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THE IMAGE OF RUSSIA IN SWEDISH NATIONAL-CONSERVATIVE DISCOURSE IN 2014–2024

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This paper examines the evolution of Swedish national-conservative discourse on Russia between 2014 and 2024, focusing specifically on the Sweden Democrats (SD) and their affiliated magazine Samtiden. Having become Sweden’s second-largest political party, the SD effectively broke through the political ‘cordon sanitaire’ in the Riksdag prior to the 2022 elections. Throughout this process, the concept of the “Russian menace” played a pivotal role. Employing methodologies from historical and political imagology, the study analyzes the image of Russia within SD narratives and its transformation over time, as the party strategically invokes the “Russian menace” myth for political mobilization. Prior to 2014, the Sweden Democrats did not perceive Russia as an existential threat to Sweden — a position that clearly distinguished them from other Swedish right-wing actors, particularly the conservative Moderate Party (Moderaterna). Following the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, however, the SD began reevaluating their stance. Before the 2018 Skripal case, both the party and its affiliated commentators largely framed Russia as a legitimate participant in the international order. Subsequently, their discourse gradually shifted toward more pronounced criticism of Russian foreign policy and political system. Since February 2022, the Sweden Democrats have actively employed the “Russian menace” narrative more intensively than any other Swedish political party. In doing so, they frequently reference arguments from historians, political scientists, and international relations scholars. These discursive developments have profoundly shaped the party’s evolving position on Sweden’s NATO membership and constitute a central pillar of its broader political messaging. Within this context, the “Russian menace” narrative has emerged as a cornerstone of the Sweden Democrats’ political agenda.

Keywords:

Sweden, Sweden Democrats, Samtiden, Rysskräcken, Russian menace, national-conservatism, Russophobia

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Introduction

The perception of Russia in the public opinion of the Baltic region countries remains an acute problem for Russian foreign policy and, consequently, regional and European security. The sequence of events that took place between 2014 and 2024, coinciding with the emergence of an anti-Russian discourse during geopolitical transformations, exposed the existence of political and cultural Russophobia in multiple nations. A notable instance was that of Sweden, which exhibited a distinctive pattern due to its formal non-alignment policy before March 2024. Despite its “Freedom from Alliances” after 1814, Swedish society continues to refer to the “Russian menace” myth in its historical consciousness, despite its long-standing, multilateral relations with Russia. The myth appeared to be a part of Swedish scepticism towards Russia both before and after 1991. In 2022, Sweden revised its foreign policy strategy and submitted an application for membership in NATO, citing anti-Russian rhetoric and policy as a primary motivation. Before 2014, the *Sweden Democrats* Party had not articulated a particular stance toward Russia, in contrast to the positions adopted by the other Swedish political parties. This position underwent a shift, which was concomitant with the evolving dynamics between Sweden, NATO, and Russia.

The escalation of tensions between Russia and Sweden occurred during the final months of the *Moderaterna* government led by Fredrik Reinfeldt in 2014. Concurrently, deliberations concerning Sweden’s potential accession to NATO emerged, with the notion of the “Russian menace” assuming a pivotal role in this discourse. The leading political parties in Sweden, for example, the Social Democratic Workers’ Party, *Moderaterna*, and the *Sweden Democrats*, have expressed a range of opinions on NATO membership and Russia in general. These opinions have been articulated during the general elections of 2014, 2018, and 2022, as well as during parliamentary and expert debates [1]. Nevertheless, the “freedom from alliances” was not abolished, despite the expansion of cooperation between Sweden and NATO before 2022–2024.¹

Following Russia’s special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine in 2022, Sweden submitted its application for NATO membership, which was approved in March 2024, resulting in its full accession to the alliance. The dissemination of both historical and contemporary portrayals of “the Russian menace” within Swedish public discourse proved to be a pivotal element in this process. The *Moderaterna* and the *Sweden Democrats* have demonstrated a consistent stance on NATO membership and relations with Russia, maintaining a unified position that contrasts with their previous divergence. This shift in position is noteworthy, as it indicates a shift in their ideological stance, or lack thereof, on the matter of NATO membership.

The objective of the survey is to identify the primary components of the negative image of Russia that was established between 2014 and 2024 within the discourse of the national conservative party of Sweden, the *Sweden Democrats* (SD). The decision is associated with the shifts in the role of the SD in Swedish politics. According to the results of the Riksdag elections of 2014, 2018, and 2022, the *Sweden Democrats* emerged as the second largest faction in parliament.

¹ The term “Alliansfrihet” is a Swedish concept that refers to a non-alignment policy. The term literally translates to “freedom from any alliances.” The concept cannot be considered a replacement for the “neutrality” concept.

The Tidö Agreement of October 14, 2022, between the *Moderaterna*, Liberal, and Christian Democratic parties, resulted in the dissolution of the “sanitary cordon” that had been imposed on the Swedish Democrats in the Riksdag. The *Sweden Democrats* exhibited a shift in their stance toward Russia during the period spanning from 2014 to 2024. Initially exhibiting indifference or partial support for Russia, the party has since adopted Russophobia as a fundamental tenet of its ideology and programme. The aforementioned changes have demonstrated the acceptance of the “Russian menace” myth and the formation of a specific version within the discourse of security policy. This shift in perspective has also influenced the position adopted on several pressing issues of Swedish foreign policy, including NATO accession.

Literature review

The dynamics of Russia’s perception in Sweden have long been a subject of study among historians and political scientists. A fundamental study of Swedish perception of Russia throughout history is “The Russian Menace Towards Sweden: A View of Smaller Power Elites on Strategy During the Imperialism Era” by Gunnar Åselius [2]. Åselius’s work is predicated on the “Russian menace” myth, a concept that gained traction in Swedish public opinion during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This myth served as a foundational archetype in the perception of Russia and Russians within the Swedish culture. The phenomenon under scrutiny in this study has been demonstrated to be intimately intertwined with the historical struggle for dominance over the Baltic Sea that transpired during the 16th—18th centuries. This dynamic relationship is further contextualised by the collapse of the Swedish Empire and the subsequent historical upheavals that befell the nation. Subsequently, Russia and Russians were perceived to pose an existential threat to Sweden, as evidenced by the nation’s strategic culture and prevailing public opinion.

Works devoted to the strategic culture of Sweden continue this trend. Jakob Westberg’s research focused on the role of “the Russian menace” as a mobilising factor in Swedish society and as a strategic imperative in Swedish foreign policy from 1815 to 2015 [3; 4]. The research conducted by Olof Kronvall and Magnus Petterson, which focused on the dynamics of the USSR and the USA’s perception during the Cold War, yielded similar patterns of analysis [5]. Michael Nilsson opted for an alternative approach, focusing on the incorporation of Sweden into the U.S. strategy through the implementation of soft power policy [6]. Carl Marklund conducted a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of anti-American discourse in Sweden during the Olof Palme government from 1973 to 1986 [7].

Moreover, research focusing on Russia’s image in Sweden has also addressed the subject of Sweden’s accession to NATO. Political scientists and historians specialising in Swedish-Russian relations posit that the bilateral relationship is a pivotal element in the escalating collaboration between Sweden and NATO,¹ thereby necessitating a reevaluation of Sweden’s national security strategy (Wahlbäck, Holmström, Blydal, Gyllensporre) [8—11]. In their analysis, Ohlsson and Wislander examined the emergence of anti-Russian rhetoric in Sweden in the con-

¹ Holmström, M. 2016, “Säpo: Ryska agenter motarbetar på svensk mark”, *Dagens Nyheter*, April 30, URL: <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/sapo-ryska-agentermotarbetar-pa-svensk-mark/> (accessed 02.06.2024).

text of the Ukrainian crisis that began in 2013 [12; 13]. It was determined that this outcome was made possible by the EU's "Eastern Partnership". The persistent negative image of Russia in Swedish society, as well as its integration into the new European and national security strategies, are also considered factors that have contributed to the deterioration of attitudes toward Russia and Swedish—Russian relations. (Brommerson, Eckengren, Michalski, Persson, Wildmalm, Savić, Ydén, Berndtsson) [14—17]. The collective work led by Jesper Ströms bäck and Lars Nord centred on the role of public opinion as a catalyst for national foreign policy in Sweden [18].

In the broader international context, the issue remains largely confined to comparative analyses of the superpowers' perceptions in Scandinavian countries (Røsslyng-Jensen) [19]; Scandinavian security issues (Pettersson) [20]; Swedish policy towards the Baltic States and their secession from the USSR in 1988—1991 (Kuldkepp) [21]. In this context, scholars analyse attitudes toward Russia through the lens of criticism of Soviet and Russian foreign policy. Moreover, the issue is examined within the framework of several research questions, including the relationship between Swedish and Finnish participation in the European security system outside NATO until 2022 (Forsberg, Vaahtoranta) and after Sweden and Finland were admitted to the Alliance (Alberque, Schreer); as well as the role of Arctic security issues in tensions between Russia and NATO (Odgaard, Depledge).

Russian historians and political scientists have examined the image of Russia in Sweden, focusing on the myth of the "Russian menace," which has persisted for centuries (Zaretskaya). Additionally, Voronov has explored the concept of "traumas" in Swedish historical consciousness, examining their connection with the contemporary image of Russia [27; 28]. As indicated in the works cited, the phenomenon known as the "Poltava Syndrome" refers to the decline of the Swedish Empire and the subsequent shift in Swedish Baltic supremacy. These works also address the role of historical memory and historical policy in the context of Sweden. Furthermore, the scholars have analysed the cultivation of a negative attitude toward Russian statehood, based on the aforementioned myths, across various periods. In the context of right-wing discourse, criticism directed towards Russia has been identified as a part of a strategy for mobilisation.

In addition, Russian scholars have examined the role of right-wing populism in the transformation of European political systems, particularly in the Nordic countries (Okuneva, Tevdoy-Burmulli) [29]. They have also explored the impact of the Ukrainian crisis in 2013 on the perception of Russia and the policies directed towards it in Northern Europe (Vorotnikov) [30]. Research on this topic has also been conducted in collaboration between Russian and Swedish political scientists (Simons, Manoilo, Trunov) [31].

Methodology and methods

The study was conducted using materials such as articles published in the online media outlet *Samtiden*, which is affiliated with the *Sweden Democrats*. Party members serve as its editors and columnists, and the publication functions as a platform for promoting the party's agenda. It also collaborates with historians, political scientists, and specialists in international relations, thereby shaping and reinforcing the party's ideological position in public discourse. Furthermore, *Samtiden* publishes reviews of works on the history of Sweden and Swedish-

Russian relations.¹ *Samtiden* provides information, critical reviews and discussions on party agendas, global and national issues. Thirty-five essays published on the *Samtiden* portal were analysed. They are devoted to the role of Russia in world history and politics. The second source of data is the official website of the *Sweden Democrats*, which contains the party's programmes and speeches delivered by its leaders.²

The study is based on historical and political imagology approaches, as the constructed image of the "other" has become an important subject of analysis. Ethnostereotypes and perceptions of previous experiences of bilateral relations are shaped by the broader political context. These components are exposed via the dichotomy of "me and the other" through symbolic interaction and the immanent perception of the state as part of "me" and the other state as part of "the other," as well as the mission of "my" state [32]. The perception of "the other" also impacts personal identity in a changing world [33].

The main emphasis in the image of Russia and its behaviour in international relations, particularly towards Sweden, is the difference in political and strategic culture, as well as rivalry and the struggle for dominance in the Baltic Sea region. The survey conducted through discourse analysis reveals how the following concepts are redefined and implemented in Swedish national conservative discourse: "authoritarianism," "empire," "nationalism," and "Russian threat".

Russia in the world politics within the discourse of the Sweden Democrats (2014 – 2024)

Swedish-Russian relations began to deteriorate during the initial phase of the Ukrainian crisis from 2013 to 2014, which coincided with the final months of Fredrik Reinfeldt's *Moderaterna* Party cabinet. At the same time, the *Sweden Democrats* gained stronger positions, becoming the second largest party in the Riksdag after the 2022 general election. Furthermore, on October 14, 2022, the right-wing parties, including the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, agreed to sign the Tidö Agreement on a parliamentary coalition.³

During the 2022 general elections, the *Sweden Democrats* excessively referred to the "Russian menace" image. Nonetheless, over the previous eight years, active discussion took place on the pages of *Samtiden*, involving party members, columnists, historians, and specialists in international relations. They presented different perspectives on Russia's role in world politics. This debate contributed to the formation of Russia's image by 2022 and was closely connected to Sweden's prospective membership in NATO.

In the 2014 party programme, the *Sweden Democrats* did not present Russia as a hostile state. During the Riksdag legislature from 2014 to 2018, *Samtiden* published articles by the *SD*-affiliated columnists that welcomed Russian foreign policy initiatives, such as fighting against the "Islamic State" (a terrorist organ-

¹ *Samtiden*, 2025, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/om-oss/> (accessed 12.08.2024).

² *Sverigedemokraterna*, 2025, URL: <https://sd.se/> (accessed 12.08.2024).

³ Överenskommelse för Sverige, 2022, Tidöavtalet, 14.10.2022, *Liberalerna*, URL: <https://moderaterna.se/app/uploads/2022/10/Tidoavtalet-Overenskommelse-for-Sverige.pdf> (accessed 26.06.2024).

isation banned in Russia) and radical Islamism in general;¹ supporting dialogue on European security issues aimed at further détente in the Baltic Sea area, particularly through the Council of the Baltic Sea States.² The *SD* condemned the “excessive and unfair scepticism” towards Russia, given that the country is a permanent guarantor of world security.³

Moreover, the *SD*-affiliated columnists agreed with President Donald Trump’s preference for dealing with Russia rather than the EU. They presented his position under the motto “Shame on Europe” and condemned the anti-Trump campaigns, portraying the United States as “the country that saved Europe from Nazism and communism.”⁴ Nevertheless, the *Samtiden* columnists claimed that the ideal role for Russia would be to engage in “a constructive Russian-American dialogue” and “joint efforts to provide global stability,” despite the low chance of this occurring. The *SD* leaders claimed that maintaining a dialogue with Moscow is crucial for détente in the Baltic Sea region, Europe, and the world.⁵

The *SD*’s criticism of Russia was accompanied by discussions about Sweden’s possible cooperation with NATO. *Samtiden* addressed the issue of recognising Crimea as part of Russia and the status of the Donbass region, using them to justify Sweden’s tentative cooperation with NATO, referencing the “traumatic” experiences of Finland and the Baltic States with the USSR. In this way, Russia was portrayed as follows: “Russia only understands force in international relations, not talks about humanitarian superpowers and feminism.” This was all connected to criticising the UN and Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström for being “inactive”.⁶

Following accusations that Russia had launched cyberattacks aimed at interfering in the 2016 US presidential election, the *Sweden Democrats*’ discourse began referring to the “Russian menace” more frequently.⁷ The *SD* columnists portrayed the emergence of the BRICS countries in the world economy as “a factor downgraded by corruption and slow democratic reforms”.⁸ According to the *Sweden Democrats*, the Russian government employed disinformation campaigns as

¹ 2016 — hopp och förtvivlan, 2025, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2016/01/2016-hopp-och-fortvivlan/> (accessed 27.06.2024) ; Donald Trump har rätt om Syrien, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2016/10/donald-trump-har-ratt-om-syrien/> (accessed 27.06.2024).

² Oberoende utredare vägleder de osäkra om Nato, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2016/08/oberoende-utredare-vagleder-de-osakra-om-nato/> (accessed 20.06.2024).

³ Ny världsordning med Donald Trump, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2016/11/ny-varldsordning-med-donald-trump/> (accessed 20.06.2024).

⁴ Trump avskyr Europas eliter så som de avskyr honom, 2018, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2018/07/trump-avskyr-europas-eliter-sa-som-de-avskyr-honom/> (accessed 21.06.2024).

⁵ Oberoende utredare vägleder de osäkra om Nato, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2016/08/oberoende-utredare-vagleder-de-osakra-om-nato/> (accessed 24.06.2024).

⁶ Nato är det bästa alternativet, 2026, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2016/05/nato-ar-det-basta-alternativet/> (accessed 25.04.2023) ; Meningslös seger i FN, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2016/06/meningslos-seger-fn/> (accessed 27.06.2024).

⁷ Cybersäkerhet i fokus efter ryska attacker, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2016/12/cybersakerhet-fokus-efter-ryska-attacker/> (accessed 25.06.2024).

⁸ Årskrönika: Väst dominerar världen också 2017, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2016/12/arskronika-vast-dominerar-varlden-ocksa-2017/> (accessed 25.06.2024).

a means to undermine the cohesion of the Western bloc, thereby creating a negative environment in Sweden. The political party exploited the issue to its advantage, utilising it as a means of attacking its opponents from the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party. These opponents were accused of creating a breach in national security and providing assistance to Russian influence agents.¹

Consequently, the *Sweden Democrats* initiated the development of a thesis on Russia as a revanchist country. The party advanced the hypothesis that revanchism had gained popularity in Russia due to a “failed comeback to Europe,” which they attributed to a perceived lack of a consistent course by Boris Yeltsin. They further speculated that the United States and the EU actions between 1991 and 2014, characterised by a perceived shift in their soft power toward the East, contributed to this perception. According to the *SD*, the aforementioned factors contributed to the emergence of anti-Western political sentiment in Moscow, which subsequently manifested as unrest and a shift in geopolitical orientation towards the East.² The aforementioned factors were portrayed as a threat to Sweden: the Georgian and Ukrainian crises, in conjunction with the escalating Russian military presence in the Baltic Sea region, were presented as evidence of a negative stance toward Russia.³ The term “hypocritical” was used to describe the position of national elites within the European Union, who criticised Russia while continuing to engage in commercial activities with it, as illustrated by Germany’s active trade relations with Moscow. This characterisation aligns with the perspective of Donald Trump.⁴

Following the Skripal incident, the leader of the *Sweden Democrats*, Jimmie Åkesson, publicly declared that Russia posed a threat to Sweden. The issue of foreign intervention in the US presidential elections, for example, from Russia, was referred to as an internal American “witch hunt.”⁵ These statements emerged during the period of preparations for the 2018 Riksdag elections, thereby indicating that the anti-Russian agenda was integrated into the *SD* programme and discourses.

Subsequently, the *SD* called to prohibit Russia from exercising its vote in the Council of Europe, a decision that was precipitated by the ongoing Ukrainian affairs;⁶ condemned the invitations sent to representatives of Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, also referring to these countries as “murdering regimes”;⁷ en-

¹ Varning för falska nyheter! 2017, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2017/01/varning-falska-nyheter/> (accessed 25.04.2024).

² Hur agera när Ryssland söker revansch? 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2016/12/hur-agera-nar-ryssland-soker-revansch/> (accessed 25.06.2024).

³ Räcker Sveriges underfinansierade försvar mot krigshot i Östersjöområdet? 2017, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2017/07/racker-sveriges-underfinansierade-forsvar-mot-krigshot-ostersjoomradet/> (accessed 25.06.2024) ; Försvarsmakten behöver pengar akut, 2018, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2018/02/forsvarsmakten-behov-pengar-akut/> (accessed 25.04.2024).

⁴ Trump är oförsämd nog att säga sanningar, 2018, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2018/07/trump-ar-oforsamd-nog-att-saga-sanningar/> (accessed 25.06.2024).

⁵ Ryssutredningen var en grundlös häxjakt, 2019, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2019/04/ryssutredningen-var-en-grundlos-haxjakt/> (accessed 25.05.2024).

⁶ Löfven hårt pressad om EU:s sociala pelare, 2019, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2019/11/lofven-hart-pressad-om-eus-sociala-pelare/> (accessed 26.06.2024).

⁷ Nobelstiftelsen: “Rutin” att bjuda in mördarregimer, 2019, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2019/12/nobelstiftelsen-rutin-att-bjuda-in-mordarregimer/> (accessed 26.06.2024).

dorsed the “self-sufficient Sweden” proposal in anticipation of a potential embargo by Russia on power source supplies to Europe.¹ The *Sweden Democrats* have asserted that “the humanitarian superpowers” have reached their demise, with Sweden being a prime example of this decline. Therefore, it can be posited that the *SD* began to disseminate negative portrayals of Russia during the period of heightened international tensions between 2014 and 2020. Nonetheless, the party denounced the propagation of anti-Russian rhetoric as a means of disseminating “Western values” as “dangerous and leading to a war of world views.”²

Following the initiation of Russia’s special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine, the discourse within the *Sweden Democrats* underwent a shift, adopting an absolutely anti-Russian stance. The political party advocated for the continuation of economic sanctions against “regressive countries,” such as Russia, Belarus, and Turkey, as outlined in its programme before the 2022 Riksdag elections. Additionally, the necessity of the *SD* is predicated on its role in containing Russian and Chinese activities in the Arctic, in conjunction with the persistent promotion of Swedish interests.³ Subsequently, the political party’s stance toward Russia exhibited a shift, aligning more closely with the positions taken by *Moderaterna*.⁴ Subsequently, members of the Swedish Democrats and affiliated columnists initiated a campaign of defamation against left-wing parties in Sweden, characterising them as “pro-Russian” and “pursuing surrender”.⁵

The “Russian menace” myths as a contributing factor to the evolution of the Sweden Democrats’ attitude towards the NATO accession of Sweden

During the initiative phase of the Ukrainian crisis, which occurred concurrently with the Riksdag election campaign in 2014, the *Sweden Democrats* expressed disapproval of any prospective Swedish NATO membership. The aforementioned statements were contradictory to those made by the *Moderaterna*, which advocated for collaborative efforts with the Alliance to address the perceived threat posed by Russia. The initial reaction of the Swedish Democrats to the prospect of NATO membership was characterised as “an unacceptable means of counter-

¹ Sverige utan självförsörjning — Vad händer när handeln inte fungerar? 2020, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2020/03/sverige-utan-sjalfvorsorjning-vad-hander-nar-handeln-inte-fungerar/> (accessed 26.06.2024).

² Kinas makthunger en del av globaliseringens baksida, 2021, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2021/02/kinas-makthunger-en-del-av-globaliseringens-baksida/> (accessed 26.06.2024).

³ Sverigedemokraternas Valplattform 2022, 2022, Inriktningsprogram för Sverigedemokraternas inflytande över svensk politik under nästa mandatperiod, Stockholm, p. 57, *Sverigedemokraterna*, URL: <https://www.sd.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/sverigedemokraternas-valplattform-2022-april.pdf> (accessed 26.06.2024).

⁴ Tid att visa blågul solidaritet — i praktisk handling, 2022, *Moderaterna*, URL: <https://moderaterna.se/nyhet/tid-att-visa-blagul-solidaritet-i-praktisk-handling/> (accessed 25.06.2024).

⁵ Vänstern redo att ge upp Sverige och kapitulera vid krig, 2024, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2024/01/vanstern-redo-att-ge-upp-sverige-och-kapitulera-vid-krig/> (accessed 26.06.2024).

action towards Russia, despite Swedish involvement in NATO infrastructures”.¹ The *Sweden Democrats* leaders asserted that the issue demanded a thorough examination, complemented by constructive engagement between Sweden, Russia, and NATO in a provisional détente within the Baltic region. The party cited research from a monograph entitled “Sweden, NATO, and Security,” which was published in 2016.²

From this perspective, the *Sweden Democrats* have expressed disapproval of the expansion of the US military presence in Europe. They have emphasised that this development would not contribute to improving relations with Russia.³ Simultaneously, the party placed a particular emphasis on the necessity of enforcing the Swedish army, which was deficient in both financial resources and modernisation.⁴ According to the *SD*, the responsibility for these outcomes lies with Carl Bildt, who served as Prime Minister of Sweden from 1991 to 1994. This is attributable to his revision of Swedish security policy in the Baltic region in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR.⁵ The *Sweden Democrats* reached the conclusion that the policy of “freedom from alliances” required revision in order to correspond to the changing geopolitical circumstances.

At the onset of the 2018 Riksdag election campaign, the *Sweden Democrats’* stance on NATO membership remained constant. The party’s position on NATO accession for Sweden remained in opposition. According to the aforementioned position, the Swedish society “did not desire, nor should it have relinquished, the lives of their soldiers for the benefit of foreign interests”.⁶ Conversely, the *SD* proposed an alternative plan that focused on enhancing national defence, e. g. the armed forces, voluntary organisations, police units, and the military production industry. The Swedish military-industrial complex was to be prioritised in the allocation of orders for the production of military equipment for the Swedish army and navy. Concurrently, the *SD*-affiliated columnists, historians, and political scientists underscored the pivotal role of NATO in world and European politics during the latter half of the 20th century and the initial years of the 21st century.

Olof Hedengren asserted that NATO had the potential to “die peacefully.” However, following the outbreak of the Korean War, Western nations recognised the imperative of containing the expansion of the Soviet Union. According to Hedengren, the Soviet Union was a “superpower led by the megalomaniac Joseph Stalin”. In his second pro-NATO statement, Hedengren referred to the division of Germany, attributing full responsibility to the Soviet Union because of its role in forcing the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to accept its terms. According to Hedengren, the Alliance demonstrated its capacity to contain the

¹ Nato är det bästa alternativet, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2016/05/nato-ar-det-basta-alternativet/> (accessed 25.04.2023).

² Blix, H., Ekéus, R., Hirdman, S., Schori, P., Åkerström, L., Oscarson, S., Ingelstam, L. 2016, *Sweden, NATO and security*, Stockholm, Celanders Förlag, 222 p.

³ USA skickar 330 marinkårssoldater till Norge, 2016, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2016/10/usa-skickar-330-marinkarssoldater-till-norge/> (accessed 27.06.2024).

⁴ Försvarsmakten behöver pengar akut, 2018, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2018/02/forsvarsmakten-behoover-pengar-akut/> (accessed 28.06.2024).

⁵ Carl Bildt i halvfigur, 2017, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2017/10/carl-bildt-halvfigur/> (accessed 27.06.2024).

⁶ Sverigedemokraterna. Försvarspolitik, 2018, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20181028000252/https://sd.se/vad-vi-vill/forsvarspolitik/> (accessed 28.06.2024).

“Soviet empire” and facilitated the unification of both Germany and Europe. The columnist also advanced the argument that, for Sweden, NATO represents an opportunity to modernise its defence system in response to a growing security threat.¹ In the 2018 elections, the *Sweden Democrats* demonstrated inconsistencies in their programme. On the one hand, they advocated for the enforcement of national defence without acceding to NATO. On the other hand, they denied any willingness to make “sacrifices in favour of the interests of another.” At the same time, they expressed support for the Alliance, acknowledging its capacity to strengthen Swedish defence and its role in maintaining security in Europe and beyond since 1949.

Following Russia’s initiation of SMO in Ukraine, the *Sweden Democrats* have modified their stance on the prospect of Sweden’s accession to NATO. In the course of the 2022 Riksdag election campaign, the party articulated its commitment to allocating additional financial resources to national defence and to reinforcing the capabilities of the armed forces, the national military production industry, and auxiliary units. This commitment was made irrespective of the nation’s NATO membership status. The party has articulated its rationale for this decision, attributing it to the perceived escalating threat posed by Russia to Sweden and Finland. The proposal included the establishment of a collective defence mechanism with this country.²

In the subsequent endorsement of Sweden’s application for NATO accession, the political entity characterised Sweden’s integration into the Alliance as “more advantageous for the Alliance than for Sweden” on the grounds that “more vulnerable Finland required support.” Concurrently, the endorsement of the Swedish application by NATO members was characterised as a form of “bazaar bargaining”. According to the *Samtiden* position, the underlying factors that precipitated this occurrence can be attributed to the conditions established by the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán.³ Accusations were levelled against the Swedish Prime Minister, Magdalena Andersson, regarding the situation. Moreover, the Sweden Democrats emphasised the fundamental distinction between the European Union and NATO. Columnists affiliated with the party stressed that “each NATO member is responsible for its own defence before an attack is launched against one of the Alliance members.” NATO was thus portrayed as a defensive alliance. In contrast, according to the Sweden Democrats, EU policy amounted to a “redistribution of taxes through political decisions.”⁴ De facto the *Sweden Democrats* acknowledged the value of NATO membership for national defence, perceiving it as a more effective approach than the EU institutions.

Subsequently, the *Sweden Democrats* employed the discourse surrounding the “Russian menace” and NATO membership issues as a means of criticism directed towards their opponents. The *SD* have accused their opponents of “disregard-

¹ Nato, Trump och svensk säkerhetspolitik, 2018, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2018/07/nato-trump-och-svensk-sakerhetspolitik/> (accessed 28.06.2024).

² Sverigedemokraterna. Försvarspolitik, 2022, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://sd.se/vad-vi-vill/svensk-forsvarsmakt/> (accessed 28.06.2024).

³ Dick Erixon. Plågsamma Nato-processen över — eller? 2024, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2024/02/plagsamma-nato-processen-over-eller/> (accessed 28.06.2024).

⁴ Ibid.

ing the historical experience of struggle against Russia”¹ and of facilitating the dissemination of anti-NATO narratives by think tanks affiliated with the Social Democratic Party. For instance, Tarja Kronberg, an employee of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, has been identified as a key figure in this regard.² The *Social Democrats* were depicted as leaders who would be willing to surrender to Russia in case they returned to power. Consequently, the *Sweden Democrats* incorporated the concept of the “Russian menace” into their programme and discourse.

The understanding of the relationship between Sweden, NATO, and Russia underwent a substantial transformation within the agenda of the Sweden Democrats between 2014 and 2024. Initially, the party assigned priority to maintaining security in the Baltic Sea region and across Europe while avoiding a direct confrontation with Russia. After 2018, however, the *Sweden Democrats* began to conceptualise Russia as an “existential threat” and to present NATO as the principal instrument of national defence. The “allied duty” towards Finland was also introduced as an additional justification, alongside recognition of NATO’s historical role in ensuring European security throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Following the events of 2022, the *Sweden Democrats* fully incorporated an anti-Russian agenda into their political programme.

Conclusion

The image of Russia underwent a comprehensive revision in Swedish national conservative discourse between 2014 and 2024. Before 2018, the *Sweden Democrats* had not adopted a definitive stance on the so-called “Russian menace.” They did not advocate for any anti-Russian initiatives and did not articulate a necessity for Sweden to align with NATO, citing the “Russian threat” as a rationale. Conversely, the party accentuated the necessity of engaging in discourse with Moscow concerning regional and European security, as well as the imperative to confront radical Islamism and terrorism.

However, when Russia was accused of imposing cyberattacks to intervene the 2016 US presidential elections, the image of the country started to serve as a means to discredit political opponents within the country. Accusations of posing a threat to national security through collaboration with Russian organizations and officials have been leveled at other Swedish political parties in the Riksdag, as well as against ministers and heads of the government.

The Skripal incident provided the *Sweden Democrats* with an opportunity to further demonise Russia. Party-affiliated columnists began to describe the country and its government as a “murderous regime.” A second accusation concerned Russia’s use of fossil fuel exports as a “political weapon.” Following these allegations, the party intensified the construction of a negative image of Russia. The initial stage involved the mobilisation of historical myths. The *Sweden Democrats* referred to the history of Swedish—Russian rivalry and revived the narrative of the “Russian menace” that had persisted over previous centuries. They

¹ Lars, F. 2024, Eklund. Karl XII och hotet från öster, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2024/03/karl-xii-och-hotet-fran-oster/> (accessed 28.06.2024).

² Därför förnekar Socialdemokraterna sin putinism, 2024, *Samtiden*, URL: <https://samtiden.nu/2024/05/darfor-fornekar-socialdemokraterna-sin-putinism/> (accessed 28.06.2024).

also reactivated the negative image of the Soviet Union that had previously been employed in political discourse. At the same time, the party began to express regret over its earlier criticism of Sweden's bid for NATO membership before 2018. In the period following the outbreak of the COVID-2019 pandemic and the escalation of tensions between Russia and Western countries from 2020 to early 2022, the *Sweden Democrats* persisted in the development of their anti-Russian agenda. The Russian global conduct was depicted as "a threat to the world". Nonetheless, the *SD* issued a call to avert the "war of values" with Russia. These notions were accompanied by historical myths that cast aspersions on Russia, thereby validating the *SD* position.

The change in the *Sweden Democrats'* stance toward Russia was marked by an overt shift toward hostility following Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. The *Sweden Democrats* called for the introduction of sanctions against Russia, the restriction of Russian activities in the Arctic, and the strengthening of collective defence cooperation with Finland. Furthermore, the party abandoned its opposition to Sweden's prospective accession to NATO.

The image of Russia in the discourse of the *Sweden Democrats* has developed in forms typical of national conservative parties that incorporate Russophobic elements into their political programmes and ideology, such as *Law and Justice* in Poland, the *Danish People's Party*, and the *National Alliance* in Latvia. The *Sweden Democrats'* original position was one of neutrality or positivity with regard to Russia and its Russian population. This position entailed the articulation of a counterargument to the sanctions imposed on Russia, emphasizing the detrimental impact these sanctions would have on national economies, the European Union, and the global community at large. The *SD* further advocated for the initiation of negotiations with Russia concerning global security concerns. Therefore, it can be posited that the *Sweden Democrats* were originally more aligned with the *Alternative for Germany*, the *Austrian Freedom Party*, and *FIDESZ* of Hungary. Nevertheless, the position of the *Sweden Democrats* has demonstrated a shift in dynamics. Previously exhibiting neutrality towards Russia, the far-right wing party has since integrated numerous anti-Russian narratives into its agenda, which are characteristic of Swedish political culture and historical memory. Consequently, the *Sweden Democrats* have revised traditional historical myths of the "Russian threat" in a new context and incorporated them into political propaganda.

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