

Research note

**Gender, Sexuality and Emotion in
Visual Representations of Sweden Joining NATO**

Emma Rosengren

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Abstract

This research note introduces gender and feminist theory as important tools for understanding international relations (IR), and uses snapshots from my ongoing research project on gender and disarmament in Swedish security policy during the post-Cold War period to exemplify what feminist contributions to the field can look like. Analyzing media visuals about Sweden's relationship with NATO during 2022–2023, I argue that such sources draw on well-known societal stereotypes about, for example, gender to make sense to their audiences. The visuals included in this study contribute to destabilize associations between security policy, national identity and masculinity from Cold War Sweden by portraying Swedish politicians as female brides ready to marry male NATO representatives and thereby gain protection within what has previously been conceptualized as a gendered NATO family. Both human bodies and emotions related to fear contribute to make meaning about such representations.

Keywords

Gender, NATO, feminist IR, media visuals

About the author

Emma Rosengren (PhD) is a researcher in international relations at the Department of Economic History and International Relations at Stockholm University, Sweden. She is also an affiliated researcher at the Hans Blix Centre for the History of International Relations at Stockholm University. Her research interests include historical and contemporary disarmament, historical perspectives in IR, and feminist and intersectional theory.

1. Introduction

This research note provides observations and reflections from my ongoing research about gender and disarmament in Swedish security policy during the post-Cold War period. Departing from feminist theory in international relations (IR), my research project elaborates on the interrelation between two key features of Swedish foreign and security policy from a feminist perspective: policy on disarmament on the one hand, and gender equality on the other. In this note I focus on how gender was a key feature of media visuals about Sweden applying for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, an alliance reliant on nuclear weapons.

In the aftermath of Russia's full scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Sweden, together with its Nordic neighbor Finland, applied for membership in NATO. This constitutes the most fundamental security shift in the Baltic Sea region since the end of the Cold War. Sweden's eventual membership will put an end to its historical policy of armed neutrality and military non-alignment, a central feature of Cold War security policy and national identity in Sweden.¹ Furthermore, joining an alliance reliant on nuclear weapons has been argued to challenge Sweden's historical legacy as an advocate for nuclear disarmament.² In my previous research I have analyzed how Swedish national identity, the policy of armed neutrality, and nuclear disarmament advocacy during the Cold War were co-constructed with societal notions of masculinity.³ The decision to apply for NATO membership thereby opens up the re-negotiation of how national identity has been gendered as masculine in the past. In this research note, I analyze comics and other visuals published in Swedish media during 2022–2023 to show how gender, sexuality and emotion contribute to make meaning about NATO membership at the societal level.⁴

1 On Swedish neutrality and national identity, see Bjereld, Ulf, Johansson, Alf W. & Molin, Karl. *Sveriges säkerhet och världens fred: svensk utrikespolitik under kalla kriget*. Stockholm: Santérus, 2008; Lundin, Per & Stenlås, Niklas. "Technology, State Initiative and National Myths in Cold War Sweden. An introduction". In *Science for Welfare and Warfare. Technology and State Initiative in Cold War Sweden*, Lundin et al (ed). Sagamore Beach: Science History Publications, 2010; Cronqvist, Marie. "Survival in the welfare cocoon: the culture of civil defense in Cold War Sweden". In *Cold War cultures: perspectives on eastern and western European societies*. Vowinckel et al (ed). New York: Berghahn, 2012.

2 This was raised as an argument against Swedish NATO membership by, for example, former disarmament diplomats such as Rolf Ekéus. See "Ett Nato-medlemskap kan bli en historisk tragedi för Sverige". *Dagens Nyheter*, 2022-05-10 <https://www.dn.se/kultur/rolf-ekesus-ett-natomedlemskap-kan-bli-en-historisk-tragedi-for-sverige/>

3 Rosengren, Emma. *Gendering nuclear disarmament: identity and disarmament in Sweden during the Cold War*. Diss. Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 2020; Rosengren, Emma. "Gendering Sweden's nuclear renunciation: a historical analysis". *International Affairs*. Vol. 98, No. 4, July 2022b: 1231–1248.

4 Preliminary analysis of such sources has been made in Rosengren, Emma. "Sweden is ready to marry into NATO –but at what cost?". *International Affairs blog*. 2022c <https://medium.com/international-affairs-blog/sweden-is-ready-to-marry-into-nato-but-at-what-cost-8f318cbab817>

Since the research is at an early stage, I have only studied a small sample of visuals collected from some of the larger newspapers in Sweden, and Swedish state television.

As a genre, comics and media visuals often draw on simplified notions of what they are addressing. By turning complex and often serious topics into something laughable, this genre also exposes power relations in various forms. The context in which such sources are published is crucial to their interpretation. If the audience does not understand or relate to what is depicted in the image, it becomes rather pointless. This kind of material is therefore likely to draw on well-known societal stereotypes to make sense. Such stereotypes in turn reflect widespread assumptions about gender, nation, and sexuality, among other things, in the context in which they were published. Hence, media visuals are likely to draw on, and thereby reproduce, well-known societal stereotypes to make sense to their audiences, while also probably going slightly to the extreme.⁵

The following section introduces feminist theory in IR, followed by a background section introducing gender dimensions of Swedish security policy during and after the Cold War. Then follows an analysis of media visuals and a concluding discussion of the findings. The paper introduces work in progress, and only includes a limited number of visuals and preliminary analysis. A more in-depth study of additional sources will eventually shed further light on the topics discussed.

2. Feminist IR

Feminist and gender approaches to international security include a broad spectrum of research agendas, ranging from empirically oriented investigations of women as actors and collectives, to deconstruction of key concepts such as security and protection. Early feminist work challenged a preoccupation with men in traditional approaches to IR. Arguing that a single-handed focus on powerful elites and state leaders brings about a biased focus on men as actors, feminist scholars called for a research agenda which took the lives of women seriously. While women have been engaged in a variety of activities in IR, their work has often been overlooked and/or dismissed. For example, feminist IR pioneer Cynthia Enloe has shown that while international diplomacy has historically been marked by an overrepresentation of men, women have made crucial contributions in the field of diplomacy in reproductive capacities (as wives, hostesses for private dinner parties, and caregivers to the children of male diplomats), but such work has rarely been recognized as of political relevance.⁶ An explicit focus on women makes it possible to gain a richer understanding of that which has previously been ignored, and about the contributions of both men and women.

5 Rosengren, Emma. "På bar gärning". *Historisk tidskrift*, nr. 2 2022a, 213–217.

6 Enloe, Cynthia. *Bananas, beaches and bases: making feminist sense of international politics*. London: Pandora, 1989.

While feminist IR has evolved since the early feminist critique of the discipline, and while important gender history has been written about the diverse contributions of women in international politics, more recent feminist work has had an increased focus on the analytical concept of gender rather than an empirical focus on the categories men and women. Gender refers to the socially constructed and perceived differences between the sexes, the various meanings associated with femininities and masculinities in specific contexts.⁷ What it means to be masculine or feminine, or to deviate from this binary distinction, varies across time and space. When masculinity is constructed in a certain manner, it is simultaneously differentiated from the characters of its opposite Other(s), from femininity or from other forms of masculinity.⁸ That means that gender is relationally constructed, constantly in the making, and (re)constructed in social relations and historical processes.

Gender is also a central category for understanding social hierarchies and power relations. For example, characteristics such as strength, rationality, production, and the public have historically been associated with certain masculinities and privileged over assumed feminine characteristics, such as weakness, emotion, reproduction, and the private.⁹ Gender also serves as a symbolic system which shapes our understandings of phenomena beyond male and female, masculine and feminine.¹⁰ Furthermore, gender intersects with other societal power relations, such as ethnicity and sexuality. For example, western representations of nations often resemble descriptions of a conservative and heterosexual nuclear family ideal, involving active men as protectors of caring women in need of protection. This traditional representation of collective national identity relies on the intersection of gender, nation, and sexuality as manifest in the nuclear family ideal.¹¹ Hence, there is a need to investigate how masculinized and feminized meanings, as well as other power relations, have in fact been at the heart of things that are conventionally thought of as ‘neutral’¹², such as security and nuclear alliance politics.

7 Scott, Joan Wallach. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

8 Rosengren, 2020.

9 Särämä, Saara. *Junk feminism and nuclear wannabees: collaging parodies of Iran and North Korea*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2014.

10 Cohn, Carol. “Sex and death in the rational world of defence intellectuals”. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Vol. 12, no. 4, 1987; Cohn, Carol. “War, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War”. In *Gendering War Talk*. Cooke Miriam G. & Wollacott, Angela, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

11 Collins, Patricia Hill. “It’s All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation”. *Hypatia*. Vol. 13, no. 3, 1998; Nagel, Joane. “Masculinity and nationalism, Gender and sexuality in the making of nations”. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Vol. 21, no. 2, 1998; Young, Iris Marion. “The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State”. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Vol. 29, no. 1, 2003.

12 Wendt, Maria & Åse, Cecilia. *Gendering Military Sacrifice*. London: Routledge, 2019.

The analysis in this research note draws on literature which shows how gender is an integral feature of both security policy and national identity. For example, a fundamental logic in international security concerns how the security-seeking behavior of states has privileged military strategies and armament. Feminists have shown how such policies can be understood in terms of a gendered, and sexualized, nation-family analogy. In her study of the “logic of masculinist protection”, political scientist Iris Marion Young shows that both family ideals and militarized security policies in the US after 9/11 have reproduced heterosexual stereotypes about masculine protection and feminine vulnerability.¹³ In the past, the NATO alliance has frequently been described in language that resembles a gendered nuclear family, with the US as the male protector and the allies as women or children.¹⁴ Such representations rely on the intersection of gender and heterosexuality as manifest in the nuclear family ideal.¹⁵ Within the logic of masculinized protection, the “good man” uses weapons to secure both women in his family and national territories marked by female bodies, such as “Mother Svea” in Sweden and the Finnish Maid “Suomi-neito” in Finland.¹⁶ Furthermore, emotion is a necessary but often neglected component of the protection myth. Without representations of fear of a threatening other, there is no one to protect/be protected from. Without notions of national pride and honor, there is little to protect. Hence, both human bodies and emotions contribute to the manifestation of collective communities, and thereby identities.¹⁷ This theoretical departure suggests an analysis of how gender, sexuality and emotion contribute to make meaning in visual representations of Sweden’s relationship with NATO.

3. Background

Swedish national identity after the Second World War rested on neutrality and non-alignment, on the one hand, and the welfare state and modernity, on the other.¹⁸ For example, the Swedish state sought security in external relations through the neutrality

13 Young, 2003.

14 Costigliola, Frank. “The Nuclear Family: Tropes of Gender and Pathology in the Western Alliance”. *Diplomatic History*. Vol. 21, No. 2, 1997.

15 Collins, 1998. See also Nagel, 1998; McClintock, Anne. “Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family”. *Feminist Review*. No. 44, 1993: 61–80; Yuval-Davis, Nira. “Women, Citizenship and Difference”. *Feminist Review*. No. 57, 1997: 4–27.

16 On Mother Svea, see Eduards, Maud. *Kroppspolitik. Om moder Svea och andra kvinnor*. Stockholm: Atlas, 2007. On the Finnish Maid, see Valenius, Johanna. *Undressing the maid: gender, sexuality and the body in the construction of the Finnish nation*. Diss. University of Turku, 2004.

17 Ahmed, Sara. *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

18 af Malmborg, Mikael. *Neutrality and state-building in Sweden*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001; Agius, Christine. *The social construction of Swedish neutrality: challenges to Swedish identity and sovereignty*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006; Lundin & Stenlås 2010.

policy in combination with comparatively large national armed forces, and security in internal relations through a strong welfare state infused by modernistic ideals.¹⁹ Swedish military expenditure was among the highest per capita in Europe, considerably larger than in most NATO member states.²⁰ The armed dimension of neutrality was a central feature of Cold War nation building and relied on a conviction, and practice, that it was a masculine duty to protect the nation through the policy of male conscription.²¹ Hence, while Sweden remained outside of military alliances, its security policy relied on notions of masculinized military protection in a classical – yet defensive – sense.²²

The post-Cold War period is characterized by parallel tracks in both Swedish and international security. After the end of the Cold War, Sweden decreased its military expenditure, initiated women's voluntary conscription, and advocated a broadened approach to security in international affairs. During the 1990s, gender equality evolved as a central pillar of Swedish foreign policy and national identity,²³ and the Women, Peace and Security agenda, which took form at the international arena from 2000, received strong support in Sweden.²⁴ In 2014, the Swedish government declared a feminist foreign policy which lasted until 2022 when it was abandoned by the present government.²⁵ Hence, a broadened approach to security, including gender equality, was a central feature of security policy and national identity.

In parallel with the above, however, Sweden increased its military cooperation with NATO and its allies. By signing a cooperation agreement with NATO in 1994 (Partnership for Peace), and joining the European Union in 1995, Sweden embarked on a path towards increased military transatlantic cooperation and western European integration.²⁶ A renewed focus on military security in the 21st century, including the US led war on terror after the 9/11 attacks, and Russia's military interventions in neighboring countries, weakened a more

19 Cronqvist, 2012.

20 Agrell, Wilhelm. *Fredens illusioner. Det svenska nationella försvarets nedgång och fall 1988–2009*. Stockholm: Atlantis, 2010.

21 On the historical roots of male conscription in Sweden, see Sundevall, Fia. *Det sista manliga yrkesmonopolet: genus och militärt arbete i Sverige 1865 – 1989*. Stockholm: Makadam, 2011. On post-Cold War developments, see Kronsell, Annika. *Gender, sex and the postnational defense: militarism and peacekeeping*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

22 On armed neutrality and gender, see Rosengren, 2020: Chapter 3.

23 Towns, Ann. "Paradoxes of (in)equality: Something is rotten in the gender equal state of Sweden". *Cooperation and Conflict: Journal of the Nordic International Studies Association*. Vol. 37, No. 2, 2002.

24 Holvikivi, Aiko & Reeves, Audrey. "Women, Peace and Security after Europe's 'refugee crisis'". *European Journal of International Security*. Vol. 5, No. 2, 2020.

25 Aggestam, Karin, Bergman Rosamond, Annika & Kronsell, Annika. "Theorising feminist foreign policy". *International Relations*. Vol. 33, No. 1, 2019; Aggestam, Karin & Bergman-Rosamond, Annika. "Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy in the Making: Ethics, Politics, and Gender". *Ethics & International Affairs*. Vol. 30, No. 3, 2016.

26 Rainio-Niemi, Johanna. *Routledge Studies in Modern History: Ideological Cold War: the Politics of Neutrality in Austria and Finland*. Taylor & Francis, 2014.

comprehensive approach to security. After Russia's military annexation of Crimea in 2014, both Finland and Sweden signed a comprehensive defense agreement (Värdlandsavtalet) with NATO.²⁷ Shortly after Russia launched its full-scale military intervention in Ukraine in 2022, both countries applied for full NATO membership. Before this, public opinion polls favored sustained non-alignment and there was no parliamentary majority for NATO membership in either country.²⁸

4. Gender, sexuality and emotion in media visuals

Following Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Swedish politicians increasingly questioned the policy of non-alignment, arguing that the war in Ukraine demonstrated the urgent need for Swedish NATO membership.²⁹ Ulf Kristersson, then leader of the conservative opposition in parliament, and now Prime Minister of Sweden, said: "No one doubts for a second where we belong. But we do not have NATO protection if things would go bad".³⁰ While not explicitly stated in this quote, he argued that Sweden belongs with the western group. Previous research has shown how identity has indeed been a central feature of Finnish and Swedish debates about NATO after Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, and how the belonging to the western sphere was a core element of arguments in favor of NATO.³¹ Hence, Kristersson's positioning of Sweden as part of the western group was not a new feature of identity representations.

While conservatives in Sweden argued in favor of NATO membership, the ruling Social Democrat government was not yet convinced. In March 2022, former Social Democrat Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson said: "If Sweden would choose to submit a NATO application in these circumstances we would further destabilize the situation in Europe."³² The historical tradition of non-alignment was represented to serve Swedish, and international, security interests well. Shortly thereafter, however, on the 16th of May 2022, Andersson and her Social Democrat government had changed position. Standing side by side with Ulf Kristersson at a press conference, Andersson declared that Sweden—together

27 Englebrect, Kjell, Holmberg, Arita & Ångström, Jan (ed.). *Svensk säkerhetspolitik i Europa och världen*. Stockholm: Norstedts juridik, 2015; Forsberg, Thuomas. "Finland and NATO: Strategic Choices and Identity Conceptions". In *The European Neutrals and NATO: Non-alignment, Partnership, Membership?* Cottey et al (ed). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

28 Rainio-Niemi, 2014.

29 Moderaterna, "Ukrainas sak är även vår", <https://moderaterna.se/nyhet/ukrainas-sak-ar-aven-var/>

30 "Nato-medlemskap en fråga på liv och död", *Dagens Nyheter*, 2022-02-27, <https://www.dn.se/sverige/kristersson-nato-medlemskap-en-fraga-pa-liv-och-dod/>

31 On Sweden, see Hagström, Linus. "Text and body in the Swedish NATO debate". *Cooperation and Conflict*. Vol. 56, No. 2, 2021. On Finland, see Aunesluoma, Juhana & Rainio-Niemi, Johanna. "Neutrality as Identity? Finland's Quest for Security in the Cold War". *Journal of Cold War Studies*. Vol. 18, No. 4, 2016.

32 "Nato-medlemskap skulle destabilisera säkerhetsläget", *Sveriges Television*, 2022-03-08, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/andersson-om-nato-medlemskap-skulle-destabilisera-sakerhetslaget>

with Finland—intended to apply for NATO membership.³³ A majority in parliament, including the populist right wing Swedish democrats who had been against NATO membership until recently, supported this decision. Only the green and the left parties were against joining NATO. While both Finland’s and Sweden’s decisions to apply for NATO membership can be understood as hasty, a closer look at continuities and changes over a longer time period shows that they are, in fact, the continuity of a security policy path which evolved during the mid-1990s. In this process, national identity representations in both Finland and Sweden have been increasingly associated with notions of belonging in the western group.³⁴

While Sweden’s ties with NATO have been strengthened over a longer period of time, the decision to apply for membership last year still appeared as sudden and perhaps somewhat dramatic. Such events are often the theme of visual media representations such as satire sketches and comics, and such images often draw on gendered stereotypes to make sense to their audiences.³⁵ A closer look at visual media representations of Sweden joining NATO shows how Swedish politicians were represented in a feminized position. Shortly before the Swedish government announced its intention to join NATO, one of the largest newspapers in Sweden described how the country was “being prepared for ‘NATO’s wedding vows’”.³⁶

Image 1. NATO’s wedding vows



Source: Krutmeijer, Malin. “Sverige är alltså en rodnande brud, redo att ge upp sin oskuld för den virile herr Nato?”. *Sydsvenskan*. 2022-05-12, <https://www.sydsvenskan.se/2022-05-12/sverige-ar-alltsa-en-rodnande-brud-redo-att-ge-upp-sin-oskuld-for-den-virile-herr-nato>

33 “Klart Sverige ska söka medlemskap i NATO”, *Dagens Industri*, 2022-05-16, <https://www.di.se/nyheter/klart-sverige-ska-soka-medlemskap-i-nato/>

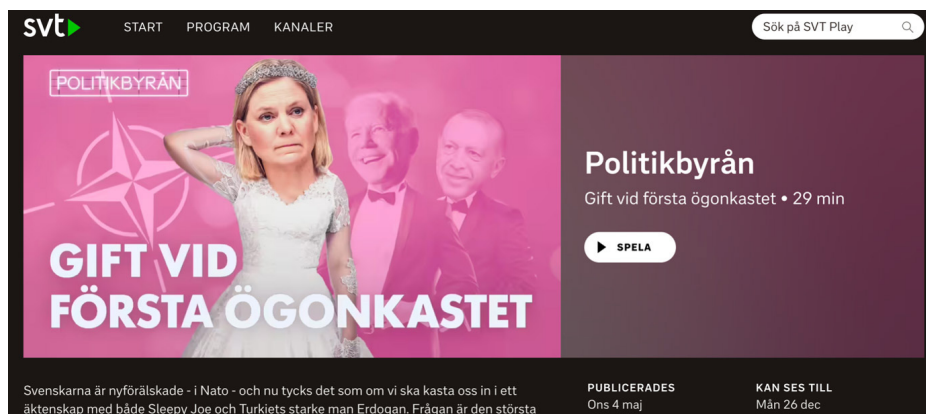
34 Jonter, Thomas and Rosengren, Emma. “Advocating nuclear disarmament as NATO members. Lessons from the past and possible routes ahead for Finland and Sweden”. Forthcoming.

35 Rosengren, 2022a.

36 Krutmeijer, Malin. “Sverige är alltså en rodnande brud, redo att ge upp sin oskuld för den virile herr Nato?”. *Sydsvenskan*. 2022-05-12, <https://www.sydsvenskan.se/2022-05-12/sverige-ar-alltsa-en-rodnande-brud-redo-att-ge-upp-sin-oskuld-for-den-virile-herr-nato>

The above image portrays a heterosexual bridal couple in front of former Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. By positioning a bridal couple in the middle of this collage, Sweden's NATO application is represented as a personal relationship, where Sweden is a woman and Stoltenberg, a symbol of NATO, is a man. Domestic imagery, gender and sexuality are key in such representations. Similar representations were made elsewhere. One talk show from Swedish state television described the issue thus: "The Swedes are newly in love—with NATO—and now it seems like we will throw ourselves into a marriage both with Sleepy Joe and the strong man of Turkey, Erdogan".³⁷ The screenshot below displays the Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson in a white wedding dress in front of the US President Joe Biden, Turkish President Recep Erdogan, and the NATO logo.

Image 2. Married at first sight



Source: Screenshot from Sveriges television. Politikbyrå. Gift vid första ögonkastet. 2022-05-04, <https://www.svtplay.se/video/35174147/politikbyran/politikbyran-gift-vid-forsta-ogonkastet>

With a humorous undertone, the above descriptions also point to one of the key barriers to joining NATO for Sweden—the Erdogan dilemma. With the signing of NATO's wedding vows in his hand, Erdogan has repeatedly threatened not to approve Sweden's NATO application if certain criteria, including the extradition of 73 people blacklisted by the Turkish regime, are not fulfilled.³⁸ While Swedish politicians have continually

37 "Politikbyrå. Gift vid första ögonkastet". *Sveriges television*. 2022-05-04, <https://www.svtplay.se/video/35174147/politikbyran/politikbyran-gift-vid-forsta-ogonkastet>

38 "Erdogan warns Turkey could still block Finland and Sweden's accession to Nato", *The Guardian*, 2022-06-30, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/30/erdogan-warns-turkey-could-still-block-finland-and-swedens-accession-to-nato>

declared their willingness to follow the demands of the Turkish president, traveling to Ankara to ensure their best intentions, Erdogan does not seem to be convinced. Recent protests in Sweden against Erdogan's regime, including the hanging of an Erdogan doll outside Stockholm city hall by pro-Kurd Rojava committees, caused strong reactions in Turkey.³⁹ The burning of a Koran outside the Turkish embassy in Stockholm by right-wing extremist Rasmus Paludan added fuel to the fire. Following these protests, on the 23rd of January 23, 2023, Erdogan declared that he will not support Sweden's NATO application.⁴⁰

During the Cold War, Swedish politicians associated non-alignment and neutrality with a responsibility to criticize other states for violations against human rights and other behavior deemed wrong by Swedish decision makers. Olof Palme's critique of the US during the Vietnam War, which led to tense diplomatic relations between Sweden and the US, is perhaps the most well-known example.⁴¹ While Palme was criticized by US elites and their allies, he received strong support at the national level, and he paved the way for a new era of active Swedish foreign policy. Nuclear disarmament engagement was a core feature of this policy direction.⁴² This historical context is important for understanding contemporary media representations of Swedish politicians and their position vis-à-vis Erdogan. Shortly after the Erdogan doll was hung outside the city hall in Stockholm, it was condemned by conservative Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson. According to Kristersson, it should be understood as an act of sabotage against Sweden's NATO membership.⁴³ His reaction caused strong critique in Sweden. For example, the left-wing newspaper *Flamman* announced a call and competition for the best satire sketch of Erdogan. The winning contribution was displayed not only in *Flamman*, but in several other magazines, including liberal ones, acting in solidarity with the initiative.⁴⁴ In a comic in *Aftonbladet*, one of the largest newspapers in Sweden, Kristersson was represented in a rather disgraceful position:

39 "Turkiet kallade upp Sveriges ambassadör efter dock-protest", *Aftonbladet*, 2023-01-12, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/3E5P7L/turkiet-kallade-upp-sveriges-ambassador-efter-erdogan-docka>

40 "Erdogan: Sverige får inget stöd från Turkiet", *Aftonbladet*, 2023-01-23, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/8J9bxG/erdogan-sverige-far-inget-stod-fran-turkiet>

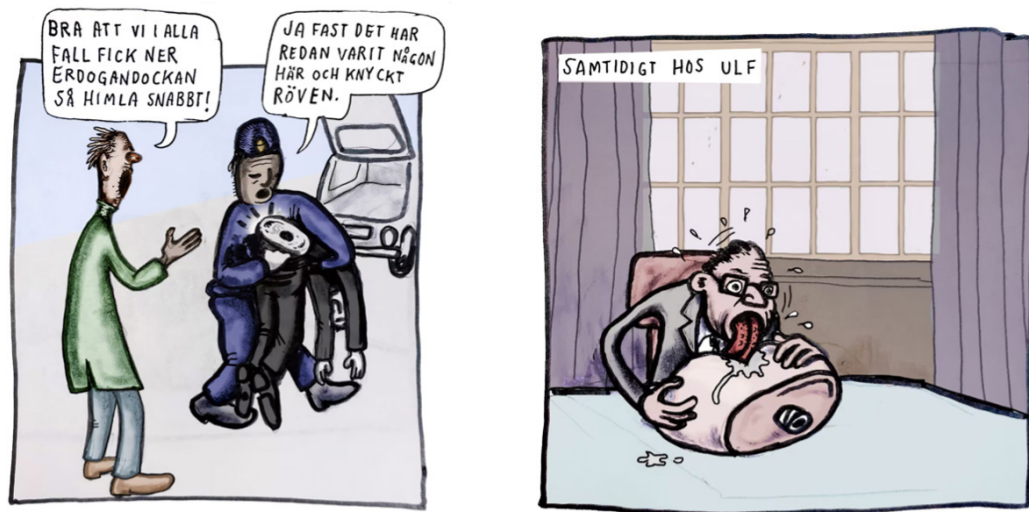
41 Östberg, Kjell. *I takt med tiden: Olof Palme 1927–1969*. Stockholm: Leopard, 2008

42 Jonter, Thomas. *The key to nuclear restraint: the Swedish plans to acquire nuclear weapons during the Cold War*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; Rosengren 2020.

43 "Otroligt grovt – ett sabotage", TV4, 2023-01-13, <https://www.tv4.se/artikel/zo8ZX5pIBEypGDAQMvUV1/otroligt-grovt-ett-sabotage>

44 "The winner of *Flamman*'s satire competition: 'Erdogan devours his own people'", *Flamman*, 2023-01-24, <http://flamman.se/a/the-winner-of-flammans-satire-competition-erdogan-devours-his-own-people>

Image 3. Ulf Kristersson and the Erdogan Doll



Source: Lundkvist, Pontus, “Vad hände egentligen med Erdogan-dockan?”, Aftonbladet 2023-01-20. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/xgOnV8/pontus-lundkvist-om-erdogan-och-kristersson>

In the image to the left, the man to the left tells the police officer: “Great that at least we managed to get the Erdogan doll down so quickly.” The police officer replies: “Yes, but someone has already been here stealing his butt”. The caption in the image to the right reads as follows: “Meanwhile, at Ulf’s place”. In this image, we see the Swedish Prime Minister Kristersson licking Erdogan’s butt, drawing on the Swedish expression for kissing up (slicka röv). Kristersson and other Swedish politicians were repeatedly accused of kissing up to the Turkish President in the interest of NATO membership. In these illustrations, Kristersson is represented in a demasculinizing manner, and notions of shame contribute to make meaning about Sweden’s relationship with the Turkish regime. Eager to please Erdogan and thereby convince him to let Sweden into the NATO family, Swedish decision-makers are represented in a disgraceful position.

On the 24th of January the prime minister, foreign minister and defense minister held a joint press conference. The prime minister stressed that while freedom of speech gives everyone the right to express their opinions, he also urged everybody to consider that Sweden now faces the most serious security challenge since the Second World War. Furthermore, getting Sweden’s NATO application approved together with Finland’s was described as the most important task of the government.⁴⁵ With Erdogan approving

45 Regeringen, “Pressträff med statsminister Ulf Kristersson, utrikesminister Tobias Billström och försvarsminister Pål Jonson”, 2023-01-24, <https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2023/01/presstraff-med-statsminister-ulf-kristersson-utrikesminister-tobias-billstrom-och-forsvarsminister-pal-jonson/>

Finland's application on the 30th of March 2023, this task was not fulfilled.⁴⁶ Continued analysis of media representations following this announcement remains to be made.

5. Conclusions

This research note has introduced feminist theory and gender analysis as important tools for understanding various dimensions of topics related to international security. In the above media visuals, gender, sexuality and emotion clearly say something about Sweden's relationship with NATO, and with the Turkish regime. While previous research has shown how Swedish non-alignment and nuclear disarmament advocacy was co-constructed with notions of masculinity in the past, Sweden is now represented in a feminized/demasculinized position, either as a heterosexual female bride about to marry a male protector, or as a male politician kissing up to the Turkish president with homosexual undertones. NATO representatives are relationally represented as men. Hence, conservative symbols and metaphors about heterosexuality and gender contributed to make meaning about Sweden's relationship with NATO.

Although seemingly remote from security policy, symbols and metaphors from the private sphere, such as the heterosexual marriage analogies above, are often used to describe complex issues, such as NATO membership, in international security. In 1997, historian Frank Costigliola showed how the NATO nuclear alliance has been described in language that resembles a gendered nuclear family in the past, with the United States as the male protector and the allies as women or children.⁴⁷ As a non-aligned state, Sweden was not part of the NATO nuclear family. In media descriptions of Sweden joining NATO, however, it seems like Sweden is a woman about to marry into the western nuclear family. Notions of fear and shame, the need for masculine protection from international allies, and belonging to the western sphere are central features of such representations.

While the above analysis shows how gender, bodies and emotion have contributed to make meaning about Sweden's relationship with NATO in a limited set of media visuals, it does not explain the various processes that led to Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership, nor the consequences NATO membership will have for Sweden's possibility to advocate for nuclear disarmament in the future. Those are the topics of another study.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, it provides a snapshot of how national identity is being renegotiated in the present.

46 Gardner, Frank & Durbin, Adam. "Turkey approves Finland Nato membership bid". <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65132527> available 2023-03-31

47 Costigliola, 1997: 163–183.

48 These issues are explored in Jonter and Rosengren, forthcoming.