

2023/2024

Bridges Beyond Borders

Understanding Swedish Politics on the Global Stage

SWEDEN'S IMAGE
ABROAD – FOREVER
POSITIVE?

THE SWEDISH
REPUTATION - A DECLINE
IN TRUST AND BELIEF

TRUTHS AND MYTHS
ABOUT SWEDISH
FOREIGN AND SECURITY
POLICY

Upost

Umeå Association of International Affairs

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

To summarize current global foreign policy events in a single issue is nearly impossible. Swedish politicians highlights over 200 years of peace as an unique milestone. Various political events have helped bring Sweden forward in the spotlight, both in negative and positive terms. Questions and debates have been brought up that have not previously been discussed, at least not as loudly. The theme for this year's UTPOST is Sweden's reputation in the world and the highly relevant NATO membership.

Hopefully this issue will give you a bit of insight to the minds of some students at Umeå University. The entire purpose of this magazine is to bring forward different perspectives on current happenings in regards to foreign politics.

Lastly I would like to dedicate a big thank you to the writers participating in this number, without them this magazine wouldn't be possible. Hopefully you will find the articles as interesting as I do.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nelly Bergman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Nelly" on the top line and "Bergman" on the bottom line.

EDITOR



UTPOST IS THE MAGAZINE BY THE
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EDITOR

NELLY BERGMAN

PHOTOGRAPHERS

JASON LEUNG

ENGIN AKYURT

ULADZISLAU PETRUSHKEVICH

NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANISATION

WRITERS IN THIS EDITION

MARIE-THERES MAYR

Sweden's image abroad – forever
positive?

ELIN PARVIAINEN

The Swedish reputation
A decline in trust and belief

DAVID GREN

Truths and Myths About Swedish
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UMEÀ



– FOREVER POSITIVE?



Businesses have long been aware of how important their image and the public's perception of their actions is – a positive image can generate goodwill, foster business relations, and create new opportunities.

However, the same is true for the image of a country.

A country's perception abroad is arguably vital for many reasons – from political relations to business decisions, the way a country is perceived does affect many aspects of how it interacts with the world, and how the world interacts with said country.

Sweden, for the past decades, has benefitted from one of the best reputations of any country. In the past ten years, it has consistently placed in the top 10 of various important indicators and indices, which evaluate, amongst other aspects, the political climate, potential for innovation, sustainability, and quality of life, such as the Nations Brand Index and the World Happiness Ranking. This favorable reputation has, for the most part, also translated to positive reporting from news outlets worldwide. Additionally, the conversation about Sweden on various social media platforms has been mostly positive over the course of the past ten years.

However, with the political and diplomatic climate shifting in many parts of the world, the way in which Sweden is perceived in certain countries has changed due to recent events and policies. The most important one of these changes is most likely Sweden's NATO application, which – according to the Swedish Institute (SI) – dominated news about the country abroad, covering a spectrum from negative to very positive opinions.

In NATO and NATO-adjacent countries, the reporting about Sweden's NATO application in major news outlets has been overwhelmingly positive. Favorable reporting has described Sweden as an important player in ensuring stability in Europe and the decision to join NATO as a step in the right direction. Meanwhile, the majority of news in Russia about the application has been negative. Furthermore, opinions on Sweden have also become less favorable in Türkiye and China, possibly due to Sweden's stance regarding the war in Ukraine and the global tensions due to this conflict.

This negative influence on Sweden's image is also reflected in one of the major indices used to evaluate country image, the NBI (Nation Brands Index), where Sweden's position decreased significantly for respondents from Russia (minus seven ranks), China (-7) and Türkiye (-4). Yet, it is important to note that despite the negative change in perception in the previously mentioned countries, Sweden's overall rank in the NBI did not change compared to the previous year, with Sweden retaining the ninth rank. For comparison, the first, second and third position of the NBI are occupied by Germany, Japan and Canada.

Another issue dominating international reporting that affected Sweden's reputation in some countries are the Quran burning and the subsequent 2022 Easter riots in various Swedish cities. These events caused a polarizing discussion about freedom of speech both in Sweden and abroad, with opinions being particularly critical of Sweden in Middle Eastern and Asian countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Pakistan.

The change in perception was especially significant in Saudi Arabia, where Sweden's NBI placement plummeted 18 spots. Notably, Turkish and Chinese politicians spoke out against the demonstration that is seen as the inciting event of the riots, and it is likely that the Quran burning and the riots were a contributing factor for the decrease in positive opinion towards Sweden in both Türkiye and China.

A third, rather recent change that may have had a negative influence on Sweden's image abroad is the 2022 Riksdag election. With right-wing parties on the rise across Europe, the election result was not entirely unexpected by experts and mainstream media, however considering Sweden's reputation as a more left-leaning country, the general media response nevertheless displayed a certain level of surprise at the outcome of the 2022 election. Articles describing Sweden - in the past often lauded as a very open society with a focus on equality - as facing a large shift in political ideology were common in news media, especially with regards to domestic policy and immigration.

Yet, despite existing in an increasingly conflict-riddled Europe, and in spite of the previously mentioned issues faced directly by Sweden, the country is still perceived in an outstandingly positive light, which may translate to increased political capital and further economic opportunities in the future. Nevertheless, only time will tell if Sweden manages to maintain its reputation, or if future political, societal, or economic changes may ultimately cause Sweden to fall out of favor abroad.

Written by Marie-Theres May



“RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AS A LEGAL
RIGHT MEANS LITTLE UNLESS
PEOPLE OF ALL RELIGIONS ARE
SAFE TO PRACTICE THEIR FAITH,
WEAR THEIR RELIGIOUS GARB,
SPEAK THEIR TRUTH AND IN
OTHER WAYS FOLLOW THEIR
CONSCIENCE WITHOUT FEAR OF
DISCRIMINATION, PERSECUTION
OR VIOLENCE.”

Charles Haynes

“IF LARGE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE BELIEVE IN FREEDOM
OF SPEECH, THERE WILL BE FREEDOM OF SPEECH, EVEN
IF THE LAW FORBIDS IT. BUT IF PUBLIC OPINION IS
SLUGGISH, INCONVENIENT MINORITIES WILL BE
PERSECUTED, EVEN IF LAWS EXIST TO PROTECT THEM.”

George Orwell

THE SWEDISH REPUTATION - A DECLINE IN TRUST AND BELIEF

Elin Parviainen

“Those who allow such blasphemy in front of our embassy can no longer expect our support for their Nato membership. If you love members of terrorist organisations and enemies of Islam so much and protect them, then we advise you to seek their support for your countries’ security.”

- Recep Tayyip Erdogan

For several decades Sweden has hailed a well respected reputation globally. The country has been known for having a strong moral standpoint,

which has been illustrated by their actions regarding foreign affairs. With generous financial aid directed towards nations in need, Sweden showcases their belief in human decency. The country is not foreign to standing up for what is “right”, even if it is against other powerful nations.

On the 23 of December 1972 then-prime minister

Olof Palme held his infamous speech where he condemned US actions during the Vietnam war. Something that for a long period frosted over the

foreign relations between Sweden and the superpower. But in recent years Sweden, like many other countries, has seen a rise in popularity for populist right-wing political parties. The

Swedish example consists of the party Sweden democrats becoming the second largest political party in just two decades. But are the glory days now over?

During 2023 Sweden has faced bigger and bigger dissent among its citizens after a long series of Quran burnings with the following social unrest. The country has also received international criticism for their actions, or rather their failure to act. Some critics point out that



Sweden has a law prohibiting incitement against ethnic groups, but experts say that since the burnings targets a book instead of people or individuals the law does not fit the legal criteria. The intensity of the burnings have increased in recent years, culminating now in 2023. One possible explanation for the increased intensity of these actions can be found in Turkey's demands and attempts to delay Sweden's entry into NATO. Some individuals feel that Sweden are turning into Turkey's errand boy by giving in to their demands and some of this frustration is illustrated by the burnings.

Turkey, a predominantly muslim country, has been one of the biggest critics of the burnings and has threatened to not progress with the national vote

for Swedish NATO membership. Is freedom of speech worth potentially losing one of the most important and strategic defence allegiances? Is

there a way for Sweden to regain their international reputation as one of the good guys?

The first and probably the most important question to answer is, why is Sweden continuing to allow Quran burnings despite threats and criticism? To cite Professor Marten Schultz, "Sweden has one

of the world's strongest legal protections for freedom of expression".

Their constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression no matter who it might offend or hurt. In the past the

courts have overruled the police when they attempted to refuse to allow two planned Quran-

burnings early 2023. Not only does the constitution have precedence over other law but we now also have examples of legal praxis.

The Quran burnings have created a sort of ripple effect, that we are only now truly seeing the consequences of. As a result of the burnings and the following unrest SÄPO, in consultation with NCT, has raised Sweden's terror threat level as the government and its institutions fear retaliation. Swedish nationals are now at an increased risk of being targeted, something that has already happened in Brussels, Belgium October 16th 2023. This does beg the question if we should ban burnings of all holy texts and books? If this question were to be asked we would probably hear all sorts of answers.

On one hand the freedom of expression is regulated in the constitution making it one of the most important laws in Sweden, but on the other hand NATO is a valuable ally as the Russian threat increases. But there is a potential danger in restricting the freedom of expression.





Countries are led down a dangerous path as extreme political opinions and mistrust directed towards democracy and its institutions gain more ground. But like previously established, restrictions of freedom of expression is not possible in the Swedish example.

So is there a way for Sweden to regain their good reputation? Well possibly. A first step is of course condemning the burnings and other harmful actions towards ethnic groups. This has already been done to some extent, by several people of importance including prime minister Ulf Kristersson. A second step could logically be to have an open dialogue with other countries with extra focus on countries with a large muslim population. Other countries need to understand that Sweden's constitution is broad and strong, in other words not easily changed. A core value for the countries' democracy is freedom of expression and by limiting that, can they really call ourselves tolerant and democratic? A third and final step would be to strengthen the trust in democracy and its institutions. Sweden's population needs to see that they can trust decisions made by the government and institutions. An important component to this is to fight the disinformation campaign. This is partly illustrated by certain groups spreading the idea that the Swedish government kidnaps children through social services.

In conclusion Sweden has for a long time been viewed as a moral superpower but the trust and belief in Sweden's good reputation has been on a decline for the last couple of years. The country faces many possible challenges that are not easily fixable. But there are signs that having an open dialogue with other actors, both state and individual, do help to ease the current tensions. It's highly unlikely that Sweden will be viewed in a negative light going forward but depending partly on how the Quran burnings are being handled, they still have to wait and see whether Sweden regains their reputation as a moral superpower.

Written by Elin Parviainen





NATO OTAN

TRUTHS AND MYTHS ABOUT SWEDISH FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

David Gren

On the 16th of May in 2022 the Swedish government, with broad consensus in the Swedish parliament, decided to apply for NATO membership. Due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February of the same year, public opinion started shifting in favor of NATO membership. Both the Social Democrats and the Sweden Democrats changed their position on NATO membership in 2022 and were now in favor of it. This left only the Green Party and the Left Party against NATO membership out of the 8 political parties with representation in the parliament. My ambition in this article is to shed light on these developments in a historical context and give the reader truths, and perhaps break myths, about Swedish foreign and security policy.

At the moment when this article is being written it is unclear when Sweden will become a member of NATO and the Swedish application is dependent on approval from both Turkey and Hungary.

However, the UK and the USA among other NATO members have given Sweden security promises in case of war meaning that the era of Swedish non-alignment is over even if Sweden is not yet a member of NATO.

Before talking about history it is necessary to clarify three central concepts, what a neutralist policy implies, what non-alignment implies, and what neutrality implies. The purpose of a neutralist policy for a state is to be neutral in case of war, not necessarily during peace.



Neutrality implies not taking a stand on either side. Non-alignment implies not being in a military alliance with other states where promises of defending each other are given. It would be wrong to say that Sweden during the Cold War was a neutral state, Sweden had a neutralist policy meaning Sweden would be neutral in case of war not neutral during peace. After the Cold War, which I will talk more about, Sweden did not have a neutralist policy but was rather a non-alignment state.

Now, let's have a look at the brief historical context beginning with the Cold War era. After the Second World War, Sweden joined the United Nations. During this period, there were discussions among the Scandinavian countries Denmark, Sweden, and Norway to create a military alliance. Finland was not part of these discussions because of the Finno-Soviet Treaty of 1948. This was due to how the Second World War ended and the treaty said that Finland and the Soviet Union would consult each other in case Germany invaded one or the other. These discussions did not lead anywhere and eventually, Norway and Denmark joined NATO. Denmark and Norway were therefore leaning to the West while Finland leaned to the East and Sweden was rather a balancing state between the West and East with a neutralist policy. The idea was that a strong military defense would protect the Swedish neutralist policy.

From 1945 to 1962 Östen Undén was Minister for Foreign Affairs in Sweden.

During the first period of the Cold War Swedish foreign policy was characterized by having a relatively speaking "low profile". Östen Undén wanted Sweden to have good relations with both the USA and the Soviet Union. However, when voting in the United Nations assembly Sweden usually voted with the Western powers, with a few exceptions.

From the 1960:s and closer to the end of the Cold War Swedish foreign policy was under change. Sweden was starting to shift away from having the same positions as other Western powers to voting as the third world countries in the United Nations. Sweden started to openly criticize both Western and Eastern powers and the third-world questions became an important part of Swedish foreign policy. An example of how Sweden was more openly criticizing powers is the criticism of the Vietnam War, Prime Minister Olof Palme gave harsh criticism to the USA and this even led to a diplomatic crisis during the 1970s.

An example of when Sweden criticized the Eastern Bloc was the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the Soviet–Afghan War that started in 1979. During this period there was however unofficial and rather secret military cooperation between Sweden and Western powers. This was in the form of for example exchange of intelligence.

After the end of the Cold War Swedish foreign policy was again under change. Direct threats towards Sweden were hard to see and wars seemed to be far away from Swedish soil. Neutrality policy was no longer used to describe Swedish foreign and security politics. The non-alignment was kept although and highlighted in Swedish foreign and security policy.

Sweden joined the Partnership for Peace in 1994. On the first of January 1995, Sweden became a member of the EU.

There was at the beginning of the post-Cold War era a broad consensus among the Swedish political parties on how the foreign and security policy would be. However, this came to change for example when the Liberals became the first party in 1999 to be pro a NATO membership. After the Cold War cuts in military spending were also made, for example, made both by Social Democratic governments and the Moderate Party-led government between 2006 and 2014.

However, something that suddenly challenged the view that direct threats seem far away from Sweden was Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Spending more money on defense has now become a priority after years of cuts in spending. The Hultqvist doctrine was now being developed. Close cooperation with NATO, keeping the non-alignment, and spending more money on defense was the core of the Hultqvist doctrine.

When Russia invaded Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022 the public opinion became more positive towards NATO membership. The Social Democrats and the Sweden Democrats changed their opinion on NATO now wanting Sweden to become a member. This left only 2 out of 8 political parties in the parliament being against NATO membership. Sweden applied for NATO membership on the 16th of May 2022 and is now waiting for Turkey and Hungary to approve Sweden.

I have now put Swedish foreign and security politics in a historical context. In concluding remarks, how Swedish foreign and security politics have changed over time has had a lot to do with developments in the world. What will happen in the future with Swedish foreign and security policy will depend upon changes in the world and how Sweden decides to react on those changes.

The Board

2023/2024



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REBECCA SLÄTTÅS

President
ordf@upfu.org

MARTIN GÄRDIN

Head of PR
info@upfu.org

MELISA MEMET

Vice President
vice@upfu.org

GIFT KEN

Head of Activities
activities@upfu.org

MAGDALENA HAUTALA

Secretary
sekreterare@upfu.org

NELLY BERGMAN

Editor
redaktor@upfu.org

MALVA SEEVERS

Treasurer
kassor@upfu.org

VIKTOR OTTOSSON

Head of Travel
travel@upfu.org

MAX LANNERGREN

SAIA / UFS - representative
umea@ufsverge.org

MÄRTA GÖRANSSON

Substitute Head of Travel
travel@upfu.org

ANASTASIJA LARINA

Head of Program
program@upfu.org

ALMA RIVAROLA BARAIBAR

Head of Media
media@upfu.org

METTE MÄKITALO

Head of Program
program@upfu.org

SALEH KWAIDI

Head of Grants
grants@upfu.org

SELMA DULMA

Head of PR
info@upfu.org

A WORD FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear members of Umeå Association of International Affairs,

As the fall semester draws to a close, I wish to express my sincere gratitude and pride for the great participation and dedication as demonstrated by the board, as well as all of our members. We have had the great opportunity to arrange a trip to Yerevan, Armenia, and explored the many cultural features and heritages of the country.

Additionally, we have had the chance to arrange multiple interesting lectures with diverse speakers about interesting topics, as well as a Human Rights themed week, along with our cooperative associations on campus. Highlights of these months include co-hosting a panel discussion with Umeå University between top diplomat and former deputy general secretary of the UN Jan Eliasson and Niklas Eklund from the department of political science. Furthermore the general secretary of the International Red Cross, Anders Pedersen, visited Umeå in November. Both Eliasson and Pedersen specifically advocated for the importance of societal engagement among the youth, a statement I wish to undertake in my time as the president of UAIA.

However, in this day and age, it is impossible to disregard the utter chaos corresponding to foreign affairs today. The concept of democracy has been compromised and freedom of speech is questioned. In this edition of Utpost, we are digging deeper into the aspects of respectfulness and responsibility concerning these topics.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Rebecca Slättås". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Rebecca" on the top line and "Slättås" on the bottom line.

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SAMHÄLLSVETARHUSET, FLOOR 1
ROOM B14333, BOX 7652
901 87 - UMEÅ, SWEDEN