Sweden’s Process to Enter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Decision-making and Bounded Rationality in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 set Europe in sorrow, distress, and emergency. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is something Sweden has refrained from joining due to the country’s neutral stance. However, despite Sweden's long-standing neutrality of over 200 years, it was abandoned within only weeks. The short timeframe of decision-making raised questions about the level of rationality in the decision of the Swedish NATO application. Scholars and researchers have through different methods and theories attempted to explain this unpredictable shift, but still, the process appears to lack a clearly defined rationale. This case study seeks to understand the decision-making process of the government in times of crisis, examining how the rationality of such decisions may have been compromised by analyzing secondary data. The aim is to address the research gap, concerning the rapid and framed process for Sweden to join NATO. Analyzing the decision through the lens of Bounded Rationality Theory, applying variables such as (1) time pressure, (2) cognition, and (3) access to information (Simon, 1947), the possibility arises to shred light on the factors contributing to Bounded Rationality in the Swedish NATO process. These aspects were all present in the Swedish NATO process. In combination with characteristics of a government in crisis (Boin, Hart, Stern & Sundelius, 2005), one can to a great extent understand the significant shift in stance towards NATO membership, given that governments tend to act differently when being subject to a crisis. It can be concluded that rationality was significantly bounded by limited access to information, to some extent by the ability to process information, and comprehensively by the constraints of time pressure. The Swedish NATO process, consisting of a government amid a crisis, was subject to and exemplifies Bounded Rationality in decision-making.
Key words

Bounded Rationality Theory, Sweden NATO process, Government in Crisis, Sweden NATO application, decision-making process, NATO debate, non-alignment, non-belligerency

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List of Abbreviations

EU - European Union
ICC - International Criminal Court
NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NORDEFCO - Nordic Defense Cooperation
PfP - Partnership for Peace
SDGs - Sustainable Development Goals
Svenska Freds - The Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society
UD - Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Utrikesdepartementet)
UN - United Nations
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1 Introduction

1.1 Research Problem

The Russian invasion of Ukraine 24th of February 2022 set Europe in sorrow, distress, and emergency. The power dynamics among global actors underwent a significant transformation, highlighting the unpredictable nature of international politics and the consequences that actions can have, surpassing what decision-makers may have anticipated. Sweden, as one of few non-NATO-member states in Europe, and further so located in the Baltic Sea region with proximity to Russian territory, was placed in a stressful situation framed by a comprehensive security crisis. The swift governmental action in Sweden to enter a comprehensive shift in policy on the issue of NATO, within 9 weeks, appears to lack a clearly defined rationale. The hasty shift in stance completely abandoning the previous long-standing policy of neutrality, and so under prevailing pressured circumstances raises questions. A concept applicable to this context is that governments act differently when placed in circumstances of crises.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as a multinational alliance with the purpose of ”guarantee freedom and security for its members through political and military means” (NATO, 2023a), is something Sweden has refrained from joining for over 70 years. However, there has recently been a rapid shift in its stance. Membership in the alliance follows both obligations and benefits and the debate on a Swedish such has been present. Experts and researchers have outlined both sides. However, the limited existing research on this topic fails to sufficiently address the complexities and nuances of policymakers' choices of action. Therefore, there is a pressing need for further investigation to fill the gap in the level of rationality of the rapid decision-making process.
The study is limited to the period of early December 2021 when Russia threatened the global peace order and further followed on 24th of February the invasion of Ukraine. Two events both of which affected the Swedish security agenda, until the 16th of May 2022 when Sweden decided to apply for NATO membership.

1.2 Relevance

The debates on Sweden’s security policy have rather focused on the question of when to enter NATO than if. The swift Swedish governmental action to enter a comprehensive shift in policy appears to lack a clearly defined rationale, in particular, due to Sweden's long-standing neutrality and continued anti-alliance stance. Thus, a government entering election proposals with the promise that a membership in NATO for Sweden was not current, contributes to the context concern of filling the research gap of evaluation of the level of rationality of such decision. The hasty shift in stance and so under prevailing pressured circumstances raises questions. Therefore, we argue for the importance of evaluating this decision which rapidly shifted in stance through a theoretical lens of Bounded Rationality (1947). By applying variables from the theoretical framework in the forms of the context of time (time pressure), cognition (capability to process information), and lack of context information, we will frame our research around Bounded Rationality in times of crisis, and thereby analyze various factors that may have influenced the decision-making process.

This study, based on the Swedish NATO process, explores the dynamics of governance during a crisis and its implications or accuracy for democratic legitimacy through rational actions. Since the democratic field is alarmingly shrinking around the world, we argue for the high importance of raising awareness of decision-making processes, and such following Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 Peace and Justice, where target 16.10 includes “Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in
accordance with national legislation and international agreements” (UNSD, n.d.).

The relevance is the highly applicable importance of the impact of the Swedish decision to enter NATO and its effects on peace, conflict, security, and ultimately on the level of development. NATO has been subject to criticism in all aspects, including member states' policies concerning democracy and human rights, the power balance with Russia, together with the alliance's support of military operations and nuclear weapons as a development strategy for peace. Further, the frighteningly different opinions among domestic peace experts in Sweden concerning Swedish NATO membership have alarmingly raised concerns. As the barriers in Swedish peace, conflict, security, and development research are comprehensively noticeable, we argue for the urgency and importance of further research on the topic.

This study is further important as it raises awareness of decision-making processes and their crucial consequences, as a compatible link to shrinking democratic space in the world. The reason behind our choice to study the Swedish process instead of the Finnish is explained through our language skills. Since Swedish is our mother tongue, we have been able to translate the empirical data from the Swedish process to English. The process in Finland was not an optimal option due to the language barrier.

1.3 Objective and Research Questions

This study seeks to understand the decision-making process of government in times of crisis, examining how the rationality of such decisions may be compromised. The aim is to fill the research gap, consisting of the evaluation of the rapid and framed process for Sweden to become a member of NATO. The decision might be understood through characteristics of Bounded Rationality, by addressing the following research questions:
1. How did the government change its arguments from neutrality to an application for NATO membership?
2. How have the opposition parties and the media influenced that process?
3. What external factors of pressure are identified to have influenced the process?
4. What are the key factors that have been driving the Swedish NATO debate, with particular emphasis on Sweden's neutrality?

1.4 Disposition

This study consists of seven chapters, including the first chapter of the introduction. The following chapter accounts for the literature review, whereas the third chapter focuses on the theoretical frameworks used for this thesis, which are Bounded Rationality and the conceptual framework of Government in crisis. In the fourth chapter, we introduce our methodology which is a qualitative desk study, using abductive reasoning to evaluate the theory used in this context. Chapter five consists of our findings that center on Sweden’s history of neutrality, followed by a tracing of both the debate and process of Swedish NATO membership based on government statements. In chapter six, an analysis in which we apply our chosen theories to this matter is presented, followed by chapter seven which is our conclusion.

2 Literature review

2.2 Sweden’s Government in Crisis

The policies and strategies of the Swedish government have long been subject to criticism, giving rise to the term "Sweden-bashing" in the international room, as a means of disapproving Sweden. The country stands out in relation to others in its way of handling crises. It has faced criticism for what some
perceive as ineffective governance and inaction in response to certain events (Marklund, 2016:2), which can potentially lead to further crises (Smith, 2016:56).

In a complex situation of crisis, political leadership plays a critical role in crisis management. By analyzing key points in political leadership, one can broaden the understanding of how governments deal with the pressures and challenges that arise during a crisis (Boin, Hart, Stern & Sundelius, 2005). Within the academic context, a crisis marks a phase of disorder in the seemingly normal development of a system in which the usual methods of operation become ineffective (Boin et al., 2005:3). The concept of urgency is relevant within relevant works, and when examining the field of crisis management, there is a further correlation with time pressure and uncertainty (Boin et al., 2005:3-4). Another important notation Boin et al., make in their literature is that citizens often show a strong desire to be informed about crises and further find out how they can safeguard themselves. However, this is often undoable as policymakers often struggle to immediately provide accurate information (Boin et al., 2005:12).

2.3 The Swedish NATO Process

There exists a pattern within the academic literature in which the majority agree that not only was the application to a membership a swift decision, but it further altered the Swedish security sphere. The theories such as realism and idealism used when applying a theoretical framework on this matter, are all of an important nature when guiding people of interest to better understand the political world (Spångberg, 2023, Magnusson, 2023, Stangvik, 2023). Yet, we found that the gap in the government’s rationality in the decision remains. Therefore, we aim to trace the process and apply Bounded Rationality (1947) to our findings, which can give the field another perspective on the relatively poor academic performance on the issue.
In addition to the academic literature, the highly present NATO discussions over the past two years have persuaded scholars and students from various universities in Sweden to further research on the Swedish NATO process. Boley Diseth (2023) explains Sweden’s decision to apply for NATO membership through realism, liberalism, and dependency theory, specifically argued through representatively Russian threats, from previous Swedish NATO co-operations through Partnership for Peace (PfP) where NATO membership became the next natural step for Sweden, and attainable due to weakening public and political support for Sweden's military non-alignment (Diseth, 2023).

Lindblad (2023) writes in favor of the alliance but highlights his concern about a blocked Swedish NATO debate long before the invasion of Ukraine. He further emphasizes that the decision due to that was noticeably swift (Lindblad, 2023). From the perspective of Hellström (2023), the Swedish NATO process has rather been a game of political strategies than goodwill for the Swedish people. She further highlights her concerns with the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society (in the following text called Svenska Freds) exclusion from the debate and emphasizes her disappointment with membership. A membership was rather argued to be a comprehensive disadvantage, and further depart from the basic ideology of military detente Sweden has had for ages. Arguably, applying for membership in the alliance was not aligned with the will of the people nor a united aim from the government in terms of full support, where the author further argues that “no one is the winner of war” (Hellström, 2023:65). Debates have been avoided and the process, which should have been comprehensive and thoroughly elaborated, has been given little room for further analysis (Hellström, 2023).
3 Theoretical Frameworks

3.1 Government in Crisis

The term “crisis” is defined by Dyson and Hart as a “turning point”, where factors of threats, stress, and uncertainty are presently dominant. It can be equivalent to entering scenarios in an emergency faced by catastrophe and disaster. Aspects such as state security, human welfare, and fairness included in the term “crises” further follow the fact of how a government can lack competence. As this can not only be measured in numbers and statistics, a government in crisis is a broader sense whereby words and meaning have to be emphasized (Dyson & Hart, 2013:395-396). Human psychology concerning these factors hinders the human brain from acting rationally in complex contexts, where biases, levels of high stress, and cognition can lead to misjudgments. Thus, one should consider that a situation in urgency can lead to a government decision ending up inappropriate due to high-stress circumstances (Dyson & Hart, 2013:395-396).

According to Ury and Smoke (1985), a crisis is characterized by several interacting components, with four factors being particularly prominent. The first factor is high stakes, which distinguishes a crisis from normal decision-making processes as it involves the expectation of significant losses. High stakes entail the risk of unforeseen escalations as parties often calculate the short-term gains without thoroughly considering potential long-term losses (Ury & Smoke, 1985:48). Another factor thereof comes naturally, which is high uncertainty. Uncertainty plays a significant role in crises, as decision-makers often experience a sense of profound uncertainty due to a lack of information about the ongoing events or their repercussions (Ury & Smoke, 1985:50). The authors suggest that a general element of uncertainty in such situations relates to the intentions of the opposing party. The third factor is the constraint of time which is mentioned by the authors as a fundamental aspect of crises (Ury & Smoke, 1985:49). The limited time available restricts the
opportunity for thorough consideration and analysis of the situation. Finally, the fourth factor in what constitutes a crisis is narrowing options. During times of crisis, decision-makers often perceive their range of options as becoming more limited. These choices are rarely viewed as being in a middle ground but rather are seen as either escalating the situation or retreating (Ury & Smoke, 1985:51).

Rosenthal & Kouzmin (1997) further argue that the urgency of a situation adds to the complexity of crisis decision-making. As critical situations often call for immediate action, the longer decision-makers spend searching for an ideal solution or adopting a rational approach, the higher the chance that events will spiral out of control (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997:293-294). Here, the authors offer various interpretations of the meaning of crises in such contexts, yet the consensus is conditions that pose threat and uncertainty in which there is a need for quick decision-making (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997:280). One definition of crisis is explained as “…a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a social system, which—under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances—necessitates making critical decisions” (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997:280).

Figure 3.1 illustrates the parameters for government in crisis. These parameters serve as indicators, highlighting the elements that can trigger and contribute to a government's descent into crisis. By evaluating these parameters, we can better understand the factors that lead a government from a stable state to a state of crisis.
Figure 3.1

Graph created by authors

3.2 Bounded Rationality

Finding a definition of rationality within the context of decision-making and cognitive processes is complex and diffused due to the constant development of its meaning. Rather, the literature provides a clearer definition of what is thought of as irrational (Nickerson, 2007:13). This can be giving in to different temptations we know will be a disadvantage to us (Harman, 2013:1). Rationality can instead mean the capacity for individuals to evaluate and assess available information to reach logically optimal, or maximally satisfying choices or actions (Harman, 2013:1; Tzu-Wei, Lane & Joseph, 2017:7). It involves the ability to analyze and weigh options, considering their potential outcomes and risks, while aligning decisions with one's goals, preferences, and values (Nickerson, 2007:13). Rationality involves a clear thought process that aims to achieve preferable outcomes by applying logical and consistent reasoning. However, it is important to recognize that absolute
perfect rationality is rarely observed in complex real-world settings due to various cognitive limitations, time constraints, and information imbalances. The phenomenon of individuals making choices that drift from rationality can be explained through the lens of Simon's theory of Bounded Rationality.

Professor Simon, as the founder of the theory, had a profound impact on 20th-century social sciences and played an important role in shaping various fields such as organization theory, political science, psychology, management, and economics (Augier, 2001:268). One of his noteworthy achievements is his innovative research on Bounded Rationality in 1947, focusing on how people with limited rationality make decisions and tackle problems (Hertwig & Kozyreva, 2021:505). His framework focuses on understanding human cognition and emphasizes the limitations of human beings making rational decisions in processes. Further, the theory features limitations in the form of the context of time, cognition, and lack of context information (Simon, 1947). At its core, it is a behavioral economics theory that suggests that humans cannot make fully rational decisions (Dequech, 2001:912).

In simpler terms, the theory argues that humans use heuristics to solve complex problems and make decisions efficiently, which in turn can lead to irrational decisions (Dequech, 2001:913). Individuals also have limited cognitive abilities to process information, and thus must simplify complex decisions to make them manageable (Gigerenzer, 2020:57). This is also referred to as satisficing - a concept within the theory that refers to a decision-making strategy where individuals aim to find a satisfactory solution or decision, rather than an optimal solution (Gigerenzer, 2020:59). In simpler terms, one searches for adequate solutions rather than achieving the best possible outcome. The theory emphasizes how human beings make choices for what is accessible at hand, which increases the risk of decision errors. Moreover, the role of emotions serves as a component in this theory as it can eliminate rationality in decisions. This is because emotions have the power to influence the level of logic in one's capability to process information (Simon, 1947). Applicable to
Cognitive limitations refer to the idea that human beings have limited cognitive capabilities, meaning they are limited in their ability to process and analyze information, caused by limited attention span and memory capacity. Due to these limitations, individuals cannot consider or evaluate all available information when making decisions. Instead, they rely on simplifying heuristics to make decisions more efficiently (Dequech, 2016:913). Further, time constraints introduce the limited amount of time individuals have to make decisions (Harman, 2013:2). In many decision-making situations, there is a need to make choices within a specific timeframe, yet individuals do not have an unlimited amount of time to thoroughly analyze all available options. Due to these time constraints, one may resort to making decisions based on incomplete or unideal information (Hernández & Ortega, 2019:3). Lastly, incomplete information acknowledges situations where it is impossible to have access to all relevant information necessary to make fully informed decisions, further limiting the rationality of decision-making. Relying on incomplete or uncertain information can therefore lead to potential biases and errors in decision-making processes (Dequech, 2001:916-919).

Together, these three variables shape the decision-making process within the Bounded Rationality model. This theory recognizes that individuals strive to make reasonable decisions within these constraints, using strategies to cope with limited cognitive resources and imperfect information (Fiedler, Prager & McCaughey, 2021:164). However, it is important to note that a fourth factor in the form of one's environment is included by a few scholars (Hertwig &
Kozyreva, 2021:508). However, since little evidence exists that a fourth factor should be considered in Bounded Rationality, we chose not to include the environmental aspect in our research.

In the case of Sweden's shift towards NATO, the theory will be tested to understand if decision-makers faced insufficient information given the complete shift in such a short period of time. This lack of information may have limited their ability to make a fully informed decision. The uncertainty surrounding Russia's future actions and intentions could have led to cognitive biases in the decision-making process. For example, decision-makers might have favored information that aligned with their biased perceptions and considered the lack of sufficient time to evaluate potential consequences. This time constraint may have pushed them towards an inadequate solution, leading to the decision to consider NATO membership. However, by applying the Bounded Rationality theory (1947), one can contribute to an understanding of the decision-making process - a decision that would abruptly end Sweden’s neutrality.

Figure 3.2 depicts the various variables of bounded rationality that influence the process of decision-making.
4 Methodology

4.1 Methodological Framework

Our research design is a qualitative desk study, applying an abductive method where theory and data will be handled parallel, where the Bounded Rationality theory is used to explain the Swedish NATO process (Bryman, 2021:22-23). The motivation behind our choice of abductive reasoning is to provide a reasonable evaluation of the complex Swedish NATO process. Abductive reasoning is suited for complex and multifaceted issues (Bryman, 2021:23), which is particularly relevant for our methodology. Abduction is a method that starts with a limited amount of information and goes on to determine the most probable explanation for that information. This type of reasoning is commonly used for decisions based on the available but often incomplete information (Butte College, n.d). As we will not be able to find or analyze all data accessible, it is appropriate for us to use this method for our thesis to examine the available evidence and consider various perspectives, before proposing our
explanations. The theory of Bounded Rationality, is another reason for the choice of an abductive method, as both the theory and the method entail applying and making a probable conclusion with the information found.

Why a qualitative approach applies to this study can be justified through several reasons. First, it emphasizes an in-depth opportunity for analyzing social issues from the individual perspective, thus surrounded by a complex context (Bryman, 2021:350). This can be essential in studying the Swedish NATO process to gain a holistic understanding. Second, we find relationships between variables valuable in this research, as another characteristic of the qualitative approach. Lastly, we are researching socially constructed soft values, which will be difficult to measure through a quantitative method (Bryman, 2021:31-32).

4.2 Case Study

As a case study involves an in-depth investigation of a specific case (Bryman, 2021:39) this will be a case study for rational governmental decision-making in times of crisis. A characteristic of a case study is location, a single event, and a specific organization (Bryman, 2021:59). In this case we refer to Sweden, the NATO process, and the Swedish government. It can be considered both a typical case and an extreme case (Bryman, 2021:60). Typical in the sense that the level of Bounded Rationality can be applicable to every nation and decision-making process, whilst the astonishing short time frame in the Swedish NATO process can be considered an attribute for an extreme case (Bryman, 2021:61).

4.3 Ethics

No ethical dilemmas associated with this research are identified, and neither are any participants identified to be in a vulnerable situation. As we are conducting a desk study based on secondary data, the data in question are public or possible for the public to receive. No potential risk for the environment or the participants is present, except for potentially provoking
stakeholders in the somewhat sensitive NATO debate. However, this study aims to increase awareness of the dynamics within the debate rather than promoting any particular viewpoint. Nevertheless, Sweden as the issued country of research, is a democracy in favor of the freedom of speech, which is a fundamental aspect considered in this study.

4.4 Subtitled Data and Data Collection

We have for this study collected secondary data from the government, NGOs, and media platforms to emphasize the research questions. Material from the government as documents, speeches and press conferences are essential to trace the process, as well as media documents and NGO reports are relevant to get the overall picture in terms of time pressure, cognition, and access to information. Due to limited access of government material in video formats, we had to ask the government to provide us with such on our demand. We requested material between January 1st 2022 and June 1st 2022, related to the Swedish NATO process in terms of the Swedish defense rearmament or the general security policy situation. Using already pre-existing data was a strategy to save us time in reaction to our relatively short time frame of 8 weeks to conduct this research.

In addition to analysing the videos and media newspaper sources, we also conducted a thorough textual analysis of the data. This involved extracting key information and themes from the videos and media sources. For the sources provided to us by the government on demand, we watched and listened to each video, identifying important messages and speeches made during the specific time period in question. We made detailed notes on the speeches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the government's perspective during this era. As for the media newspaper sources, we analysed them by examining their titles and headlines. This allowed us to understand how the media portrayed this time and the events that took place. We also paid attention to the tone and language used in the articles, which provided insights into their overall framing and potential bias.
By combining these approaches, we were able to gain a better understanding of the data to draw accurate conclusions and make informed evaluations of the information available.

4.5 Limitations and Delimitations

Secondary data comes with limitations. The lack of control over the quality of the data together with the challenges of finding key variables are to consider (Bryman, 2021:298). A limitation to consider for this study is the press conferences from the Swedish government, as they are publicly erased after six months, which means we had to receive the press conference material directly from the government. Therefore, we were left without guarantees to have received all relevant information, nor can we guarantee the material we received was free from human factor errors. Further weaknesses of this study are the confidential information and classified documents. Some information in terms of Sweden’s security is simply not publicly available. This brings a limitation for us to analyze the level of information policymakers had, through the characteristic of cognition within the theory of Bounded Rationality.

This led us to set up delimitations in the form of abstaining from all relevant material outlining the entirety of external factors of influence of the Swedish government in the NATO process. The media coverage, the debates on both NATO and neutrality together with the outlining on the Russian invasion of Ukraine were delimited to the most essential aspects for this study. Due to our limited time frame, we were not able to go through all existing literature, data, or material available, but did a careful selection. Due to the limited scope of this study, we chose not to bring in the framework of democratic legitimacy in comparison to our findings of Bounded Rationality.
5 Findings

5.1 Sweden's Neutrality

It is important to emphasize the remarkable speed at which Sweden's neutrality was challenged and eventually reconsidered. For two centuries, the country had promoted a policy of non-alignment¹ and neutrality², successfully avoiding involvement in major conflicts while maintaining a position of diplomatic independence (Erlanger, New York Times, 2022). Yet, within a matter of weeks (Strömberg & Nilsson, 2022), the previously unwavering commitment to military non-alignment³ seemed to have been hastily abandoned, prompting a reevaluation of our understanding of the swift decision-making process.

Neutrality is a distinct concept that should not be confused with other terms such as neutralization⁴, non-belligerency⁵, non-alignment, military non-alignment, military or armed neutrality⁶, and non-allied⁷ (Agius & Devine, 2011:267). In its most basic definition, neutrality refers to the act of abstaining from involvement in a conflict or war (Agius & Devine, 2011:267), while being militarily non-aligned or non-allied entails the state’s lack of membership in any military alliance. Since the 1990s, Sweden has referred to their security policies as being militarily non-aligned. The concept of non-alignment originated during the Cold War and serves as a political stance rather than a legal one, to avoid involvement in conflicts between superpowers (Agius & Devine, 2011:268). Neutrality, from a realist perspective, helps

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¹ “state that consider themselves not formally aligned with or against any major power bloc”
² “the state of not supporting or helping either side in a conflict”
³ “a military strategy or policy in which a country does not align itself with any major military alliance or bloc”
⁴ “the process that a person uses to justify a behavior that is considered unethical or criminal by society”
⁵ “a state or policy of not being involved in or engaging in military aggression or hostility”
⁶ “the position taken by a neutral country during war in which it is prepared to maintain its neutral rights against the belligerents by force if necessary stance”
⁷ “non-alignment but does not necessary adopt a neutral”
ensure security, protect interests, and maintain stability. From an idealist perspective, it contributes to advancing positive changes in international relations by promoting norms and values, and keeping control over the use of force in the world of nations (Ydén, Berndtsson & Petersson, 2019:3).

Although many debates suggest that neutrality in the Swedish context is a dead concept, authors Bjereld & Möller (2016) argue otherwise. They contend that neutrality, as a judicial and theoretical concept, is useful for analyzing the foreign policies of former neutral states and the transition from neutrality to post-neutrality (Bjereld & Möller, 2016:434), which refers to retreating from or reevaluation of a country's historical policy of neutrality. The reason neutrality has been named as dead or outdated is because of its paradoxical notion in the Swedish context, as experts say that it would be impossible for Sweden to remain neutral in a war that would affect their neighbors (Forsberg & Vaahtoranta, 2001:78). Sverker Åström, a notable figure in shaping Sweden's post-war neutrality policy, argued that Sweden should no longer rely on the concept of neutrality (Forsberg & Vaahtoranta, 2001:78). It would be unlikely that in the purely theoretical case of a military conflict, Sweden would want and be able to behave neutrally in the traditional sense of international law (Åström, DN, 1999).

The Nordic region has witnessed the existence of security and defense collaborations for several decades, which has entailed engaging in peacekeeping efforts, supporting human rights, and cooperation in crisis management. However, this cooperation was significantly enhanced in 2009 with the establishment of the Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEFCO n.d.). As Norway, Denmark, and Iceland became initial founding members of NATO in 1949, Sweden and Finland chose to abstain, the Swedish-Finnish collaboration became essential (Tanttu, 2021). In the mid-90s, Sweden even embarked on a cooperative path with NATO. This decision cleared the way for participation in numerous military operations in Bosnia and Kosovo (Forsberg & Vaahtoranta, 2001:16). Further in 1998, Sweden appointed its
first NATO ambassador which strengthened the diplomatic ties and opened up for continual dialogue between the two actors. A decade later, the country received its own NATO delegation in the headquarters of Brussels. In 2013 Sweden began its participation in NATO’s advanced defense exercises, and the following year, became a so-called “Enhanced opportunity partner” to the alliance. Further in 2016, Sweden and NATO entered a partnership treaty that enables better support in the event of crisis or war (NATO, 2023c). Thus these collaborations led Sweden to its post-neutral policy (Bjereld & Möller, 2016:365).

Sweden’s history of peace and traditional neutrality can be traced back to 1814 after the end of the Swedish-Norwegian war (Agius & Devine, 2011:268). This marked the beginning of a remarkably prolonged era of peace. The reason behind this long period of peace is claimed to have been sustained due to intentional neutrality where the policy of armed neutrality has been maintained (Bjereld & Möller, 2016:433; Alberque & Schreer, 2022:67). Sweden’s reputation of being neutral has been tested many times, but should not be confused with the terms mentioned.

For instance, Sweden took a non-belligerent stance in the Winter War 1939-1940 between Finland and the Soviet Union which they were not involved in, and thus favored Finland over the SSR (Agius & Devine, 2011:268). Thus, according to Agius and Devine, one can simplify the term into one aspect, where the authors say “At its simplest, neutrality means not taking part in a war” (Agius & Devine, 2011:267). However, as a member of the European Union (EU) since 1995 (European Union History Series, 2015), of the Partnership for Peace (PfP since 1994 (NATO, 2023b), and the United Nations (UN) since 1946 (UN, n.d.) which includes peacekeeping missions, thus together with security cooperations in the Nordic countries, the level of neutrality can be questioned. The purpose of PfP is to build relationships between NATO and other states (NATO, 2023b). This, together with Sweden's membership in the EU, has been two fundamental steps in Sweden’s choice of
alignment. The pro-Western position has been visible for decades (Petersson, 2018), even though it has a self-determined status as a non-military ally.

As Sweden declared its intention to remain neutral during the Cold War, it aimed to avoid aligning with any side during times of peace and maintained neutrality during times of war. They pursued a strategy of armed neutrality while building a strong defense to make their neutrality credible and viable in times of conflict (Nilsson & Wyss, 2016:336). However, relying on the policy of armed neutrality demanded the obtaining of modern weaponry for Sweden. Yet, Sweden lacked self-sufficiency in terms of military supplies, leading to a large amount being imported. Depending on external arms posed a risk to their neutrality and potentially further weakened their credibility (Nilsson & Wyss, 2016:337).

Finland plays an important role in the context of Sweden’s road to NATO, as they share numerous fundamental similarities. The former president of Finland has described Sweden and Finland to be “sisters but not twins” (Forsberg & Vaahtoranta, 2001:69). Both countries advocate for a stronger role for the EU in international security matters and have cooperated closely with NATO while maintaining military non-alignment. Though identifying as traditionally neutral, there always existed a preparedness to potentially join the alliance in the future (Forsberg & Vaahtoranta, 2001:69-70). Forsberg and Vaahtoranta describe the bilateral relationship between Sweden and Finland as intense, with cooperation between the two countries having grown tremendously after the end of the Cold War. Public statements emphasize the importance of collaboration as the foreign and defense ministers have jointly released policy proposals, aiming to interrelate their efforts across the spectrum of security. Thus, the importance of taking action close together in their approach to NATO membership (Forsberg & Vaahtoranta, 2001:69-70). Despite this, historian Wahlbäck distinguishes the two from each other, describing Sweden as having been the protected country versus Finland as the threatened one. The distinction between the two actors can come from the geopolitical distinction.
and historical differences. It is important to keep in mind the two Finnish wars against the Soviet Union which has since kept Finland in this ominous position. Thus, Finland’s relationship with Russia is far more turbulent than Sweden’s, as Sweden has been at peace with the world during all this time (Forsberg & Vaahtoranta, 2001:70).

Finland and Sweden had historically chosen not to join NATO due to their complicated relationships with the Soviet Union and their desire to maintain national sovereignty. Finland, in particular, faced the risk of being invaded by the Soviets and opted for neutrality and democracy instead. This strategy, known as Finlandization, aimed to avoid provoking the Soviets. Sweden's neutrality, on the other hand, stemmed from its loss of Finland to the Russian empire in the Napoleonic wars and continued until the end of the Cold War (Herniczek, 2023). The Baltic Sea Region cooperation can partly be considered an extended version of the NORDEFCO, as it further includes the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Germany, and Poland. Together they operate on security issues, such as facing common challenges, particularly concerns about Russian threats and regional stability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2022).

The debate on Sweden’s neutrality has been present for many decades. Some experts argue Sweden has, thus these collaborations, been neutral until the NATO application in May 2022, while others argue Sweden has never been neutral. Actors such as Hellström, Chairman Svenska Freds during the period of 2016-2022, argued Sweden’s neutrality was a fact until it was interrupted on the 28th of Feb 2022, when the Swedish government decided to send weapons to Ukraine in the manner of defense against Russia (Hellström, 2023:49-50). This, while others such as Ydén, Berndtsson, and Petersson, researchers and scholars in areas such as defense and security policy, NATO studies, and military organization, argue that Sweden's neutrality has only been fabricated to avoid conflict (Ydén et al., 2019:16).
To sum up, Sweden's neutrality has been discussed as the public opinion paradox, as the neutral stance has gradually been abandoned in decades, but the public has still been aiming for continued neutrality in the NATO debate. As that, the debate of neutrality is ongoing and can be viewed from different angles (Agius & Devine, 2011:268). However, in this case study, we refer to Sweden as a military non-alignment state, and will therefore describe it as a long-standing country of neutrality.

5.2 The Debate on Swedish NATO Membership from December 2021 to May 2022

The Swedish NATO debate has been complicated to follow, and somewhat partial, where opposition voices have been avoided and political promises broken. Several actors in Swedish society have taken part in the NATO debate. Aspects such as the joint defense of the member states' territories and the defense of Western, democratic values, are two of the points arguing for Sweden’s entry into NATO (Dahl, 2022). In addition, the arguments for the alliance's existence and the room for, potential to, and high importance of, further development are clear. NATO, as a military alliance, plays a crucially important role in international military cooperation, despite not being perfect, but valuable (Sloan, 2020). Thus, the arguments in the debate shifted, from the initial ground of pros and cons of a membership to involving the outside circumstances of security threats, which by time became the predominant factor for an argument for a membership (Prime Minister Andersson, 2022).

Dahl, as an Associate Professor of International Relations and a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, argues that NATO is a modern alliance that is up to date in times of change and advanced in adapting to the environmental circumstances while being aware of the political situation. The author further refers to the fact that Sweden has in modern times been avoiding war, and is apart from NATO member countries excluded from personal experience of the effects of war (Dahl, 2022:227), which can be another
attribute for an attribute in favor of the alliance. The Baltic countries, as all members of the alliance, are, according to experts such as Dahl, three prime examples of how deterrence has been successful against Russia. Moreover, during the 74 years NATO has existed, only one single attack against the member states territorial arena has been identified, which is the 9/11 terror attack in the US, which can be classified as the alliance’s defense operations are successful (Dahl, 2022:229-231).

However, Article 5 (stating that a war against one member state is a war against everyone), was at the same time criticized by other experts, such as Svenska Freds. The validity of this provision in the treaty is criticized with the ultimatum that all NATO member countries carry the power of veto. From the point of view of Svenska Freds, the 9/11 incident shredded the alliance's credibility, as the United States, as the leading military power in NATO sought assistance, rather than employing their extensive military capabilities to assist smaller states. Thereby, Svenska Freds raises their concerns that Article 5 does not guarantee either military war material or humanitarian assistance (Svenska Freds Interim report Article 5, 2023).

Svenska Freds, as part of the opposition, has throughout this debate been one of the most predominant voices against membership in NATO. Svenska Freds is an association that has been fighting for peace since 1883. It has survived two world wars and is today the oldest peace association in the world (Hellström, 2023:31-34). However, the public view regarding their work has not always been positive. This can be explained as peace work domestically contradicts national interests in terms of security (Hellström, 2023:31). Hellström shares her point of view as a reason for little media spaces, where she argues that the primary reason why NATO opponents have not been given space in the media is that the resistance against the military alliance is perceived as equivalent to being on Russia’s side (Hellström, 2023:137). However, from another perspective, some information is confidential, together
with the argument that a united Sweden can be crucial in the diplomatic international arena (Bergkvist, DN, 2022).

From another point of view, Prime Minister Andersson and Hellström argue that a membership would withdraw from Sweden's long-term disarmament which would lead to a declining security situation for Sweden (Prime Minister Andersson, 2022; Hellström, 2023). Departing from non-military alignment is to them considered as something negative for Sweden (Prime Minister Andersson, 2022) and further to the world, as Sweden if so would lose its negotiation power in terms of diplomacy for peace (Hellström, 2023). Both Andersson and Hellström agree that military rearmament in response to the already destabilized security situation would rather give birth to tension instead of increased security (TV4b, Prime Minister Andersson 2022 & Hellström, 2023:70). Further, a membership would equal merging with an alliance operating in favor of the use of nuclear weapons, which is against Swedish core values in line with the UN anti-policy against nuclear weapons (Hellström, 2023).

Prime Minister Andersson and the Social Democrats have faced criticism during the process. Actors such as representatives from the Moderates Party together with Oksanen from the Swedish Defence University have expressed their concerns with the Swedish government in times of crisis. From one point of view, Strömmer argues that politicians should prioritize Sweden's interests over narrow party concerns, at a time he considers Sweden to be in its worst security policy crisis since World War II, with a parliamentary government that is the weakest since the 1970s. Moreover, he stresses the importance of taking responsibility during a crisis and highlights several instances where the Social Democrats initially opposed important measures. These include sending arms to Ukraine, restarting the defense committee, distributing more funds for defense, as well as conducting a security policy analysis. Strömmer assumes that if the Social Democrats have control, there will be no progress regarding a Swedish NATO application (Strömmer, DI, 2022). Oksanen
further criticizes the Swedish government and compares Finland's internal unity against Sweden’s, according to him, stagnant and ineffective process (Oksanen, Norra Skåne, 2022).

Another voice in the debate, Kristersson holds a contrasting viewpoint to Prime Minister Andersson's opinion on the potential destabilization caused by NATO membership. He believes Finland would form a wrongful perception that Sweden is no longer a reliable partner, and argues that a joint application process would demonstrate to Russia the strength of its democratic response to authoritarian threats. While the decision on NATO membership ultimately rests with Sweden, Kristersson sees the benefits of joint action with Finland and believes that Finland shares the same viewpoint (Kristersson, DN, 2022).

However, from the point of view of Lanoszka, Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Waterloo, the alliance has faced and continues to face several challenges. This has raised concerns, in particular regarding the alliance’s inability to stand together in crisis (Lanoszka, 2022). NATO as an alliance further follows the dilemma of increased military spending and the concern of deterrence for peace, in particular through the use of nuclear weapons for power balance with Russia. The components concerning the alliance's reliability or unreliability together with issues pointing out the security dilemma, have, according to Lanoszka, resulted in a shaky ground for NATO. Even more concerning the unpredictable leadership of the alliance during the regime of Donald Trump (Lanoszka, 2022). Furthermore, few analyses have been conducted on the relations between European neutral states such as Sweden, and NATO (Ydén et al., 2019:2).

*Svenska Freds*, The Green Party, and the Left Wing Party share the concern about an angled debate and bring this forward from their perspectives. They all emphasize the lack of a broad debate to cover all layers of NATO. According to Hellström, media criticism becomes a central fact when *Svenska*
Freds repeatedly gets excluded from the media space, and the poor attention they receive is predominantly negatively embedded. The perspective portrays the backside of the Swedish NATO process, as one where political interests in all dynamics took over the actual matter (Hellström, 2023; Svenneling & Ferm, May 13th, 2022).

They all highlight the concern regarding the Government Official Investigation, established in the spring of 2022 and operating as the base for the membership application. The NATO opposition parties express dissatisfaction with the timeframe for the group overseeing the report. The issue regarding associations with nuclear weapons is severe, together with concerns about democratic setbacks and political challenges in certain NATO member countries, specifically Hungary and Turkey (Hellström, 2023; Svenneling & Ferm, May 13th, 2022).

Persson, former Prime Minister of Sweden during the years 1996-2006, voiced his opinion a variety of times during this period. Although holding a deep respect for the alliance as an organization, he believes that Sweden has served well so far as neutrals. To the positive viewpoint of many politicians regarding a tight collaboration with Finland in the application process, Persson recognizes that Finland would undeniably affect Sweden in their decision. Thus, it must not be done in such a way as Finland making decisions for Sweden. That, he says, would be very unfortunate (Nordström, TV4, 2022).

Hagström's report from the Swedish Defense University shows that the NATO debate between 2014-2018, contained more personal attacks than substantive counter-arguments to membership in NATO (Hagström, 2020). Hellström believes that the same problem has prevailed in the Swedish NATO debate since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Hellström, 2023:132). The Social Democratic journalist and author Greider agrees. He argues in an interview with TV4 that the NATO debate has been nationalized and too focused on the question “what is best for Sweden?” instead of what is best for
the world. The freedom from alliance has not been debated for Sweden, as it has rather been NATO propaganda than a NATO debate. The rush has been too dominant, and the unawareness of what Sweden will enter is still not identified (Greider, TV4, 2022). Moreover, during an interview with Dagens Nyheter in June 2015, Ambassador Viktor Tatarintsev could not give any guarantees that Russia lacked intentions to attack Sweden, further emphasizing that NATO membership could have consequences for Sweden (Kunz, 2015:18). Forsberg & Vahtoranta argued this already in 2001 and meant that the maintenance of military non-alignment by Sweden is advisable due to possible unforeseen consequences for European stability that could result from Russia's response to a Swedish NATO membership (Forsberg & Vahtoranta, 2001:68).

As by this, we have created a list presenting the dominant pro and con arguments for and against a Swedish membership in the alliance. The pro list is based on a selection of opinions from experts, scholars, and politicians. Scholarly primarily from Swedish Defence University, political parties and representatives from Prime Minister Andersson and the Socialist Party, The Moderate Party, The Liberals, The Centre Party, The Christian Democrats, and The Swedish Democrats. Thus, the selections of the cons are stated by other experts, scholars, and politicians such as Svenska Freds, Associate Professor Lanoszka, Prime Minister Andersson and the Socialist Party, The Green Party, The Left Party, and Göran Greider. The reason Prime Minister Andersson placed on both sides is because she contributed to arguments for both sides. Early in the process, she contributed to the con side, while she shifted and brought arguments to the pro side of a Swedish membership.
The situation between Ukraine and Russia became more urgent on February 24, 2022, when Russian President Vladimir Putin commanded his troops to enter Ukraine, launching a full-scale invasion of the country in what he referred to as a “special military operation” (Westfall, The Washington Post, 2023). Furthermore, Putin asserted their efforts to reach a consensus with key NATO members regarding indivisible security in Europe, which he perceived had been met with deceitful responses. By the first week of the invasion, a million Ukrainian refugees fled the country, 50,000 of whom fled to Sweden that year (Bigg, New York Times, 2023; Regeringskansliet, 2023a). In addition, four different sanctions from February 23rd to March 2nd were placed on Russia by Sweden (Regeringskansliet, 2023b).
It is important to note that Sweden's security environment has undeniably been affected by Russia's actions long before 2022, starting from the Russian aggression against Crimea, Ukraine in 2014. Despite Sweden's belief that there was not any direct global threat to their defense, they in previous years emphasized the importance of closely monitoring Russia's actions due to the ambiguity surrounding their intentions. In the past years, there have been numerous instances of Russian intrusions into Swedish territory, prompting concerns and suspicions about Moscow's intentions. The occurrence known as the Russian Easter incident in March 2013, where two Backfire bombers and four Flanker fighter jets entered Swedish airspace to simulate attacks on targets in the southern region, left Sweden in the position of being a mere observer, with the incident being monitored solely through radar screens (Kunz, 2015:17-18).

From the Russian perspective, the relationship between Sweden and Russia, before Sweden’s NATO membership application, was described as “cold” and “awkward”, where the relationship is on unequal terms. This is based on interviews where the relationship between the two countries was found asymmetrical as Russia has considered Sweden to be an inessential country, whereas Sweden has seen Russia as somewhat of a threat. At the time of these statements, Sweden was not perceived as an enemy in which Russia would have an interest in invading and occurrences of what were perceived as threats from Russia are described to only be misunderstandings amplified by the Swedish media. However, it is mentioned that membership in NATO could change this Russian perception of them, and come with threatening consequences (Simons, Manoylo & Trunov, 2019:338-339).

5.4 The Role of Swedish Media

With the Russian ultimatum at the beginning of December 2021, came a difference in the Swedish media coverage. The media outlets began increasing their coverage of Russia's aggressions. For Sweden, headlines have frequently
featured narratives surrounding their security levels, which has contributed to the anxious security feeling and partial media coverage (Hellström, 2023:14-20). The changed security policy caused the Swedish media to report on events with frightening headlines such as “Unknown drones over Swedish airspace”, and “Swedish military escalation on Gotland”, questioning Sweden's false-based threats (Hellström, 2023:14-20). It was later determined that the drones did not belong to Russia, and the military preparedness on Gotland turned out to be a normal presence in times of peace (Hellström, 2023:30). In fact, in a media discourse analysis on the Swedish NATO process in 2022 made by El Kaouay, the author found that there were more articles in favor of Swedish NATO membership than against it. Most predominant was the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, which had 18 pro-NATO articles, while only 1 anti-NATO (E. Kaouay, 2023:30-32).

Overall, the debates surrounding NATO have displayed a significant lack of balance. In the media, NATO negotiators have been positioned as experts, resulting in a declining presence of critical voices in news broadcasts and debates (Hellström, 2023:137). The limited criticism that emerges mainly revolves around concerns about the speed of the decision-making process and the complexity of the issue, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive and thorough analysis (Hellström, 2023:137). The Swedish media assuredly influenced this process by underlining the threats emanating from Russia towards Sweden. Hellström explains an exclusion from NATO debates in Swedish television early on in the debates and such several times. Thus, the exclusion of *Svenska Freds* in the media debates has worsened the situation where their presence in times of crisis can be considered valid and important, where they could have provided different points of view (Hellström 2023:33; Leuhusen 2017).
5.5 The Process of Swedish NATO Membership Application

2022

During the Swedish NATO discussions between December 2021 and May 2022, the Swedish Social Democratic Party governs the Swedish Parliament, led by Prime Minister Andersson. The Social Democratic Party is the party that entered the election process in 2018 with the promise to not depart from military non-alignment (Socialdemokraterna, 2022).

In December 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin called for immediate talks with the US and NATO regarding security guarantees for Russia (Stenberg, 2022). Putin demanded that NATO refrain from admitting new members and impose limitations on its defense of Eastern European countries (Agrell, 2022). If Putin's demands were implemented, Sweden would be greatly affected and the security policy would be undermined. Despite the significant implications of Russia's demands, it took a considerable amount of time for Sweden's Prime Minister to publicly address the matter, more specifically, to early January 2022 (Stenberg, 2022). In a phone call with the NATO secretary general, Andersson expressed gratitude for the deepened partnership between Sweden and NATO and affirmed their right to choose their security arrangements and continue their neutrality (Riksdagen, 2022). At that time, there was no majority support for NATO membership in the parliament or among the general population, as indicated by a survey conducted by DN (Stenberg, 2022). Days after that phone call, the Prime Minister extends an invitation to the party leaders of the Parliament to engage in discussions regarding the current state of security policy. During this meeting, Andersson and the government are faced with criticism for their delayed response in light of Russia's escalated actions and threats. Nonetheless, the Prime Minister stood her ground in that it was fundamental for Sweden to protect Swedish national interests (DN, 2022a).
The following chapters will be presented in the present tense, to help the reader in the process of tracing how the government shifted its stance towards NATO membership. The year is 2022, divided from January to May.

5.5.1 January
In a press conference with Swedish Prime Minister Andersson on the 26th of Jan 2022, she emphasizes the importance of a cooperative parliament, including frequent dialogues, close collaboration, and information exchange with the entire parliament due to the destabilized security situation in Sweden and Europe. She claims that no order from Russia is going to be taken. In the same conference, the media asks insistently about why the government is not including the Swedish Defense Committee in the dialogue. Further, the Prime Minister states that “No rapid changes are neither accurate nor timely appropriate under the current serious security situation”. A close dialogue with other countries and in particular Finland is important (Prime Minister Andersson, January 26th, 2022).

5.5.2 February
The discourse is tense when a press conference with committees of Finland takes place on February 2nd. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Linde, argues for the importance of keeping close collaborations with Finland and further states that a close dialogue with NATO will continue (Minister of Foreign Affairs Linde, February 2nd, 2022). Further, as The Minister of Defense highlights the threat against Swedish security, the view is clear not to apply for membership in NATO (Minister of Defense Hultqvist, February 2nd, 2022).

A week later, the Minister of Foreign Affairs holds her line and states “The government does not intend to apply for NATO membership. The security policy line is fixed. Our military non-alignment serves us well and contributes to stability and security in Northern Europe” (Minister of Foreign Affairs Linde, February 9th, 2022)
On February 24th, 2022, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine shakes the European security order, initiating another critical turning point for Swedish-NATO cooperation. Sweden shows solidarity with Ukraine by providing them with political and humanitarian support, as well as reinforcing sanctions against Russia (Government, 2023a). The same day Linde says Sweden is facing the most serious security policy situation since the Second World War (Jönsson, SVT, 2022). Regardless of this momentous change in security, the Prime Minister states that she is determined at this point that Swedish membership in NATO is not in question (Hellström, 2023:46).

The same day, Prime Minister Andersson refers strictly to Swedish arms export legislation (Arms Act) when receiving the question of sending military aid to Ukraine (Prime Minister Andersson, February 24th, 2022). As this information was based on false premises of Swedish regulations, the discussion of aiding military assistance to Ukraine was prolonged.

5.5.3 March

Preparations for ensuring cyber security are announced to be of importance, as foreign power in the form of the Russian Federation is capable of breaking the rules of war. In a press conference on the first of March with P. Gornitzka, the Director General of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, and V. Essen, Head of Swedish Security Service, they stress the challenges of reviewing direct threats and highlight it as a situation that requires responsibility. The representatives further urge the general public to be vigilant and take responsibility for their knowledge of cyber security (Gornitzka & Essen, March 1st, 2022).

The same day, Prime Minister Andersson announces in a speech that the Parliament has decided that Sweden will provide weapons as assistance to Ukraine. This becomes the first time Sweden takes a similar action and supports one side of an armed conflict with military means, since the Soviet Union's attack on Finland in 1939. By this, Sweden for the second time departs
from their military-neutral choices of action. Thus, Andersson further states that the consequences of Ukraine losing the war are expected to be more detrimental to Sweden than if Sweden chooses to remain neutral. While there is no direct threat to Sweden, it remains a target of Russian media attacks and cyber attacks (Prime Minister Andersson, March 1st, 2022).

In a press conference held on March 8th, Andersson declares that NATO membership does not hold significant relevance for Sweden's security. Instead, she highlights the ongoing collaboration between Sweden, the United States, and Finland aimed at strengthening Sweden's military capabilities. A reminder is issued to the EU regarding the imperative of adhering to a unified security policy to mutually defend member states. These factors are the predominant aspects of Swedish security at present (TV4, 2022b).

At this time, The Prime Minister clearly outlines how an application to the alliance in current circumstances could destabilize the security situation in Europe and thereby Sweden further. Moreover, the most accurate work for Swedish security lies in stability. Further, she argues for the sake of neutrality (TV4, 2022b). Though Sweden is a large arms exporter, the country has not supported one side of an armed conflict with arms supplied since the Finnish Winter War in 1939 (Hellström, 2023:53). When Andersson is asked to provide her primary arguments against NATO membership, she emphasizes that such a decision should be based on what is best for Sweden's security, both in the short and long term - yet she acknowledges that the possibility of membership is not entirely off the table. Overall, when asked, Andersson argues for Sweden's values and stresses that the country's militarily non-aligned status had served it well for 200 years and helped to keep Sweden out of war. Therefore, any change in this course would require serious deliberation and strong arguments (Olsson G, DN, 2022).

At the onset of the invasion, Russia warned that joining NATO would have considerable military and political implications for these countries and that
they could not ignore the increasing cooperation between Sweden and Finland with NATO, as well as their participation in military exercises close to Russia's border. Four days after the press conference where Andersson emphasizes that a Swedish NATO application may further destabilize Europe, news outlets write that Russia has again cautioned Sweden against joining NATO, stating that membership would result in "retaliatory measures," as declared by the Russian Foreign Ministry (Olsson H, DN, 2022).

On March 16th, 2022, the government establishes a working group due to the altered security situation resulting from Russia's aggression. The group is assigned to conduct a Government Official Investigation of a potential Swedish membership in NATO, based outlining the security situation in Sweden and Europe. The deliberations shall be overseen by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Defense. Representatives from all parliamentary parties together with 11 undefined experts, researchers, and authority representatives are assigned to take part in the analysis. Much weight has been placed on uniting the Parliament to have a unified picture of the situation and to move forward in one direction as a joint team (SOU:2022: Ds 2022:7).

In regards to the parliamentary group that has been appointed to conduct an analysis, Kristersson believes it is a good opportunity for parties to reconsider their positions, reminding the fact that the ongoing conflict in Ukraine is continuing over time. He describes Putin as being constrained and experiencing financial isolation, thus heightening the likelihood of Putin resorting to desperate actions. Kristersson again pledges that, should he assume leadership, his government would initiate the process of applying for membership in the defense alliance if a parliamentary majority supports such a move following the election (Kristersson, DN, 2022).

On March 24th, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy attends a meeting at the Swedish Parliament, where he expresses gratitude to Sweden for its
substantial support during the war - naming them as one of their biggest supporters (Jakobsson DN, 2022). Additionally, he raises concerns about the potential Russian annexation of the Swedish island of Gotland (European Parliament, 2022:8).

5.5.4 April

Press photos from Bucha and other places in Ukraine are shocking, showing Russian war crimes that have been committed in Ukraine. This calls for another summit with NATO in Brussels. Russian diplomats are expelled from Sweden due to conducting illegal activities, posing a risk for implications with Swedish diplomacy in the future, as well as further Russian propaganda (Linde, Minister of Foreign Affairs, April 5th, 2022).

The following day, the tone is stressed when the Prime Minister announces that Sweden has participated in the work of holding Russia responsible for war crimes in the International Criminal Court (ICC). When asked about Swedish NATO membership, she answers: "We do what is the safest option for Sweden in every single situation". Thus, the security situation has changed since February 24th, 2022. In response to that, Sweden has deepened its cooperation with NATO and decided to reach 2% of the GDP in the defense budget, and other bilateral agreements will further be reviewed for possible ways of strengthening such. However, Andersson continues to inform future decisions in terms of Sweden’s security, that these will be based on the analysis the appointed security policy group arrives at. Moreover, the Prime Minister says she welcomes the ongoing debate on the Swedish NATO issue. On the other hand, the Prime Minister wants to highlight the results of the security policy analysis that is ongoing and must be completed on 31 May 2022 (Prime Minister Andersson, April 6th, 2022). The Norwegian Prime Minister participates and presses for Swedish-Norwegian cooperation, whereas Andersson also demonstrates their mutual relationship, built over a long period.
The same day in Brussels, Sweden and Finland’s potential road to NATO is discussed during a meeting between the countries’ Foreign Ministers alongside NATO secretary Stoltenberg. Stoltenberg says that a membership application can be processed quickly, to which Linde stresses the importance of an analysis of such a decision. On the topic of Finland and Sweden jointly sending in applications, she highlights the differences in the countries’ history and geographical positions as factors that can affect the Scandinavian outcomes (Gripenberg, DN, 2022).

A state visit from Finland takes place in Stockholm on April 13th and a joint press meeting with Prime Minister Andersson of Sweden and Prime Minister Marin of Finland. They both highlight the close relationship between the neighbors that has grown stronger recently due to the changed security situation. They announce that the cooperation will continue at the same level in the future, as the countries are dependent on each other in terms of security. Strengthened NATO cooperation is ongoing and has been mutual and parallel, hand in hand. Finland has conducted a security assessment of what actual membership would entail, and the analysis is clear that there are differences between membership and partnership. NATO, with its Article 5, is announced to be the only option for security, where political security also is guaranteed. However, Prime Minister Marin says that the consequences and risks of membership will be carefully anchored before the decision is made, as there are both short-term and long-term risks - whether the countries join or not. A decision for Finland is expected to be made in a few weeks, and that decision will impact its neighbors. The goal is however to bring peace. Finland hopes to continue a good and close dialogue with Sweden (Prime Minister Marin of Finland, April 13th, 2022). Andersson continues, “Regarding whether Sweden and Finland would make different choices, considering Russia’s border with Finland, Sweden will make a decision based on Sweden’s security, but Finland’s decision will still, of course, be part of Sweden’s security policy analysis” (Prime Minister Andersson, April 13th, 2022).
Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Zakharova says on April 20th that Sweden has been informed of the consequences that Russia would impose on them, should they join NATO. Though not giving details of what those warnings would entail, Zakharova says Sweden and Finland are aware of the repercussions. To this, Linde says that the Swedish security policy is determined by Sweden and that Russia has no influence on their decisions (Berggren Wiklund, Aftonbladet, 2022).

As the situation in Ukraine escalates, the Swedish government calls for quicker decision-making. Thus, Foreign Minister Linde declares at a joint press meeting with Defense Minister Hultqvist on April 21st that the analysis of the security policy situation by the Parliament parties is to be brought forward by almost two weeks. The deadline is advanced from the 31st of May to the 13th (Bergkvist, DN, 2022).

5.5.5 May

On Europe Day, the 9th of May, the ambitions and importance of closer European collaborations are emphasized with embedded words of the ongoing war in Ukraine which has caused instability. The EU has been predominantly inward-oriented but is now starting to seek opportunities outside the block. Outlined security measures to become defensively stronger, and as Sweden is considering membership in NATO, a European heavy security policy will automatically make NATO stronger (Ambassador of France, May 9th, 2022).

On the 11th of May 2022, Prime Minister Boris Johnson from the UK and Prime Minister Andersson hold a press conference, announcing a bilateral agreement signed. Andersson states that collaborations with the UK, EU, and NATO are considered crucial for Sweden, and continues “We need to deepen our cooperation, especially on foreign security and defense policy... In times of crisis, cooperation becomes even more important and Sweden's partnership with NATO is crucial” (Prime Minister Andersson, 11 May 2022). Prime Minister Johnson says that support is more important than ever now, and
continues “The declaration will be valid regardless of Sweden's security policy actions in the future” (Prime Minister Johnson, 11 May, 2022). Prime Minister Andersson fills in with an announcement that if Sweden or Finland submits an application to NATO, Russia threatens to respond, thus necessitating an increase in military presence in this region. However, it remains unclear to what extent this increase should be (Prime Minister Andersson, 11 May 2022).

The next day, Finland unites to apply for NATO membership (Ulkoministeriö, 2023). This puts pressure on Sweden to act rapidly, as a joint application for both countries is considered one of the core aspects of the process due to the security situation (Kristersson, DN, 2022). As the Swedish security report was advanced until the 13th of May, the opportunity to follow through together with Finland remains.

The security report is finalized and announced at a press conference on the 13th of May 2022. The main conclusion of the report “Ett försämrat säkerhetspolitiskt läge - konsekvenser för Sverige” (SOU:2022: Ds 2022:7) is that Sweden would benefit from NATO membership, and thus in terms of increased security and a shared defense force according to Article 5 of the NATO treaty (SOU 2022: Ds 2022:7). Section 6 of the report (pages 33-40) presents the benefits of a membership which are highly dominant throughout the analysis. The analysis only mentions the challenges with Swedish NATO membership three times, entailing military obligations in case of an attack on another ally, Russia’s potential response to an application, and a lack of human rights and democracy in the alliance, together with the economic consideration of 600-700 million SEK reserved for the alliance per year (SOU 2022: Ds 2022:7:33-40).

All political parties agree on the aspects of the analysis, whereby six out of the eight parties stand behind the conducted conclusion, including Sweden's further security suggestions. Overall, membership is put forward positively.
Arguments such as “...raise the threshold for military conflict and serve as a deterrent in northern Europe”, embeds the conclusion that Sweden should enter NATO, even though it is not written by word (SOU 2022: Ds 2022:7:41-42). The Minister of Foreign Affairs states in the press conference that Sweden's long-term values in foreign and security policy would not be compromised by NATO membership, and would allow the country to continue advocating for nuclear disarmament, strengthening Nordic collaborations. This policy change is driven by the current security situation influenced by the Russian invasion (Linde, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 13th, 2022).

Overall, the arguments for the conclusion’s validity are shared by the Social Democrats, the Moderates, the Liberals, the Center Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats. The report concludes with the significance of Article 5 as a fundamental aspect (SOU 2022: Ds 2022:7). When presenting their arguments, some highlight significant security events that influenced Sweden's rearmament efforts, while others refer to Ukraine as an example of the dangers faced by countries outside NATO. Together, they point out the differences between partnership and membership, stating that guarantees can only be obtained through membership. Thus, arguments stated by NATO are emphasized, where the alliance has expressed concerns over buffer zones as destabilizing factors. This ends in a statement that Sweden's non-alignment has not been credible in Russia's eyes, citing previous collaborations with NATO. They suggest that freedom of alliance may lead to isolation (Political Representatives, May 13th, 2022).

“When circumstances change, so does our decision to change” (TV4a, Prime Minister Andersson, May 15th, 2022). On the 16th of May, the decision to enter NATO was settled in the Swedish Parliament. With broad support, the journey towards a military alliance makes history in Sweden (Regeringskansliet, 2023b). A shift in stance, from a determined statement by the Swedish Prime Minister on February 24th, that “Swedish membership in NATO is not in question”, to a membership application in less than 3 months.
(Hellström, 2023:46). Within 48 hours, the Swedish application to join the alliance is signed and sent, (Regeringskansliet, 2023c) together with the Finnish neighbor (Ulkoministeriö, 2023).

6 Analysis

To help understand the Swedish NATO process, we have applied the theoretical framework of Bounded Rationality to analyze our findings, as well as the conceptual framework of Government in Crisis, following Ury and Smoke’s (1985) definition of crisis that outlines the four characteristics: (1) high stakes which involve the expectation of significant losses and unforeseen escalations, (2) high uncertainty due to lack of information, (3) constraint of time, and lastly, (4) narrowed options. Thus, together with the three factors of Bounded Rationality as: (1) context of time as time pressure and time constraints, (2) cognition as capability to process information, and, (3) access to information as in the context of a decision-making process, we will divide this chapter in line with these parameters. This is to better analyze our data through a broader lens for understanding. The first parameter in each headline is Bounded Rationality, whereas the other equals each description of a government in crisis. As stated in the theory Chapter 3.2, we have combined the different parameters of the two frameworks in pairs as we found them suitable. Thus, one important aspect to note is that attributes for the concept of a Government in crisis will automatically strengthen the theory of Bounded Rationality, as Dyson & Hart argue in Chapter 3.1, a government in crisis often lacks rationality.

6.1 Context of Time and Time Pressure

As the findings in Chapter 5 showed, the decision to enter NATO came arguably with clear time constraints, as policymakers were in a pressured situation to make a decision rapidly, specifically in barely 9 weeks. Compared to the decision to enter the EU, which was a process in about 3 years, including
both a domestic referendum on the issue together with critical negotiations with current member states (Regeringskansliet, 2019), one can argue the Swedish NATO process was hastily. However, it can be considered unfair to compare the NATO process to the EU process, due to the completely different circumstances of the European security order during the NATO process in 2022.

The decision-making process to enter NATO would arguably be influenced by both internal and external factors: external factors such as political pressure from other countries such as threats from Russia, pressure to enter the alliance from, in particular, Finland and the US, in combination with pressure from international organizations such as the EU and NATO itself. Further, there was pressure from the media and from the opposition party, which partly turned the Swedish NATO process into a political game. Internal pressure on the other hand comes from inside the government, where one potential factor could be the pressure on themselves to conduct a security report in 8 weeks and 2 days, to operate in parallel with Finland. As Finland decided to apply for NATO membership on the 12th of May, the pressure on Sweden became even more severe. As Finland was united in their ambition to enter NATO before Sweden, it led Sweden to advance their security report with 18 days, to the 13th of May instead of the 31st. Roughly 8 weeks were thereby assigned to the group to finalize, which gave room for their rationality to further be bounded by the context of time (see Chapter 5.4). Drawing a parallel with Sweden's anxiety over Russia annexing Gotland, one might speculate that Zelenskyy seized this opportunity during his digital visit to the Parliament on March 24th to indirectly put pressure on Sweden to join NATO. Thereby, several external factors are identified in the context of time.

Russia's aggression and military advance in Ukraine can be an aspect influencing the government's decision-making process in terms of time pressure. The highlighted security threats or focus on Russia's actions, have possibly created a sense of urgency, which ultimately increased the pressure
of NATO membership as the best possible solution. This can be considered the root cause of time pressure, as Russian threats put pressure on Sweden to act rapidly, in particular, due to Sweden’s somewhat vulnerable geopolitical position in this context.

Pressure from media coverage, with headlines such as "The Swedish Armed Forces: Increased number of threats against Sweden from Russia", (Krona, SR, 2022) and “Kristersson: NATO membership a matter of life and death” (Jakobson, DN, 2022), can have pushed the government to prioritize joining NATO as a way to enhance security capabilities. Thus, pressure can arguably have been present in the process from the political domestic opposition, as Ulf Kristersson brought the question to the election table. Finally, pressure from a frightened population is another factor that could have limited the ability of decision-makers to conduct fully rational decisions due to the context of pressure.

Further, media coverage as stated in the Media Findings Chapter 5.5, as of the reporting of unknown drones over Swedish airspace, together with increased military activity on Gotland, can have pressured the government to act rapidly. Factors such as these events, and several other incidents that have led to the feeling of threat, can have made an impact on governmental decision-making in terms of rational actions in the context of time, which is an attribute both for Bounded Rationality and a government placed in crisis.

The political pressure can be seen as another attribute of Bounded Rationality due to the Swedish upcoming election, which partly contributed to the Swedish NATO process evolving into a political competition. As Kristersson made NATO membership an election campaign (see Chapter 5.2), one can arguably notice the process lost its rationality even further due to political pressure and divided leadership, which led to increased time constraints.
6.2 Cognition and High Stakes which Involve the Expectation of Significant Losses and Unforeseen Escalations

Bounded Rationality theory acknowledges that people have cognitive limitations that prevent them from taking into account all available information. However, the level of cognition is a fact among policy-makers we cannot determine with certainty, as we can not know what they had in mind. There exist various factors such as undisclosed information that limit an evaluation of the government's heuristics used in the decision-making process. Yet, the fact we know for sure is that cognition is a limitation in our ability to process information, which affects decision-making. Nevertheless, rationality is based on individual interpretation which entails that one thinks and acts according to what they believe is in their own best interest. This does not necessarily demand it to be rational from the point of view of others as the instrumental understanding of rationality has proven to be unsatisfactory for certain individuals (Nickerson, 2007:14-16).

The Swedish government's misinterpretation of the Arms Act, where information was based on false premises of Swedish regulations regarding weapon aid, highlights a clear cognitive deficiency in the process of Sweden's bid to join NATO. Even though this does not answer for the entire NATO process, it clearly shows the level of limited cognition is present even at the governmental level. As stated in the process Chapter 5.4, Andersson goes from announcing that a NATO membership is off the agenda, to stating that a potential membership for Sweden shall be well considered, to conducting a report that gets critique for not being well considered. All, in less than 9 weeks. By this, one can argue that Sweden's Prime Minister at that time was limited by cognition when striving towards rational decisions, as her statements are contradictory in the manner of practices and promise to operate without synchronizations.

Furthermore, as stated in both theory Chapters 3.1 and 3.2, one can apply the role of emotions to the context. Arguably, emotions impacted the level of
rationality, as media headlines with high certainty brought feelings of threats and fear. As a characteristic of both an attribute for Government in Crisis and Bounded Rationality, emotion can limit a person's capability to process information, which it arguably did in the Swedish context of NATO application.

6.3 Access to Information and High Uncertainty due to Lack of Information

The Bounded Rationality Theory can be applied to this process by considering that relevant actors in decision-making positions limited knowledge about the potential advantages and disadvantages of NATO membership might have required them to rely on incomplete or biased information (see theory Chapter 3.2). Moreover, the unavailability of comprehensive information and the presence of influenced sources, such as propaganda, create both time pressure and an information deficit (Chapter 5.5). This, and arguably concerning the aspect of access to information as the third characteristic of Bounded Rationality, applied to the Swedish NATO process.

Russia's aggression and military advance in Ukraine can also be considered one of the core aspects in the context of access to information. As presented in Chapter 5.4.5, Andersson defines the threats as unclear, which equals high uncertainty due to lack of information, as an attribute for a government placed in circumstances of crisis. Therefore, both frameworks are applicable.

When further examining the presentation of news regarding Swedish NATO membership (see section 5.5), there were unequal amounts of published material on the pros and cons of NATO membership. As the majority of the information spread was in favor of Sweden joining the alliance, one can argue the information provided was unbalanced. Further to that, Svenska Freds as one major NATO opponent announced several times how they got excluded in the media to express their point of view, which contributed to the lack of an
in-depth debate on the issue. It is important to note that this observation is to explain how the media discourse has featured debates and articles in favor of Swedish membership in the alliance. Thus, by emphasizing the benefits of NATO membership, while downplaying the potential cons or considering alternative strategic options and excluding different actors from debates, decision-makers may be exposed to a biased or incomplete portrayal of NATO. The unbalanced outline provided by the media arguably became an indirect source of information, to all actors involved in the process. By applying the aspect of both Bounded Rationality and Government in crisis, we argue that the one-sided coverage in media and the debate could potentially have led to an incomplete understanding of the implications of joining versus not joining the alliance. Misleading or biased information can arguably have operated as a limited resource of information, further leading to high uncertainty.

Further, as outlined in Findings Chapter 5.4.3, the government declared the focus group to state the report *Ett försämrat säkerhetspolitiskt läge - konsekvenser för Sverige* SOU:2022: Ds 2022:7, and such the involved experts were as mentioned unknown. As for that, one cannot determine whether or not these were neutral in their contribution to the analysis or had a specific stance toward the matter. However, as the conclusion in the report was one-sided, where limitations and the backside of membership in the alliance for Sweden were to a great extent excluded, one can argue the involved actors in conducting the security report did not have access to all evident information. This becomes a further factor for rationality to be bounded. Moreover, a crisis defines a situation where governments experience high uncertainty due to a lack of information. That, we argue the government's access to information to make a rational decision on the matter of Swedish NATO membership was limited, as this report was stated to be the baseline of the decision. This, in combination with the involvement of high stakes, expectation of significant losses, and unforeseen escalations, one can argue that Sweden was in crisis at
this time. Yet, another attribute for the rationality in the decision to be compromised is an attribute of crisis (see Chapter 3.1).

The dedication to stay united with Finland in this process can to historians and political scientists seem invalid due to the differences in their history. As Persson states in Chapter 5.2, it would be unfortunate to see Finland in a position of decision-making for Sweden, regardless of their choice of action. As noticed in Findings Chapters 5.1 and 5.4.4, there is a noticeable difference in Sweden’s and Finland’s geopolitical history - a fact that seems to have been disregarded by the majority of decision-makers, as the government based their argument on a unified process with Finland as the most essential aspect. This emphasizes a potential lack of information, upon which the government based its argument upon. This proves again for the presence of Bounded Rationality to be present.

As Ury and Smoke state decision-makers who deal with high uncertainty often feel a deep sense of doubt in terms of unpredictability, and this is not only because they lack information, but also because unpredictability arises from not knowing the intentions of the opposing party in question. Instances of this have been observed from December 2021 to March 2022, when Russia threatened Sweden - growing uncertainty about Russia's intentions. In regards to these presumptions, one can apply high uncertainty and the repercussions of what one does with the information that one has, adding to the concept of crisis. Nevertheless, we also acknowledge the important fact that delaying a decision-making process might inflame a situation as further stated in Chapter 3.1.

6.4 Narrowed Options & Heuristics

The aspect of “narrowed options” as one characteristic of a government in crisis, was highly evident during the Swedish NATO process. Either Sweden could enter the alliance, or not. There was never really a sphere of a more
moderate alternative. Thus, while some argue that the process was hasty, swift, and somewhat too naive, others argue it had to be quick due to the pressured circumstances of the security situation (see Chapter 5.2). However, at the end of the day, the options were perceived to be limited, which constitutes yet another attribute for ratifying a classification that the government was placed in crisis. Thus, as a crisis is an attribute of rationality to be compromised, one can strengthen that the Swedish government faced Bounded Rationality.

In summary, the ongoing debate about Sweden entering NATO, where Swedish interests are claimed to have been in focus over the world's best interests, can be described as rationality in its simplicity. Nickerson argues that rationality, wherein one thinks and acts according to what they believe is in their own best interest, does not necessarily have to be equivalent to someone else's point of view (Nickerson, 2007:14). In line with this theory, we can find a cause for why the government applied for NATO membership in this short period of time, even though we argue for it to be bounded in terms of time constraints, access to information and to some extent, cognition.

7 Conclusion

The Swedish process to enter NATO has been complex and involves several fundamental principles and perspectives. Rationality, neutrality, and the government's ability to manage crises are all central aspects weighed in the decision to approach NATO. The swift decision can to some extent be understood through Bounded Rationality, where factors such as time pressure, cognition, and access to information in certain ways have bounded the ability for full rationality in the Swedish decision-making process to apply for a membership. Although the theory cannot answer every single detail, it emphasizes the answer to the research questions in a sufficient manner. The arguments shifted from presenting NATO membership as a no-option to arguing that whatever is the best possible way for Sweden will be conducted
in the security report SOU:2022: Ds 2022:7. Following, the argument that membership in the alliance would be the best choice for Sweden was justified - in barely 9 weeks. This can arguably be explained through the lens of Bounded Rationality. Based on our findings we argue here that Sweden made their decision for NATO membership based on their limited time and information available, for the situation not to escalate, affected by the media, Russian threats, and international pressure as key factors.

Further, we wish to encourage future researchers to investigate the Swedish NATO process from various aspects, as there is still much to be covered on the topic. We argue the need for an in-depth comparison to the Finnish process through a discourse analysis is necessary, and conduct a discourse analysis on the sphere of the NATO debate, for example through Framing Theory. Another encouragement to future researchers is to apply the concept of Democratic Legitimacy to the Swedish NATO process, and such in accordance with Sweden’s decision to exclude a referendum on the issue, together with the major shift in stance by the government entering the election on other promises. A comprehensive discourse analysis of the political parties in the Parliament is also something that needs to be covered.

With some final words, we argue the theory of Bounded Rationality is highly important to consider within governmental decision-making processes, to understand how these factors can affect a country's future development. In this case, Sweden was subject to a strained ability to make a rational decision, leaving us awaiting the outcomes in terms of peace, security, conflict, and development. However, can you ever avoid being bound by rationality in decisions?
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