international factors.⁶ Previous research either attributed this non-alignment to domestic conditions, following neo-classical realism theory or rather than the systemic forces as suggested by structural realism theory. Nevertheless, the literature left a gap in how extreme conditions in both domestic and international levels could spill over from one level to the other. How would this spill-over effects between domestic and international conditions affect foreign policy?

⁴ Louise Nordstrom, “‘The Russians are coming’: Sweden on edge as Russia flexes military muscle,” *France 24*, 25 January, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220125-the-russians-are-coming-sweden-on-edge-as-russia-flexes-military-muscle>

⁵ Eric J. Labs, “Do weak states bandwagon”, *Security Studies* 1, no. 3 (1992), 383-416. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09636419209347476>

⁶ Gunnar Hagglof, “A Test of Neutrality: Sweden in the Second World War,” *International Affairs* 36, no. 2 (1960): 153-167, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2612040>

Using document analysis of historical events, current public opinion polls, and a political discourse analysis on Swedish and Finnish leaders, this research aims to analyse and compare the changes in domestic factors, most prominently public opinion, of Sweden and Finland that influenced their governmental discourse and policy preference towards NATO membership. Previous literature suggested a complex relationship between domestic public opinion and policy outcomes, especially foreign policy.⁷ While some researchers disregarded public opinion completely,⁸ other scholars believed public opinion to be independently influential on foreign policy outcomes.⁹ Researchers also disagreed on the sources of the general public opinion for each respective policy.¹⁰ By looking at how political elites adapt to the changing public opinion due to exogenous influences, this research hopes to contribute a case study of arguably one major foreign policy preference with regional influence, thereby contributing to the argument on how public opinion could be both influenced by and influencing political elites in their policy preferences.

Afterwards, this research contributes to the discussion on the viability of the “non-alignment” strategy, the small states’ independence in foreign policy, and the increasingly limited range of options available to small states in an increasingly interdependent world. Previous works suggested that while systemic

⁷ Joshua D. Kertzer and Thomas Zeitzoff, “A Bottom-up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy,” *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 3 (2017): 543-558, DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12314.

⁸ Gabriel A. Almond, *The American people and Foreign Policy* (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1966); Walter Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy* (Boston: Brown, 1955).

⁹ For an overview, see Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996). Also, Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Matthew A. Baum and Tim Groeling, “Reality Asserts Itself: Public Opinion on Iraq and the Elasticity of Reality,” *International Organisation* 64, no. 3 (2010): 443-479, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40930443>.

factors set the range of acceptable alternatives”,¹¹ domestic factors decidedly determine which policy would be chosen. Nevertheless, in exceptional conditions, systemic conditions may fundamentally affect the domestic conditions, especially if the international issues become salient among the domestic population.

Research Question

How did the war-induced changing public opinion in Sweden and Finland influence governmental discourse and policy preference of military alliance during the Russia-Ukraine war?

Case Selection

The research investigates Sweden and Finland, two countries in the Baltic region with close geographical proximity to Russia. This close geographical proximity means that both countries have a history of territorial conflicts with Russia, which makes the security threat posed by Russia from 2014 onwards extremely acute. Additionally, they are the only two EU member states (an economic, social, and political alliance) with shared borders with Russia that refused to join NATO (a military alliance).¹² This means that if Russia attacks Sweden and Finland, the NATO members have no formal responsibility to commit their forces to protect Sweden and Finland. Meanwhile, though theoretically both Sweden and Finland, as EU member states, are formally protected under the Article 42 (7) of the Treaty on European Union which obliges other EU member states to provide “aid and assistance by all

¹¹ Steven E. Lobell et al., eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 282.

¹² Sweden shared maritime border with Russia in the Baltic Sea via Kaliningrad.

the means in their power”,¹³ the EU’s mutual assistance clause is much more restricted in application,¹⁴ focusing more on soft security and while leaving the hard, territorial security assistance to NATO’s Article 5,¹⁵ especially considering the fact that most of EU member states are also members of NATO.

¹³ European Council on Foreign Relations, “European Power. Article 42.7: An explainer,” 19 November, 2015, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_article_427_an_explainer5019/

¹⁴ In history, the EU’s Article 42 (7) was only invoked once by France in 2015 in response to terrorists’ attacks, with no compulsory military action from other EU member states. Meanwhile, NATO’s Article 5 has been invoked multiple times, with many actual commitments of military personnel by NATO member states.

Bob Deen, Dick Zandee, and Adaja Stoetman, “Uncharted and uncomfortable in European defence,” *Clingendael – Netherlands Institute of International Relations*, 27 January, 2022, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/uncharted-and-uncomfortable-european-defence/>; NATO, “Collective Defense – Article 5,” *NATO*, 24 March, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm

¹⁵ Trine Flockhart, “‘Me Tarzan – You Jane’: The EU and NATO and the Reversal of Roles,” *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 12, no. 3 (2011): 263-282, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15705854.2011.596306>.



Map 1: Scandinavian Regions and Borders with Russia.¹⁶

The discussion of NATO membership started in these two countries quite early since the organisation’s establishment in 1949, with a final decision to remain neutral throughout the Cold War, following a long history of non-alignment from the 19th century onwards. With the end of the Cold War, the debate on NATO membership reignited in these two countries. By joining the EU and becoming more integrated economically, socially, and politically with the West, both Sweden and Finland *de facto* shifted from neutrality to non-alignment. They also participated in more active and explicit cooperation with NATO including the Sweden-NATO Partnership for Peace in 1994, Sweden’s participation in NATO-led missions in the 2000s, and Sweden and Finland’s participation in joint military exercises with NATO’s members individually and with the NATO as a whole. Nevertheless, the cooperation

¹⁶ Nations Online. *Scandinavia*. <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/scandinavia-map.htm>

between these two countries and NATO shied away from the official title of full membership.

Following the 2014 illegal Crimea annexation by Russia, the Swedish and Finnish non-alignment strategy was seriously challenged, considering Finland's long land border and Sweden's maritime border with Russia. The clear violation of international law intensified the NATO discussion in these countries, with a turning point being the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, where the political discourse changed fundamentally and the Swedish and Finnish governments warmed up to the probability of NATO membership. As the Secretary General of NATO has explicitly welcomed both Sweden and Finland to join the military alliance,¹⁷ both countries can freely choose to apply without major worries about the most negative scenario when an application was lodged and denied, effectively angering Russia without receiving any protection from NATO. Swedish and Finnish application to NATO would fundamentally change the geopolitical balance of the region, significantly increasing the NATO-Russia border with the long Finland-Russia land border and the Sweden-Russia maritime border.



Map 2: NATO-Russia Border¹⁸

¹⁷ Jean Stoltenberg, “Press Conference,” *NATO*, 31 March, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_193943.htm.

¹⁸ NATO, NATO on the map, <https://www.nato.int/nato-on-the-map/#lat=51.5631223165374&lon=15.395992014409034&zoom=-1&layer-1>

Hypothesis

H1: In the past, though Sweden and Finland implicitly pursued military cooperation with NATO, public opinion in these countries prevented politicians from adopting NATO membership.

H2: The Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 triggered strong changes in Swedish and Finnish public opinion, which led to a change in the countries' governmental discourse towards NATO membership.

Research Design

The research would first conduct a document analysis of the two countries' political discourse and policy preference on NATO membership, the West, and Russia, as addressed by governmental documents of both Sweden and Finland and academic sources, during several periods: during the Second World War, during the Cold War from 1949 to the early 1990s, from the early 1990s to 2014 (with the 2008 Georgian war and the 2014 Crimean annexation by Russia), and from 2014 to 2022 (before the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war). This aims to investigate why Sweden and Finland decided not to pursue NATO membership in the past.

This is followed a discourse analysis of Swedish¹⁹ and Finnish²⁰ government offices' publications and news articles published by major national news agencies during the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war regarding international military cooperation with the West, military assistance towards Ukraine, and attitudes towards NATO membership. Due to the researcher's drawback in not being able to directly read Swedish and Finnish, the researcher searched for keywords such as "Sweden NATO" and "Finland NATO" on news-searching sites such as Google News to first trace the original news sources from Sweden and Finland news agencies. On some occasions, the researcher also found news articles which are also published in English by the Swedish and Finnish major news agencies. On other occasions, the

¹⁹ *Government Office of Sweden*, <https://www.government.se/>

²⁰ *Finish Government*, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/frontpage/>

researcher used tools such as Google Translate to first identify the news source, before confirming the reliability of information as re-published and translated by different international English-based news agencies. This is made possible due to the remarkable political salience of the NATO discussion in both Sweden and Finland, along with the importance of Swedish and Finnish NATO application to the international community, making the issue extensively covered by all international English-based news agencies.

The focused time period of the political discourse analysis is from 21 February 2022, when Russia officially recognised the self-proclaiming separatist regions (Donestk and Luhansk) of Ukraine and sent military troops into Ukrainian territories for an alleged “special operation”, to 18 May 2022, when both Swedish and Finnish ambassadors to NATO submitted their countries’ official application for NATO membership.²¹ The research would divide the time period into smaller segments by months. For the February segment, only one week of war would be covered. Meanwhile, for the March, April, and May segments, each would hopefully show how the political discourses of Swedish and Finnish decision-makers correlate and reflect the changes in public opinion over time.

Following the analysis of political discourses, the research would also compare the discourse patterns with statistics on Swedish and Finnish public opinion regarding NATO. These data would be gathered from mass survey results conducted in those countries by political institutions and national news agencies, as well as from academic resources through the years.

Methodology

The main methodology used is political discourse analysis. This method can be defined contextually,

²¹ Local, ““This is a good day’: Sweden and Finland submit bids to join Nato,” 18 May, 2022, <https://www.thelocal.se/20220518/sweden-and-finland-have-submitted-their-applications-to-join-nato/>

referring to the analysis of political discourse as displayed by political actors within a political context, or critically, referring to the political approach to discourse analysis.²² This research follows the prior definition of the method.

This method was based on a linguistic approach to political sciences, in which the “linguistic, discursive, and symbolic dimensions” of political sciences became prominent to researchers.²³ In this paradigm, language is seen as a strategic tool and resource from which politicians can carefully manipulate to “achieve political goals, create alliances and oppositions, and present an image of national unity”.²⁴ By using this method, the research hopes to analyse the political language, messages, and discourse that politicians used to advocate or justify a political viewpoint or action. Regarding the actors involved, as the paper deals with national security, which is still very excluded from the mass public, this research would adopt a more narrowed conception of politics and political actors, focusing primarily on the discourse produced by “central players in the polity” by van Dijk²⁵ and compared the political discourse with patterns of public opinion, rather than embracing a wider conception of politics, extending beyond the institutional politics into the domain of “life-world”.²⁶

²² Teun A. van Dijk, “What is Political Discourse Analysis?” in *Political Linguistics*, ed. Jan Blommaert and Chris Bulcean (Amsterdam: John Benjamins), 11-52.

²³ Patricia L. Dunmire, “Political Discourse Analysis: Exploring the Language of Politics and the Politics of Language,” *Language and Linguistics Compass* 6, no. 11 (2012): 735-751, <https://doi.org/10.1002/lnc3.365>.

²⁴ Kenneth Hudson, *The Language of Modern Politics* (London: MacMillan, 1978). Cited in Dunmire, “Political Discourse Analysis,” 736-737.

²⁵ Van Dijk, “What is Political Discourse Analysis,” 13.

²⁶ Norman L. Fairclough, “Critical and descriptive goals in discourse analysis,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 9, no. 6 (1985): 739-763.

Literature Review

Small States

Before 2014, Russia was generally not perceived as a major security threat by most EU and NATO member states, reflected by the lack of readiness by many states such as Sweden against Russia's territorial aggression²⁷ and by the previous willingness of the NATO *de facto* leader, the US, to improve the US-Russia bilateral relation.²⁸ However, with the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, the perception of Russia changed from a "difficult partner" to a "main security challenge" by the Western countries, especially among countries that share territorial borders with Russia, including the Nordic.²⁹ While Norway is already a NATO member, the neighbouring countries, Sweden and Finland, remain formally non-aligned with clear rejections of NATO membership. Despite this formal non-alignment, in reality, both countries have recently become more and more integrated in security and defence policies with the NATO as an alliance and with NATO's members bilaterally.³⁰

These behaviours of both Sweden and Finland correlate with the literature on small states. While great powers possess "more to say about which games will be played and how" and "the ability to act for its sake",³¹ small states merely have "modest goals and limited means" in the international sphere,³² thereby they could either "draw on the strength of the others" or "remove or isolate itself from power

²⁷ Jean Stoltenberg, "Secretary General's Annual Report 2015," *NATO*, 16 January, 2016, 19, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_127529.htm.

²⁸ White House, "U.S.-Russia Relations: "Reset" Fact Sheet".

²⁹ Lunde Saxi, "The Rise, Fall and Resurgence of Nordic Defence Cooperation", 659.

³⁰ Anna Wieslander, "'The Hultqvist doctrine' – Swedish security and defence policy after the Russia annexation of Crimea," *Defence Studies* 22, no. 1 (2022): 35-59.

³¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 194-195.

³² Fox William, "Foreword," in *Alliances and Small Powers*, ed. Robert L. Rothstein (New York: Colombia University Press), 24.

conflicts”.³³ Small states are generally believed to prefer a more “defensive”, “passive” foreign-policy strategy by avoiding conflict-generating behaviours and keeping as low a profile as possible, especially with non-alignment.³⁴ Though non-alignment and neutrality are the preferred courses of action, it depends greatly on the acceptance of the surrounding great powers,³⁵ with almost no actual case of pure neutrality with no reliance on external sources for security.³⁶ Instead, despite potential external dependency,³⁷ small states tend to pursue external security assistance, especially from far-away great powers with capabilities to provide safety for small states against local security threats with low cost and risk,³⁸ while not committing formally to any military alliances.

When non-alignment becomes unavailable, according to the collective action theory by Rothstein, small states were once believed to prefer bandwagoning (with the aggressive large state), to balance and free-ride (with the protective large state), to balance and join force (with the protective large state), to ally with other weak states, to fight alone, respectively.³⁹ However, later scholars suggested that the collective action theory has less explanatory power in analysing small states’ behaviours compared to its main counterpart, the balance of power and the balance of threat theory. To these scholars, the alleged bandwagoning tendency of small states was overstated. Though non-alignment is still considered the

³³ Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers*, 37.

³⁴ Ana Bojinovic, “Geographical Proximity and Historical Experience as a basis for Active Foreign Policy Strategy of small European states – the case of Austria and Slovenia regarding the Western Balkans”, *Politics in Central Europe*, no. 1 (2005), 8-29.

³⁵ Alyson J. K. Bailes, Jean-Marc Rickli, and Baldur Thorhallsson, “Small states, Survival, and Strategies,” in *Small States and International Security: Europe and Beyond*, ed. Clive Archer, Alyson J. K. Bailes, and Anders Wivel (New York: Routledge, 2014).

³⁶ Fox, “Foreword”.

³⁷ Bailes, “Small states, Survival, and Strategies”, 32.

³⁸ Stephen Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 103, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000045>.

³⁹ For the theoretical basis, Robert L. Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968). For the order of preferences for small states, Eric J. Labs, “Do weak states bandwagon.”

most favourable strategy, small states prefer to balance, especially if a free ride is possible, rather than to ally with other small states, to fighting alone, or to bandwagon, respectively.⁴⁰

But what makes a small state pursue a certain course of action instead of the others? If considered from the structural realist glance, all small states would act uniformly depending on the structural imperatives, thereby contributing little to explaining state behaviours. Meanwhile, neo-classical realism recognises the simultaneous roles of domestic and international factors in shaping state behaviours, despite domestic political considerations' limited effect "in ways that are consistent with balance-of-power logic".⁴¹ It sees systemic factors' role in limiting the "range of acceptable alternatives",⁴² from which domestic factors would play the decisive role in deciding the foreign policy outcomes. Domestic factors, such as the public opinion in democratic systems, serve as mediating variables, such as "entrenched national strategies from past periods"⁴³ or "ideological constructions within which national foreign policy must be justified"⁴⁴ that frequently encourage deviations from systemic-incentivised behaviours.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ For the theoretical basis, Stephen Walt, *The Origin of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987). For the order of preferences for small states, Eric J. Labs, "Do weak states bandwagon". Labs suggested that small states prefer neutrality over military alliance over bandwagoning. Nevertheless, in reality, it should be understood that small states could also utilise the grey zone between those strategies. In the case of Sweden and Finland, though remaining formally non-aligned, the extensive military cooperation between them and NATO just fell short of an official membership, which makes these two countries in between "non-alignment" and "military alliance".

⁴¹ John J. Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," *International Relations* 23, no. 2 (2009): 245-246, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117809104637>.

⁴² Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realism*, 282.

⁴³ Mark R. Brawley, "Neoclassical Realism and Strategic Calculations: Explaining Divergent British, French, and Soviet Strategies towards Germany between the World Wars (1919-1939)," in Ripsman et al., ed., *Neoclassical Realism*.

⁴⁴ Colin Dueck, "Neoclassical Realism and National Interest: Presidents, Domestic Politics, and Major Military Interventions," in Ripsman et al., ed., *Neoclassical Realism*.

⁴⁵ Ripsman et al., *Neoclassical Realism*, 281.

Public Opinion and Policy Preference

One primary domestic factor influencing foreign policy in democratic countries is public opinion. After the Second World War, the first image of elite-centric political thought, which is often dubbed the cynical “Almond-Lippmann consensus”, portrays the public with relative ignorance about international affairs, a lack of stability in their opinion,⁴⁶ and dependence on political elites for political and social knowledge, guidance, and cues.⁴⁷ From this perspective, policymaking, especially for foreign policy, should be reserved exclusively for political elites and segregated from the “unsophisticated and emotional public”.⁴⁸

In response, later generations of optimistic academics viewed foreign policy attitudes among the public to be more predictably ordered and structured than the elite-centric consensus previously suggested.⁴⁹ Past patterns have shown that public opinion regarding foreign policy has patterns and principles, such as preferring success in warfare,⁵⁰ preferring consistency between political statement and international

⁴⁶ Almond, *The American people and Foreign Policy*; Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*.

⁴⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990), 5:56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538981>.

⁴⁸ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1948). Cited in Kertzer and Zeitzoff, “A Bottom-up Theory of Public Opinion.

⁴⁹ Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*; Page and Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences*.

⁵⁰ Richard C. Eichenberg, “Victory has many friends: U.S. Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force, 1981-2005,” *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 140-177, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894616>.

relations decision,⁵¹ with clear and stable policy preference structure.⁵² These second waves of thinkers on public opinion also accredited the orderliness in public opinion of foreign policy to the public itself.⁵³

In response to the optimists, the third wave of thinkers also saw the predictability in public opinion, though considering this predictability to be more elite-driven than public-driven as the optimistic academics suggested. This school suggested that the “rationally ignorant” public knows little about politics, especially foreign policy, which is far removed from their daily life.⁵⁴ This resulted in a “top-down” information asymmetry between the political elites and the public, making “public perceptions ... often endogenous and malleable by elites”, in which the public receives information from elite cue-givers.⁵⁵ Despite the important contributions of the “elite cue-taking” theory, research also show that the pure top-down “public-elite” relation is exaggerated, with many different sources of cues accountable for the public opinion, such as social cues from peers and social networks.⁵⁶ This also means that social pressures could potentially have significant influences on the public opinion, and potentially on policy outcomes, considering the current age of new media and the political salience of political issues.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Michael Tomz, “Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach,” *International Organisation* 61, no. 4 (2007): 821-840, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818307070282>.

⁵² Brian C. Rathbun, “Hierarchy and Community at Home and Abroad: Evidence of a Common Structure of Domestic and Foreign Policy Beliefs in American Elites,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 3 (2007): 379-407, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002707300842>.

⁵³ Kertzer and Zeitzoff, “A Bottom-up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy.”

⁵⁴ James N. Rosenau, *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: An Operational Formulation* (New York: Random House, 1965).

⁵⁵ Baum and Groeling, “Reality Asserts Itself.”

⁵⁶ Kertzer and Zeitzoff, “A Bottom-up Theory of Public Opinion”.

⁵⁷ Kertzer and Zeitzoff, “A Bottom-up Theory of Public Opinion”.

Historical Context — Sweden’s and Finland’s discourse from the Second World War onwards

To fully understand the discussion in Sweden and Finland regarding NATO membership, it is important to go back to the Second World War and the early years of the Cold War when NATO was first formed, before transiting to the more recent post-Cold War debates.

Sweden and Finland during the Second World War

During the Second World War, Sweden was among a small number of countries that managed to maintain its official status of neutrality, a Swedish tradition that could be traced back to the early 19th century.⁵⁸ Even when the neighbouring Finland was attacked by the Soviets in 1939, Sweden refrained from sending in any military personnel, despite extensively providing “every material assistance possible”, as it was unsure of how the Soviet Union’s ally – Germany would have reacted towards a commitment of Swedish forces.⁵⁹ In early 1940, a peace agreement was signed with the contribution of Sweden as a point of contact between Finland and the Soviet Union, though not necessarily playing the role of a peace mediator.⁶⁰ This was followed by the German attack on Norway and Denmark in early 1940, effectively cutting off the geographical connection between Sweden and Finland with the West. Luckily, Sweden’s neutrality was deemed desirable by Germany and Russia, provided that Sweden did not ally with the West.⁶¹ But this neutrality came with a handful of economic, political, and military concessions by the Swedes. Fearing a German attack against Sweden itself, between 1940 and 1942, the overall strategy of the Swedish government was to make concessions to Germany, as few as

⁵⁸ Hagglof, “A Test of Neutrality.”

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 157.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 158.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 161.

possible, to preserve its sovereignty while silently increasing its defence capacity to not be dragged into Germany's sphere of influence,⁶²

Despite facing increasing anti-Fascist resentment by the mass Swedes for not providing assistance to the fellow Scandinavian countries which were under the German occupation,⁶³ these concessions by the "isolated" Sweden were also considered "vital" by the Western leaders, including the British and Norway, as long as Sweden did not join the Axis and continued its consistently "full and friendly relationship" with the West.⁶⁴ From the middle of 1942 onwards, as Germans showed more assertiveness in Continental Europe, Sweden slowly reduced its relationship with Germany and provided more assistances for the neighbouring countries under German occupation, which aligned more with the Swedish general anti-Fascist public opinion.⁶⁵ This showed that during the Second World War, though Sweden had clear preferences in its choices of partners, it managed its relationship with warring countries remarkably good, keeping trades with and avoiding any significant resentment from both sides of the war.

Throughout the hard test of the Second World War, the Swedish neutrality, though precarious, survived. This was due to three reasons: "a reasonably efficient defence system", "steady support from all the important political groups of the country", which also translated also to public support, and finally, a balance of power between major powers that resulted in both sides wishing Sweden to remain neutral.⁶⁶

For Finland, the Winter War against Russia ended in early 1940 with bitter peace conditions as Finland

⁶² Ibid, 162.

⁶³ Ibid, 163.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 163-164.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 165.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 166.

ceded a major proportion of its territory to Russia's jurisdiction, though with a slight consolation of peace. This consolation quickly evaporated with Germany's attacks on Norway and Denmark. As Germany further proceeded with Operation Barbarossa, mobilising the Axis soldiers to attack Russia and effectively breaking the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, Finland aligned with the Nazi Germans to attack Russia. In 1944, Finland and the Soviet Union signed the Moscow Armistice, re-establishing peace between the two countries at the cost of Finnish territory to Russia, along with a promise by Finland to expel all German troops from its territory. This led to the Lapland War between Finland and Germany in 1944, though this war could not prevent Finland from being classified as an ally of the Nazi Germany in the post-war period.

Sweden and Finland after the Second World War

Following the Second World War, both countries relied on “publicly proclaimed neutrality and non-alignment” by balancing the demands of the East and the West and focusing on international cooperation.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Sweden with its greater freedom was “neutral with a certain Western touch ... [wishing] to maintain the status quo,” while Finland was tied with the Soviet Union and “striving for a change”.⁶⁸

For Sweden, military alliance was portrayed in with risks of both “intensifying existing conflicts” and “spread of minor local conflicts”.⁶⁹ This shaped a national belief system for Sweden,⁷⁰ with general

⁶⁷ Matti Roitto and Antero Holmila, “Liquid Neutrality: Paradoxes of Democracy in Finnish and Swedish NATO discussions,” in *The Nordic Economic, Social and Political Model: Challenges in the 21st century*, ed. Anu Koivunen, Jari Ojala, and Janne Holmen (Routledge: New York, 2021): 91-123.

⁶⁸ Katarina Brodin, Kjell Goldmann, and Christian Lange, “The Policy of Neutrality: Official Doctrines of Finland and Sweden,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 3, no. 1 (1986): 18-51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45082955>

⁶⁹ Brodin et al., “The Policy of Neutrality,” 35.

⁷⁰ “Belief System” is defined as “a system of empirical and normative ideas about reality.” See more, Katarina Brodin, “Belief System, Doctrines, and Foreign Policy,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 7, no. 2 (1972): 97-112, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45083083>

distrust against military alliance and military antagonism between great powers.⁷¹ Therefore, Sweden pursued neutrality out of both interest-based and ideas-based calculations.⁷² Immediately after the Second World War, Swedish leaders expressed strong wariness towards military alliances,⁷³ with strong mutual opinion from the Swedish public against international military alliances.⁷⁴ It strategically aimed to avoid the war of interests between great powers by staying away from military alliances, while pursuing the meta-ideological image as an international “force for good” and promoting international cooperation. Nevertheless, understanding the threat posed by the Soviet Union, while publicly proclaiming neutrality as a core of Swedish foreign policy, Swedish leaders attempted to both increase its defensive capacity by itself and covertly pursued military integration with the West.⁷⁵ Essentially, throughout the Cold War, Sweden decoupled actual governmental actions in the backstage (increasing security cooperation with the NATO without formal membership) and the political performance on the frontstage (maintaining non-alignment) towards the public by politicians.⁷⁶ Swedish military cooperation and integration with the West, though active, remained hidden behind a closed curtain of secrecy. In this context, any mention of Swedish NATO membership was severely restricted among Swedish elites, with little toleration for accidental slips.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Brodin et al., “The Policy of Neutrality,” 41-42.

⁷² Magnus Petersson, “‘The Allied Partner’: Sweden and NATO Through the Realist–Idealist Lens,” in *The European Neutrals and NATO*, ed., Andrew Cottey (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2018): 73-96, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59524-9_4.

⁷³ Brodin et al., “The Policy of Neutrality,” 35.

⁷⁴ Gunnar Heckscher, “Sweden and the Cold War,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 3, no. 1 (1961): 31-34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396336108440232>

⁷⁵ Karl Yden, Joakim Berndtsson, and Magnus Petersson, “Sweden and the issue of NATO membership: Exploring a public opinion paradox,” *Defence Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2019.1568192>.

⁷⁶ Yden, Berndtsson, and Petersson, “Sweden and the issue of NATO membership”.

⁷⁷ Robert Dalsjö, *Life-line Lost: The Rise and Fall of ‘Neutral’ Sweden’s secret reserve option of wartime help from the West* (Stockholm: Santérus Academic Press, 2006). Cited in Yden, Berndtsson, and Petersson, “Sweden and the issue of NATO membership”.

Meanwhile, unlike Swedish history of neutrality, Finnish neutrality is widely believed to originate from the post-World War necessity for independence.⁷⁸ After the Second World War, Finland was still compelled to pay war reparations to the Soviet Union, thereby accepting a certain degree of Soviet influences in Finnish policies without any possibility of joining a Western military alliance.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, Finland did not want to join an Eastern alliance as well, identifying with the West through trade and culture.⁸⁰ Finland resolved to neutrality as a way to preserve its independence by keeping good relations with both the East and the West, a process later known as “Finlandisation”.

Additionally, the neutral Sweden and Finland should be considered in comparison to their fellow Scandinavian countries, Denmark and Norway, that pursued military alliance instead of returning to neutrality after the Second World War. With the history of being occupied during the war, both Denmark and Norway are much more critical towards the Soviet Union, using the totalitarian discourse to portray the Soviets as an “aggressively inclined,” thereby increasing the needs for joining military alliances.⁸¹ Meanwhile, the Swedish counterpart to this discourse were non-existent, while the Finnish counterpart portrayed the Soviet as more “defensively inclined” and peaceful state. This showed a difference in the threat perception of Scandinavian countries *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union.

Sweden and Finland after the Cold War

With the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, as the imperative security necessity disappeared, Swedish and Finnish leaders became more relaxed on their neutrality in favour of a potential

⁷⁸ Juhana Aunesluoma and Johanna Rainio-Niemi, “Neutrality as Identity? Finland’s quest for Security in the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 4 (2016): 51-78, https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00680.

⁷⁹ Klaus Törnudd, “Finnish Neutrality Policy during the Cold War.”

⁸⁰ Ola Tunander, “Geopolitics of the North: *Geopolitik* of the Weak: A Post-Cold War Return to Rudolf Kjellén,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 43, no. 2 (2008): 164-184, DOI: 10.1177/0010836708089081.

⁸¹ Brodin et al., “The Policy of Neutrality,” 42.

membership of the Western military alliance.⁸² However, the neutrality during the Cold War left an unpredicted legacy in public opinion, with neutrality becoming an embedded proponent of both Swedish and Finnish mentality and identity.⁸³ The attempt to move from Cold War's neutrality to post-Cold War's post-neutrality was not simply changing responses to external security challenges as political elites expected, but a matter "intricately enmeshed in ideas of self and subjectivity".⁸⁴ This reality shows that despite being one major influence on policy preference,⁸⁵ the belief systems of political elites could not decidedly shape national policy preference as many authors believed.

For Sweden, its definition of "neutrality" adapted to the new situation with the country's accession to the EU, shifting towards a softer "non-alignment" position. Nevertheless, though Sweden welcomed the economic, political, and social integration with the West, the issue of formal participation in the Western military alliance remained beyond the scope of consideration, despite increasing "backstage" cooperation with the NATO such as the NATO Partnership for Peace in 1994, military exercises with NATO and with NATO member states, or contributing military personnel and equipment to NATO-led missions.⁸⁶ This cooperation was also portrayed in a way that corresponded more with the Swedish tradition of international neutrality, as NATO's role had also changed during the post-Cold War period, focusing less on traditional hard security competition between great powers and more on tackling new security issues beyond state-centric conflicts and promoting international peace. In this way, Sweden became as integrated into the NATO defence system as possible without facing the domestic backlashes

⁸² Yden, Berndtsson, and Petersson, "Sweden and the issue of NATO membership".

⁸³ Aunesluoma and Rainio-Niemi, "Neutrality as Identity", 77-78. Yden, Berndtsson, and Petersson, "Sweden and the issue of NATO membership".

⁸⁴ Christine Agius, "Transformed beyond Recognition? The Politics of post neutrality," *Cooperation and Conflict* 46, no. 3 (2011): 370-395, DOI: 10.1177/0010836711416960.

⁸⁵ Brodin, "Belief Systems".

⁸⁶ Yden, Berndtsson, and Petersson, "Sweden and the issue of NATO membership", 11.

from its population and potentially more militarily integrated than many NATO members themselves.⁸⁷

For Finland, through the Cold War, neutrality became “a source of real, tangible security and even self-esteem and pride in the arenas of international cooperation and diplomacy” and a part of Finnish national ideology after the Cold War. With this mentality, public support for Finnish NATO membership remained low, even after joining the EU and became socially, economically, and politically integrated with the West more than ever. This became an official barrier that prevented many Finnish leaders from proposing or initiating NATO membership in Finland, despite *de facto* becoming more militarily integrated with NATO through Finland-NATO partnership and joint military exercises.

Before the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, Sweden and Finland, though with a consensus on the importance of the trans-Atlantic security partnership, were still socially and politically divided in the debate on formal NATO membership.⁸⁸ On the one hand, those opposing the NATO membership, associating with the old tradition of non-alignment, believed that their best interests lie in using soft powers and acting as an intermediary between Russia and the West. Despite supporting a cooperation with NATO, they also believed that an official membership would entail more costs than benefits. On the other hand, those supporting the NATO membership portray Russia as an imminent threat, though the lack of more concrete proof of clear aggressive behaviours by Russia undermined the pro-NATO argument. This resulted in a low proportion (and quite ambiguous) of support for NATO membership in both countries, with approximately only one out of three Swedes and Finns supporting NATO before 2022.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Wieslander, “The Hultqvist Doctrine”.

⁸⁸ Greg Simons, Andrey Manoylo & Philipp Trunov, “Sweden and the NATO debate: Views from Sweden and Russia,” *Global Affairs* 5, no. 4-5 (2019): 335-345, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2019.1681014>.

⁸⁹ Novus, “NATO opinion 2022-05-05 [Natoopinionen],” <https://novus.se/egnaundersokningar-arkiv/natoopinionen-5/>; Huhtanen, “Opposition to NATO membership fell to a record low”.

This social division could also be seen through the paradoxical results of public opinion in Sweden on NATO membership. Though the proportion of the Swedish population supporting the NATO membership has increased incredibly from 2013, the majority still supported non-alignment policies, especially during wartime, with over one-quarter of respondents paradoxically supporting both NATO membership and non-alignment.⁹⁰ This paradox is, in essence, “an audience reaction to what is being performed on the political stage” during and after the Cold War.⁹¹ Only until the Russian-Ukraine war in 2022, with a large-scale mobilisation of Russia military personnel occupying Ukraine, the perception of threat changed fundamentally among Swedish and Finnish public, fearing a spill-over war extending to other countries near Russia. This change happened almost overnight, with a significant increase making the proportion of Swedish and Finnish public supporting NATO membership from over 30 per cent to over 50 per cent in less than one week, and eventually to over 70 per cent in Finland, sufficiently marking a complete change in Swedish and Finnish public opinion and political landscape. These are followed by a complete reversal of decades of foreign policy within only two months.

⁹⁰ Joakim Berndtsson, Ulf Bjereld, and Karl Yden, “Turbulenta tider – svenskarnas åsikter om försvaret, Ryssland, NATO och Islamiska staten” [Turbulent times – the Swedes’ views on defense, Russia, NATO, and the Islamic state]. In *Ekvilibrium* [Equilibrium], ed. Jonas Ohlsson, Hendrik Ekengren Oscarsson, and Maria Solevid (Goteburg: Goteburg universitet, 2016): 239-253. Cited in Yden, Berndtsson, and Petersson, ““Sweden and the issue of NATO membership””.

⁹¹ Yden, Berndtsson, and Petersson, ““Sweden and the issue of NATO membership””, 8.

Analysis – Sweden’s and Finland’s public opinion and discourse in 2022

2022 marks a fundamental change in the Swedish public opinion towards key securities issues such as NATO membership and Russia. Before the 2022 war, though support for NATO membership had gradually been increasing ever since the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, only 37 per cent of Swedes supported Swedish NATO application in January 2022, while the majority of the population remained either ambiguous or opposing NATO membership.⁹² After the breakout of the Russia-Ukraine in late February 2022, for the first time since the establishment of NATO there was a majority of the Swedish population, though slim at 51 per cent, supporting NATO membership. This result is shared by different independently conducted surveys. A survey released in April 2022 by Novus showed that over 51 per cent of Swedes supported NATO membership.⁹³ Interestingly, the Novus survey also showed that almost 65 per cent of Swedish respondents supported NATO membership if Finland were to apply as well. Meanwhile, a survey by Demoskop (commissioned by Aftonbladet, a major Nordic news agency) showed that in April, 57 per cent of Swedes supported the motion.⁹⁴ Though a survey by Statista showed a slightly lower pro-NATO percentage of the Swedish population in April 2022, at 45 per cent,⁹⁵ all three surveys showed that the Swedish public increasingly leaned towards NATO membership.

⁹² Novus, “NATO opinion 2022-05-05 [Natoopinionen],” <https://novus.se/egnaundersokningar-arkiv/natoopinionen-5/>

⁹³Novus, “NATO opinion 2022-05-05 [Natoopinionen].”

⁹⁴ John Granlund, “Sharply increased support for NATO – 57 percent want to join [Kraftigt ökat stöd för Nato – 57 procent vill gå med],” *Aftonbladet*, 20 April, 2022, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/1O90qq/kraftigt-okat-stod-for-nato-57-procent-vill-ga-med>

⁹⁵ Statista, “Do you think Sweden should join the military alliance NATO,” <https://www.statista.com/statistics/660842/survey-on-perception-of-nato-membership-in-sweden/>

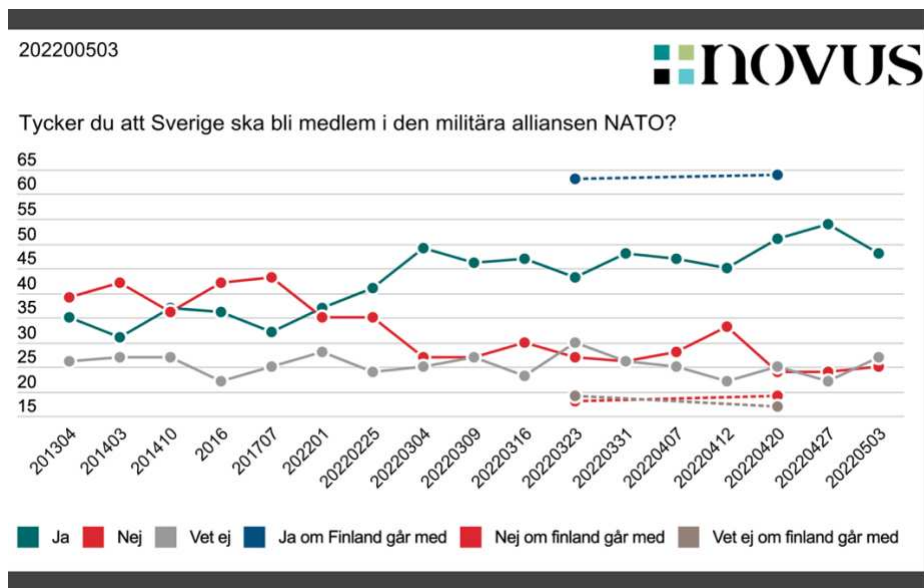


Figure 1: Swedish public opinion on whether Sweden should become a member of NATO or not.⁹⁶

The same pattern could be seen in Finland, though with faster acceleration. Before the war broke out, in January 2022, a survey by Helsingin Sanomat showed that only over a quarter of Finns (at 28 per cent) supported NATO membership, while 42 per cent opposed.⁹⁷ At the end of February 2022, only a few days after the breakout of the Russia-Ukraine war, for the first time in history, polling results by Finnish Yle news agency showed that over 50 per cent of the Finnish population supported NATO membership, nearly doubled every previous poll result.⁹⁸ As the war prolonged, Finnish public opinion became more supportive of a potential NATO membership for Finland, with 62 per cent of respondents

⁹⁶ Novus, “NATO opinion 2022-05-05 [Natoopinionen].”

⁹⁷ Jarmo Huhtanen, “Opposition to NATO membership fell to a record low [Nato-jäsenyyden vastustus putosi ennätyskellisen alas],” *Helsingin Sanomat*, 17 January, 2022, <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000008515424.html>.

⁹⁸ Yle, “For first time, Yle poll shows majority support for Finnish NATO application,” 28 February, 2022, <https://yle.fi/news/3-12337202>.

responded positively to such motion in March,⁹⁹ followed by an unprecedented 72 per cent in May.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, a survey by Statista in late February 2022 showed that 53 per cent of Finnish respondents support the government to apply for NATO membership.¹⁰¹ Along with these surveys, a bottom-up citizens' initiative gathered over 50000 signatures in just two days after the war broke out, legally forcing Finnish Parliament to debate about the issue,¹⁰² showing an active public opinion and action towards the issue.

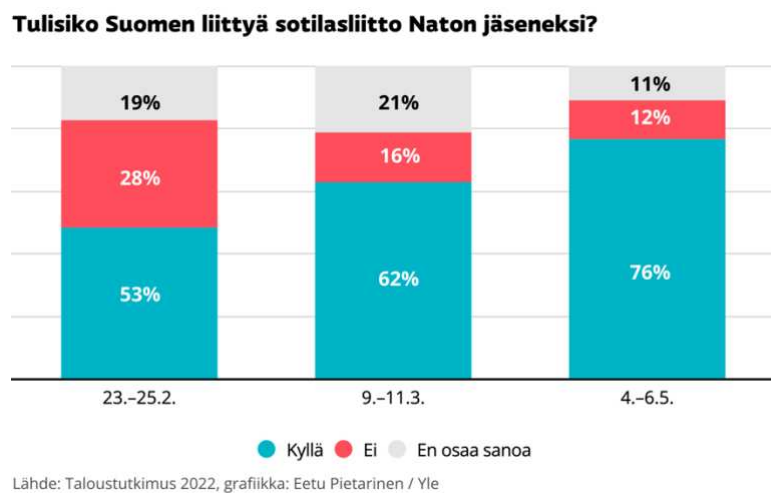


Figure 2: Changes in Finnish public opinion towards Finnish NATO membership during the Russia-Ukraine War.¹⁰³

These changes in public opinion did not go unnoticed by the public officials of both countries. At the

⁹⁹ Yle, “Yle Poll: Support for NATO membership hits record high,” 14 March, 2022, <https://yle.fi/news/3-12357832>.

¹⁰⁰ Pekka Kinnunen, “Yle’s Survey: NATO membership has strong support from Finns – 76 per cent want Finland to join NATO [Ylen kysely: Nato-jäsenyydellä on suomalaisten vankka tuki – 76 prosenttia haluaa Suomen Natoon],” *Yle*, 9 May, 2022, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-12436782>.

¹⁰¹ Statista, “Should Finland join NATO,” <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293534/opinion-on-joining-nato-finland/>

¹⁰² Kansalaisaloite, “Referendum on Finland’s NATO membership [Suomen Nato-jäsenyydestä kansanäänestys],” 21 February, 2022, <https://www.kansalaisaloite.fi/fi/aloite/9866>.

¹⁰³ Pekka Kinnunen, “Yle’s Survey.”

beginning of the war, despite officially condemning Russia's illegal attack on Ukraine and promising much support for Ukraine both socially and militarily, Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson expressed firm commitment to "Sweden's long-standing security policy ... [which] has served Sweden's interests well".¹⁰⁴ Andersson highlighted keywords such as "firm", "predictable", and "clear" upon mentioning about the desirable continuation of Sweden's non-alignment policy. This reflects the overall long-standing attitude of the ruling Social Democratic party in Sweden, which just officially voted against NATO membership in late November in its national congress. One week into the war, Andersson continued to reject the consideration of NATO membership by the opposition. Andersson repeated the message about "firm", "predictable", and clear non-alignment policies, while citing fear that Swedish NATO application would "destabilise security in Europe", despite surveys showing over 50 per cent of Swedes supporting NATO membership.¹⁰⁵ Though many news agencies and experts considered Andersson's personal attitude to be pro-NATO, the Swedish Prime Minister was hesitant to make it official on behalf of not only the ruling Swedish Social Democratic Party but also of the Swedish government, considering the explicitly strong oppositions from the members of the Social Democratic Party's committee, especially from the leaders of the party's semi-independent organisations.¹⁰⁶

However, at the end of March, as the war prolonged and the change in Swedish public opinion *vis-à-vis* Russia and NATO persisted, Prime Minister Andersson changed the political discord towards "not ruling out NATO membership in any way", marking a significantly changed position compared to

¹⁰⁴ Local, "Swedish government firm on not joining Nato despite Russian aggression," <https://www.thelocal.se/20220224/swedish-government-firm-on-not-joining-nato-despite-russian-aggression/>

¹⁰⁵ Simon Johnson, "Swedish PM rejects opposition calls to consider joining NATO," *Reuters*, 8 March, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/applying-join-nato-would-destabilize-security-situation-swedish-pm-says-2022-03-08/>

¹⁰⁶ Richard Orange, "EXPLAINED: How are Sweden's Social Democrats deciding on Nato?," *Local*, 9 May, 2022, <https://www.thelocal.se/20220506/explained-how-are-swedens-social-democrats-deciding-on-nato/>

Swedish government's position just a month prior.¹⁰⁷ Though changed, the Swedish Social Democratic Party's reluctance against NATO membership was not shared by all Swedish political parties, as the Swedish Moderate Party, which for long has been more favourable towards Swedish NATO application, launched an early election campaign with NATO membership as the most important pledge to Swedish voters.¹⁰⁸ This is particularly important, as the general support becomes more positive towards the issue of NATO membership, while the Swedish general election would shortly arrive in September, making the NATO issue one of the main issues of the electoral debate. Andersson's Social Democratic Party is also in a vulnerable position during this election, as it is a minority government with the smallest number of parliament members (100 out of 349 seats).¹⁰⁹ Any decision that does not satisfy the Swedish constituents would potentially face political backlashes and cost the Social Democratic party many parliamentary seats during the September 2022 election.

The beginning of May stills showed many hesitations among Swedish decision-makers. Nevertheless, as Finland announced its intention to join NATO on 12 May, the pressures intensified for the Swedish government. As Finland decided to join NATO, Sweden would face a grim geopolitical prospect of isolation if it decided not to follow suit, as it would be the only non-NATO country in the Scandinavian and Baltic region, which sets a different geopolitical context for foreign policy decision-making. Furthermore, the public opinion polls previously showed that though over 50 per cent of Swedes supported NATO, if Finland decides to join NATO, the public support for NATO increased to over 65 per cent. This result could potentially pressure Swedish members of the Parliament to vote more liberally for Swedish NATO membership at the Swedish Parliament, which could further motivate Swedish political elites to embrace the NATO decision with more favourable political discourses and

¹⁰⁷ Local, "Sweden's PM: 'I do not rule out NATO membership'," 30 March, 2022, <https://www.thelocal.se/20220330/swedens-pm-i-do-not-rule-out-nato-membership-in-any-way/>

¹⁰⁸ Local, "Sweden's Moderates make joining Nato their number one election pledge," 28 March, 2022, <https://www.thelocal.se/20220328/swedens-moderates-make-joining-nato-its-number-one-election-pledge/>

¹⁰⁹ Riksdag, "Members and Parties," <https://www.riksdagen.se/en/members-and-parties/>

potentially concrete actions.

On 13 May, a policy report was delivered to the Swedish Parliament, highlighting that the current non-alignment security arrangements of Sweden could not ensure Swedish territorial security, especially considering the limit of NATO commitment to partnered non-allies,¹¹⁰ as seen through the case of Ukraine. Though NATO membership could come with “Russian countermeasures during a transition period”, the report stressed that NATO membership would likely have a “lower risk for unilateral Russian actions against Swedish territory,” which is just short of explicitly endorsing NATO membership. Previously, Andersson stated that only until such a defence report is presented to the parliament would she as the national leader make the decision.

The report was followed by an announcement of the ruling Swedish Social Democratic Party, headed by Prime Minister Andersson, that the party would reverse its decade-long policies of non-alignment in favour of Swedish NATO membership, though with “unilateral reservations against the deployment of nuclear weapons and permanent bases on Swedish territory”.¹¹¹ This message is clearly aimed at Russia, expressing the notion that Swedish membership in NATO is for purely defensive purposes rather than acting as an extensive offensive source of threats towards Russia. Following this announcement of the Swedish Social Democratic Party, on 16 May, Prime Minister Andersson spoke at the beginning of the Swedish parliamentary debate on NATO. In her speech, Andersson confirmed that though neutrality and non-alignment had served the interests of Sweden for many years, as the security landscape

¹¹⁰ Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ““A deteriorating security policy situation – Consequences for Sweden [Ett försämrat säkerhetspolitiskt läge - konsekvenser för Sverige],” 13 May, 2022, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/departementsserien/ett-forsamrat-sakerhetspolitiskt-lage--_HAB47.

¹¹¹ Local, “Sweden’s ruling Social Democratic Party backs Nato bid,” 15 May, 2022, <https://www.thelocal.se/20220515/swedens-ruling-social-democratic-party-backs-nato-bid/>

changed, “[neutrality] is not going to serve Sweden as well in the future”.¹¹² From her judgement, “Sweden can be best defended within NATO” and Sweden is “leaving one era and entering another”, a sharp change in discourse from ambiguity in March to total affirmation in May.¹¹³ She also reassured that Swedish NATO membership would not clash with other Swedish international identities, such as “equality, democracy, human rights, and nuclear disarmament”, a slight appeasement message aiming at the remaining NATO-sceptics in Swedish political landscape. This change of political discourse of the Swedish Social Democratic Party toward NATO membership is perceived positively by its opposition, the Swedish Moderate Party, signalling near consensus in the Swedish political landscape. However, the Swedish Left Party, the party that is strongest against NATO membership, remained opposing, calling the decision to be without sufficient legitimacy and a “betrayal of the voters”.¹¹⁴

These overall changes of Swedish political discourse and policy preference correlated with the changes of Swedish public opinion, which reflected the H2 proposed by this paper. However, the lack of explicit mentions of public opinion by Swedish leaders make the causal mechanism more obscured than in Finland, which would be discussed subsequently.

Compared to Sweden, Finland opened up to the NATO possibility much earlier and stronger. Prior to the war, the general political atmosphere in Finland was unfavourable for NATO membership, with coalition cabinets consisting of mostly parties against NATO membership. Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin stated that it would be “very unlikely” that Finland would apply for NATO membership

¹¹² Local, “PM to parliament: ‘Sweden can be best defended from within Nato’,” 16 May, 2022, <https://www.thelocal.se/20220516/pm-in-parliament-sweden-can-be-best-defended-within-nato/>

¹¹³ Local, “Sweden to join Nato: ‘We are leaving one era and entering another’,” 16 May, 2022, <https://www.thelocal.com/20220516/swedish-pm-and-opposition-leader-announce-decision-to-join-nato/>

¹¹⁴ Local, “PM to parliament”.

in recent future,¹¹⁵ a statement made while only 28 per cent of Finns supported NATO membership.¹¹⁶ In early March, a few days after the war broke out, Marin informed the press that NATO membership would also be put into consideration during the meeting between Finnish political parties to discuss the war,¹¹⁷ acknowledging the significant change in Finnish public opinion towards Russia and NATO membership. Later in mid-April, Marin remarked how “stable” Finland was moving towards NATO membership, with all key decision-makers actively participating in the decision-making process on NATO membership.¹¹⁸ She also voiced that though it would be highly desirable for both Sweden and Finland to apply together, Finland could act independently towards NATO membership, showing a strong affirmative attitude towards NATO membership.

Similarly, in the middle of March, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö voiced concerns over the “major escalation risk” that NATO membership might carry, despite admitting a real possibility of deepening defence cooperation with the US and NATO.¹¹⁹ This could be seen as an argument against NATO membership. Nevertheless, shortly after, at the end of March, he cited recent opinion polls by Yle and Helsingin Sanomat as sufficient proofs of popular support for NATO membership, which would also

¹¹⁵ Essi Lehto and Anne Kauranen, “Finland’s PM says NATO membership is “very unlikely” in her current term,” *Reuters*, 20 January, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/finlands-pm-says-nato-membership-is-very-unlikely-her-watch-2022-01-19/>

¹¹⁶ Jarmo Huhtanen, “Opposition to NATO membership fell to a record low.”

¹¹⁷ Teemu Luukka, Jarmo Huhtanen, and Helmi Muhonen, “Finland send weapons to Ukraine – Prime Minister Marin: “The decision is historic” [Suomi lähettää aseita Ukrainalle – Pääministeri Marin: ”Päätös on historiallinen”],” *Helsingin Sanomat*, 28 February, 2022, <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000008647428.html>.

¹¹⁸ Jussi Salmela, Katri Kallionpää, and Marjaana Varmavuori, “Marin at press conference in Stockholm: Co-ordination with Sweden is sought, but not a precondition [Marin tiedotus-tilaisuudessaan Tukholmassa: Saman-tahtisuuteen Ruotsin kanssa pyritään, mutta edellytys se ei ole],” *Helsingin Sanomat*, 13 April, 2022, <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000008749032.html>.

¹¹⁹ Richard Milne, “Finland warns of ‘major escalation risk’ in Europe amid Nato membership debate,” *Financial Times*, 20 March, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/e636c759-aad7-4ee1-b245-f3575dd5ce73?sharetype=blocked/>

guarantee that such a motion would be passed in the Finnish Parliament.¹²⁰ He also considered joining NATO to provide Finland with the “most sufficient” security while enhancing Finland’s image as a safe country, discreetly hinting a positive attitude towards Finnish NATO application, despite acknowledging the inescapable threat of increasing tensions and potential retaliation from Russia. In the middle of April, Niinistö remarked that Finland’s decision regarding might not take long, with only one major concern of how Sweden would act accordingly.¹²¹

This generally positive attitude towards NATO membership in Finland could also be seen through the public discourse of other political parties. As the opinion polls showed more and more public support for NATO membership, so do the leaders of political parties. Apart from the opposition National Coalition Party which has supported NATO membership since the 1990s, two opposition parties, the Finns Party and the Christian Democrats, publicly supported the NATO membership in April.¹²² Similarly, some governmental coalition parties gradually dropped their anti-NATO stance, with the only exception of the Swedish People’s Party of Finland (RKP), which has supported NATO membership even before the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war. Specifically, both the Central Party¹²³ and the Green Party¹²⁴ announced their support for Finnish NATO membership for the first time. By May 10, only the Finnish Social Democratic Party, led by Prime Minister Marin, and the Left Alliance, the

¹²⁰ Yle, “Niinistö: Polls demonstrate required popular support for Nato membership,” 31 March, 2022, <https://yle.fi/news/3-12384116>.

¹²¹ Teemu Luukka, “President Niinistö: Finland's NATO decision will be made before the summer - hopes that Parliament will discuss the report promptly [Presidentti Niinistö: Suomen Nato-päätös tehdään ennen kesää – toivoo, että eduskunta käsittelee selonteon ripeästi],” Helsingin Sanomat, 13 April, 2022, <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000008749538.html>.

¹²² Yle, “Finns Party, Christian Democrats back NATO application,” 30 April, 2022, <https://yle.fi/news/3-12424523>

¹²³ Yle, “Centre Party says it will support potential Finnish NATO bid,” 9 April, 2022, <https://yle.fi/news/3-12398288>

¹²⁴ Helsingin Sanomat, “The Greens support Finland's NATO membership [Vihreät kannattaa Suomen Nato-jäsenyyttä],” 23 April, 2022, <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000008758226.html>.

staunchest opposition party against Finnish NATO application, remained silent regarding their official position. Nevertheless, both parties had given green light for their MPs to vote “at will”, unbounded by parties’ group discipline, which hinted a tacit approval and support for NATO membership.¹²⁵

These supports shown by the political parties in Finland reflect how the issue would be voted in the parliament. Indeed, as the issue reached the Finnish Parliament on 10 May, the parliament’s Defence Committee concluded with a near consensus that NATO membership is the “best solution for Finland’s security”, with no separate condition for Finland’s application for NATO membership.¹²⁶ Though the issue would continue to be considered and voted by other Finnish Parliament’s committees, the Defence Committee is considered the most important, showing the potential views of the whole parliament, especially considering most political parties’ official endorsement of the motion. Finally, on 12 May, both President Niinistö and Prime Minister Marin issued a joint statement on behalf of the Finnish Government, stating that NATO membership “would strengthen Finland’s security”, therefore, Finland “must apply for NATO membership without delay”.¹²⁷ The statement, though short, used very strong and unambiguous language like “must”, “without delay”, “decision will be taken rapidly”, while embracing the affirmative tone regarding the prospect of Finnish NATO membership, which indicated a radical change of political discourse by Finnish leaders and the Finnish Social Democratic Party. This change also signified a near-complete change of attitudes towards NATO membership in the Finnish political landscape, with most parties explicitly and all parties tacitly supported the motion.

¹²⁵ Minna Nalbantoglu, “Prime Minister Marin: The position of SDP MPs in NATO will be very unified [Pääministeri Marin IS:lle: Sdp:n kansan-edustajien kanta Natoon tulee olemaan hyvin yhtenäinen],” *Helsingin Sanomat*, 22 April, 2022, hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000008767488.html/

¹²⁶ Yle, “Joining Nato best solution for Finland's security, defence committee says,” 10 May, 2022, <https://yle.fi/news/3-12439150>

¹²⁷ Sauli Niinistö and Sanna Marin, “Joint statement by the President of the Republic and Prime Minister of Finland on Finland's NATO membership,” *Finnish Government*, 12 May, 2022, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/10616/joint-statement-by-the-president-of-the-republic-and-prime-minister-of-finland-on-finland-s-nato-membership>.

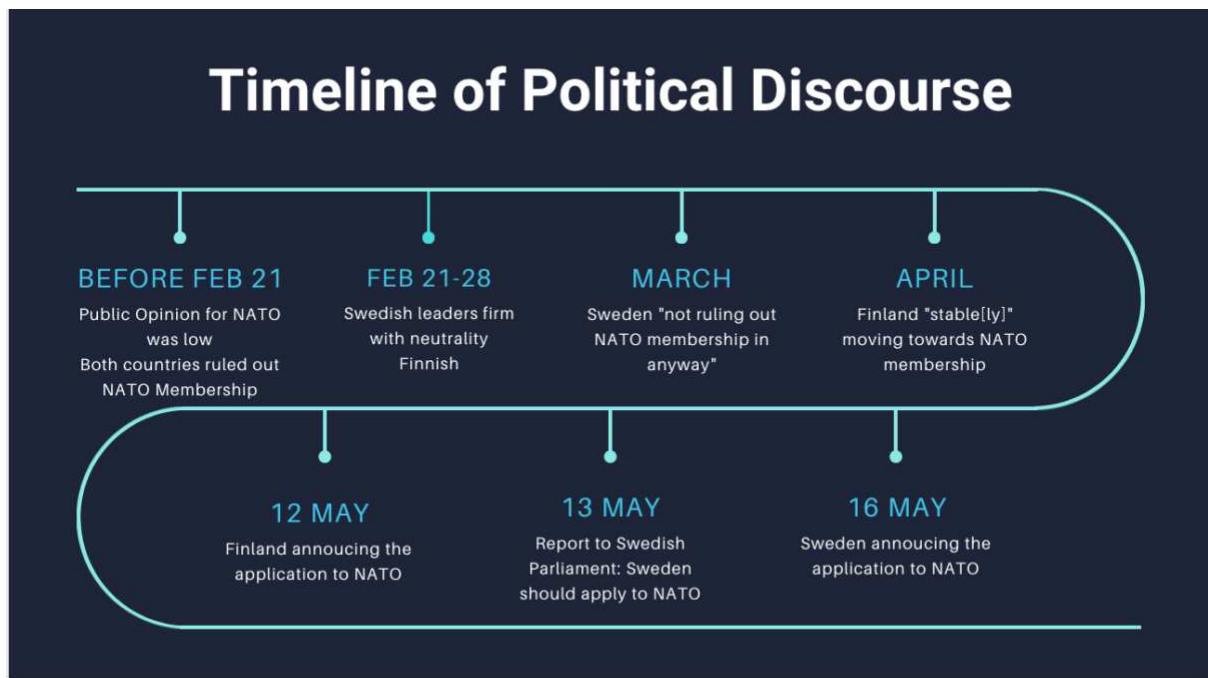


Figure 3: Timeline of Political Discourses of Sweden and Finland

Reflecting on the two hypotheses posed at the beginning of this paper, an overview of the existing literature showed that H1 described the past situation in Sweden and Finland quite closely. Though some Swedish and Finnish leaders showed implicit willingness to embrace closer military cooperation with NATO, the topic of official NATO membership remained taboo in both countries' political landscape until early 2022. However, as the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 rapidly changed the geopolitical scenery of the region, H2 correlates with the actual political discourse and policy preferences of Sweden and Finland. As public opinion in both countries shifted towards supporting NATO membership, Swedish and Finnish leaders slowly shifted their political discourse from refuting the possibility of NATO membership to acknowledging the possibility to implicitly affirming the likelihood, and, finally, to officially announce the policy.

The discourse of Swedish and Finnish leaders also showed that the relationship suggested by H2 between public opinion and policy preferences is proportionate. As Finnish public opinion shifted strongly towards supporting NATO membership, Finnish leaders also adapted accordingly to an equal

degree. Meanwhile, Swedish public opinion, though also shifting towards supporting NATO membership, saw a much more gradual change, peaking at only over 50 per cent rather than 70 per cent in Finland. This change in Swedish public opinion, though significant, does not predict a qualified majority that could guarantee that the NATO proposal would pass the Swedish Parliament. Therefore, the Swedish leaders responded to the Swedish public opinion with weaker intensity, taking a longer time to shift the discourse, and with weaker consensus within Swedish political parties, compared to Finland.

However, this proportionate correlation between public opinion and foreign policy preference could also potentially be falsifiable. Admittedly, Sweden has a longer tradition of neutrality compared to Finland, which could potentially make any macro transition in policy preference less likely, harder, and slower. Meanwhile, despite both having applied for NATO membership, Sweden included more reservations against the deployment of NATO nuclear weapons and permanent bases than Finland, which could suggest other factors influencing foreign policy preference.

Conclusion

Though both Sweden and Finland had been militarily oriented towards NATO for decades, the political discourses of both countries had continuously avoided and denied the issue of official NATO memberships due to the lack of public support. As the Russia-Ukraine war broke out and has prolonged in 2022, the public's geopolitical perceptions fundamentally changed, reverting the Cold War's legacy of neutrality. As public opinion polls showed a gradually increasing proportion of Swedish and Finnish public support for NATO membership, the political discourse of Swedish and Finnish leaders shifted through different phases, from complete denial of the possibility of NATO membership to accepting its possibility, to acknowledging a high possibility, to officially confirming the national decision to pursue NATO membership.

This research investigated two hypotheses on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy preference. The case studies of Sweden and Finland both showed that public opinion seemingly has free will in shaping foreign policies. Previously studies suggested that during the 1990s, though Swedish and Finnish leaders attempted to move toward NATO, the residue legacy of the Cold War that shaped Swedish and Finnish public opinion against NATO membership persisted, effectively negating the possibility of NATO membership in both countries. Though this showed that public opinion, in these cases, limited the option that political elites could pursue, essentially, the public opinion from the 1990s to the early 2010s in both countries was essentially shaped by previous political decisions by political elites, which correlated to what H1 suggested. Nevertheless, the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war provided a new source of external stimuli that drastically changed the public opinion in both countries, independent of the will of the domestic political elites. This changed public opinion continues to limit, shape, and drive the decision-making of domestic political elites toward a certain direction, which correlated to what H2 suggested.

Finally, following a critical reflection, this abductive research admittedly has some limitations which could be addressed by future research. First, the insight of this research could potentially be complemented with a large-N study comparing the public opinion and policy preference, especially in security issues, in different countries that had given up neutrality. This would serve as a baseline to test if the result generated by this thesis is generalisable to other cases. Second, the researcher, though attempting to minimise all potential loss in translation, might possibly miss some nuanced political messages that a non-native could not discern. Future researchers, especially those who specialise in Swedish and Finnish politics and linguistics, might potentially unlock more hidden meanings from the same materials, thereby elaborating the cases more extensively. Thirdly, though the research showed clear influences of public opinion on foreign policy preference, these influences could potentially not be decisive, especially in less salient political issues. Future researchers could potentially compare the degree to which public opinion influences policy preference across different policy sectors.

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