

Executive Summary

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Neutrality, alignment and democracy in times of war: A closer look at the Finnish and Swedish NATO accession processes.

Panel Discussion in cooperation with the Ministry of Defence

Panelists:

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Moderation:

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was followed by widespread reactions and consequences within Europe, including the expansion of NATO's eastern border. Despite their former status as neutral countries, Finland and Sweden conjointly applied for membership in NATO on 18 May 2022 to ensure national security and deter Russian aggression and expansionism in the Baltic Sea region. NATO member states have since ratified Finland's membership (4 April 2023) while Sweden's membership is awaiting ratification by the Turkish and Hungarian parliaments (as of 5 June 2023). Although Sweden's membership remains uncertain, the unexpected and swiftly-agreed application of both Nordic countries signifies a prompt change, which raises important questions about how to anchor and ground security policy in democratic societies. Against this background, the expert panel reflected upon the status of neutrality and military (non)alignment policies within the context of increasing geopolitical tensions in Europe, with a particular focus on the democratic legitimacy of security policy. The discussion covered four key areas: the history of neutrality; catalysts driving Finland's and Sweden's NATO applications; the democratic process and lastly; what these processes might teach Europe's remaining neutrals and reveal about the future of neutrality as a geostrategic position.

From the debate, there are several takeaways and conclusions relevant to policy and decision makers:

- Both Finland's and Sweden's applications were preceded and enabled by decades of intensifying collaboration with NATO. In contrast to Austrian authorities, Swedish and Finnish politicians and policy makers did not utilize the concept 'neutral', but rather 'military non-aligned', when describing their respective countries' defence policies at the time of the application. These factors made NATO membership seem like a *continuation* of previous policies rather than a significant change.
- Neutrality as a policy is however partly distinct from neutrality as national identity. Given that neutrality historically has been closely linked to particularly Swedish national identity, it is likely that the shift came across as more drastic to the broader Swedish public, than it did to policy makers and practitioners.
- The impact of NATO on Swedish and Finnish national security was the main focus of the debate in each country, as politicians argued that NATO membership would deter Russian aggression.
- Panellists stressed that the debate was too short to allow for a comprehensive analysis of alternative security strategies, risks associated with an application and the impact of membership on the war in Ukraine. The impact of NATO's internal differences and disagreements upon the process were also not foreseen, such as the role of Turkey and Hungary in blocking ratification.

- Fear of imminent Russian aggression and further expansion informed the swiftness of the decision in both countries. Panellists stressed that NATO proponents were seen as experts in the public debate, and that opponents were difficult to find and, in some cases, ostracised as ideologues or traitors. Although the application of both countries was preceded by majority votes in both national parliaments and rapid shifts in public opinion in favour of NATO membership, the swiftness of the procedure only allowed for a short and confined democratic discussion. A referendum, or at least a longer public debate, would have facilitated a more pluralistic and inclusive debate, and arguably increased the long-term legitimacy of the decision.
- Sweden's and Finland's accession leave Austria alone as the only neutral EU member State located in the geographical heart of Europe, at a few hundred kilometres from a theatre of war. It raises the question of the relevance and sustainability of a WEP-5 (the "club" of the five neutral/non-aligned Western European NATO partners) reduced to three. It might also force Austria to re-visit and reinvigorate its partnership with NATO, without undermining a neutral status solidly rooted in the nation's history and public opinion.

Introduction

The first part of this event report (headline 1-4) summarizes the panel discussion conveyed on April 24 and expands on its core topics. The final part of the analysis (headline 5) takes its point of departure in the discussions held at the event, expand on the implications of Finland's and Sweden's NATO accession processes for Austria and offer suggestions of how Austria could develop its neutrality policy.

1) The History of Neutrality in Finland & Sweden:

Sweden and Finland adopted policies of 'neutrality' during the Cold War. However, since joining the EU alongside Austria in 1995, policy makers have largely moved away from the term 'neutral' in favour of 'militarily non-aligned'. For Finland, this status has now changed to 'in alliance' since their membership was ratified in April 2023.

Finland:

Finland's neutral stance was enforced in the post-World War II *Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance* between Finland and the Soviet Union, signed in 1948 and repealed in 1992. Via this agreement, Finland had to preserve its neutrality through adequate levels of armament and it could not allow its territory to be employed for military advancement towards the Soviet Union. Finland's Cold War neutrality could thus, similar to Austrian neutrality, be understood as a case of "enforced neutrality" or "neutralization". Vogt stressed that the Finnish principles of pragmatism, continuity and preparedness, born out of the country's experiences during WWII, enabled its swift NATO application and made a policy shift seem like a pragmatic decision to ensure preparedness in the face of a changing situation. Finland's accession to NATO also follows on two decades of enhanced collaboration with the alliance, most notably through the 1994 *Partnership for Peace* and through Finland's contribution NATO-led military operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Sweden:

Sweden's neutrality policy is derived from tradition as opposed to international or bilateral treaties or sanctions. After World War II, Sweden (which unlike its Nordic neighbours was not occupied by either Germany or the Soviet Union) opted to preserve its neutral status. Moreover, if the Finnish understanding of neutrality was more linked to pragmatism, Sweden's understanding of neutrality has

at least at times been more linked to idealism; a commitment to international peace and solidarity and a scepticism towards military solutions to conflict. That being said, the Swedish government covertly collaborated with the western powers during WWII and throughout the Cold War period and began collaborating openly with NATO after the fall of the Soviet Union. Sweden joined NATO's *Partnership for Peace* programme in 1994 and its *Partnership Interoperability Initiative* in 2014. These arrangements, together with Sweden's participation in NATO-led military operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan, meant that Sweden's defence policy and (to a large extent, equipment) was already geared towards NATO at the time of application. Yet, as Hagström reminded us, neutrality as a policy is different from neutrality as national identity. Because Sweden's steps towards NATO were at first, secret and thereafter gradual and scarcely debated, the application arguably appears more like a drastic change of identity than security policy. For those in favour of NATO membership, Sweden's non-alignment policy was portrayed as an immoral and irresponsible stance and accession came to represent a source of pride; Sweden is now aligning closer with the West and taking a larger responsibility for upholding principles of democracy and rule of law. For those opposed to NATO membership, for whom neutrality symbolized idealism and peace, NATO accession rather appeared to represent resignation to great power politics and decreasing autonomy in the international arena.

2) Catalysts of the NATO Process:

The NATO membership applications in both countries was sparked by Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The outbreak of the war induced fear among the public and actualized a debate about Sweden's and Finland's exposure to Russian aggression and expansion in the Baltic Sea Region, which made the Social Democratic Party in both countries (both in government at the time of the application and both traditional NATO-opponents) reconsider their commitment to military non-alignment.

Finland:

Due to its long, shared border with Russia and historical experience of Russian aggression, the Finnish government appears to have led the process towards NATO. This geographical proximity and historical precedence means Finland has more in common with Ukraine than Sweden. Moreover, an attitude of pragmatism and a commitment towards preparedness (in contrast to Sweden's more idealistic commitment to neutrality) influenced the application; NATO membership appeared as the only way to further enhance Finland's military preparedness against a potentially aggressive Russia willing to attack an un-aligned neighbour. Finland's main opposition party in the spring of 2022, the liberal-conservative

National Coalition Party, was already pro NATO-membership. Furthermore, when the then Social Democratic Prime Minister Sanna Marin initiated a process of reconsidering Finland's military non-alignment policy – and her own party's commitment to this policy – in light of the full-scale invasion, her fellow party and coalition-party members generally appears to have acquiesced with little resistance.

Sweden:

In the Swedish context, it is equally clear that Russian aggression in Ukraine influenced the application. However, it was not the only factor. In fact, the then-Social Democratic Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson re-emphasised her support of Sweden's non-alignment policy in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, stating that a Swedish NATO application would further “destabilize” the security situation in Sweden's vicinity. However, pressure from the conservative and liberal pro-NATO opposition, together with signals about an immanent policy shift within the Social Democrats in Finland, sparked an internal review process within the Swedish Social Democrats, eventually leading to a policy shift. When the decision was taken, the Swedish government repeatedly referred to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an event that “changed everything”. Yet, as Hagström reminded us, although the military threat of Russian escalated with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia's aggressions towards its neighbours had already dominated Swedish defence policy since the Georgian invasion in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Despite these testaments of hostility, the Social Democrats preferred non-alignment and bilateral defence cooperation with Finland and favoured NATO member countries over NATO-membership. This reminder further underlines the role of Finland in pushing Sweden towards NATO. Finland's membership not only undermined the bilateral defence collaborations signed between the two Nordic countries, it also defused the old Social Democratic argument that a Swedish membership would be unsoledaric towards Finland, by risk making Finland more exposed to Russia.

3) Analysing the Democratic Process of the NATO Decision:

Both Sweden and Finland are parliamentary democracies and both parliaments voted in favour of NATO accession. However, neither country held a public referendum or a general election between the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, which sparked internal policy shifts within the Social Democrats in both countries, and the parliamentary vote. It was the government and MP's who ultimately drove the process and made the decision. Moreover, Social Democratic supporters in both countries voted for a party opposed to NATO-membership. In Sweden, the Social Democrats were represented by Defence

Minister Peter Hultqvist who openly pledged that he would not participate in Swedish NATO-accession process as late as the fall of 2021. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there was no majority in favour of NATO-membership in either of the countries. However, post-invasion, public opinion polls indicated a rise in support of NATO-membership; with Sweden polling between 50-60% in favour and Finland polling at 70-80% in favour (Spender, 2022).

Hagström and Vogt both stressed that the process was swift and – whilst the decision to apply for membership passed through two democratically elected parliaments – it did not represent an optimal democratic resolution. The debate was dominated by a singular narrative and many key considerations and consequences ultimately were overlooked. This includes the role of Turkey and Hungary in blocking both countries (and in June 2023, still Sweden's) ascension to NATO. Fear of immanent Russian aggression and further expansion in the Baltic Sea region, after a potential quick victory in Ukraine, informed the swiftness of the decision in both countries.

Sweden:

The 349-seat Riksdagen (Swedish Parliament) authorised Sweden's accession to NATO with a 269-37 vote (with 43 absent) on the 22nd March 2023 (The Local Sweden, 2023). Only two of the eight parties in the Swedish parliament voted against the bill: the Left Party and the Green Party. The Left Party and the Green Party also called for a popular vote regarding NATO membership. This call was disregarded. Generally, debate within society was limited and those against NATO were not as vocal as before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The public opinion shifted in favour of NATO membership at around the same time as the Social Democrats altered their position and rallied behind the conservative and liberal opposition, meaning that it cannot be argued that a shift in public opinion drove the process. Hagström stated that the debate within Sweden was singular, that news media struggled to find critics willing to go public with their opinions and that voices questioning NATO membership were at risk of being professionally ostracised. NATO opponents were, particularly on social media, positioned as non-experts and ideologues, at best, and as immoral Russian sympathisers or traitors (or 'Putinists'), at worst. This reflects findings from research on the Swedish NATO-debate prior to the war in Ukraine (Hagström 2021). Hagström suggested that a referendum might have facilitated a more pluralistic and inclusive debate, potentially forcing NATO opponents to formulate their arguments and legitimising their rightful position within the debate. A longer debate might also have been able to foresee Turkey's and Hungary's opposition to a Swedish NATO membership and evaluate its respective demands on concessions. It might also have highlighted issues that was largely silenced, such as the impact of a membership on the war in Ukraine as well as the continued risk of

security and alliance dilemmas, including the risk of being entrapped in foreign wars and of being abandoned by allies in case of a foreign invasion.

Finland:

Finnish MPs voted in favour of NATO-accession with a large majority, 184 to 7 vote (one abstention), on 1 March 2023 (Henley, 2023). This was, as highlighted above, preceded by an internal shift particularly within the Social Democratic Party, which reconsidered their anti-NATO stance. According to Vogt, the respect for PM and party leader Marin, who was broadly considered to have managed the COVID-19 pandemic successfully, arguably afforded her great influence over this decision and meant that dissenting voices from within her party were unlikely. Moreover, when President Sauli Niinistö of the liberal-conservative National Coalition Party began to openly advocate that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had changed the circumstances that enabled Finland's non-alignment policy, forcing the country to apply for NATO-membership, a consensus appeared to form among Finnish policy-makers from left to right. Although Vogt did not recall instances of NATO sceptics being ostracised in the same way as in Sweden, he stressed that the debate was one-sided, dominated by NATO-proponents and that it was difficult to form a dissenting opinion. He further stated that the process would have benefited from a more in-depth discussion of alternatives and a lengthier decision-making process to ensure a more robust analysis. Issues not debated in the run-up to Finland's membership application included the long-term implications of accession and the implications of a transition from a soft to hard border between Finland and Russia.

4. Learnings and Considerations from the Process:

Consequently, both experts stated that due to the speediness of the application process, key considerations were overlooked. Crucially, policy makers in both countries appeared surprised when Hungary and Turkey blocked Finland's and (still) Sweden's membership and asked for concessions in different policy areas. Hagström noted that, because NATO proponents in Sweden envisioned NATO-accession as a process where Sweden would be joining force with "like-minded" countries, Turkey's demands on Sweden to e.g. extradite Kurdish citizens, in opposition with Swedish law and democratic principles, could not be foreseen. Both panellists thus agreed that a slower, more widely debated and inclusive process could have provided a more informed decision, which arguably would have been more legitimate in the long term.

These learnings serve as a useful reminder about the importance of debating and democratically anchoring security policy within the public, despite the inherent secrecy of defence planning, and even in exceptional times of war. Moreover, the case of Sweden, where neutrality appears to have shifted from symbolizing morality and international solidarity to symbolizing immorality and naivety in light of Russia's full-scale-invasion of Ukraine, raises important questions to publics and policy makers of other contemporary neutral states, including Austria: Is neutrality a possible or desirable foreign policy posture in times of war? Does it signify an endorsement of inter-state aggression? Or can it provide necessary space for negotiation? And if so how? Arguably, the Swedish shift reminds us that neutrality as a foreign policy posture is neither inherently immoral or moral, but political; it should be argued, contested and debated. Both panel experts did however agree that neutrality will continue to play a role in international relations also in the future, and that it might be a concept worth reinvigorating. Vogt specifically suggested that Finland should follow the example of NATO member Norway and aim to maintain some aspects of its security policy usually associated with neutrality politics, e.g. advocating for (nuclear) disarmament from its position within the alliance. This could be achieved by developing policy to uphold NATO articles 1-3, where international peace is emphasised, rather than only focusing on upholding NATO article 5, stipulating an attack against one member state as an attack against all.

5. Implications for Austrian defence collaborations

Unlike Sweden and Finland, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has not led to a major swift in Austrian public opinion, which still massively supports the country's neutrality. A poll taken in May 2022, just three months into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – and the same month that Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership – showed that only 14% of Austrians favoured doing the same, with an extraordinary 75% opposed. Interestingly, the number of people who consider Austria's neutrality as "very" or "rather important" rose by 10% since 2019. The discourse of fear that has prevailed in Sweden/Finland barely had any impact on Austria.

However, similarly to these two countries, the debate over neutrality vs. NATO accession in Austria has been dominated by a singular narrative. The issue of joining NATO has arisen at most in a couple of TV debates and op-ed, to be immediately buried. For Chancellor Karl Nehammer, Austrian neutrality is "not up for debate"; the then leader of the center-left Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), Pamela Rendi-Wagner, frequently called Vienna's neutrality "non-negotiable." Isolated voices in the conservative ÖVP calling for accession to NATO, doubts about neutrality within the liberal NEOS's, as well as two open letters sent by a large group of prominent Austrians (from business, politics, academia

and civil society), calling on Federal President Alexander van der Bellen to independently examine whether the country's policy of neutrality was fitting for the times, were side-lined.

The lack of a genuine democratic debate over neutrality in Austria might be deemed less consequential because of 1) the continuity in the country's status and position, in opposition to Sweden/Finland (drastic change); and 2) the adequation between the public opinion and most of the political establishment. However, like in Sweden and Finland, several key considerations have been overlooked or insufficiently addressed in Austria and remain as "open questions", such as:

- Austria's "security dilemma": What do "security" and "to be secured" mean for the country?
- Neutrality and its current appropriateness: What does it actually mean? What does it entail? Does it have any real protecting role (i.e., would NATO protect non-member Austria? Does being surrounded by NATO countries imply benefitting from the mutual assistance clause in article 5 of the NATO Treaty)? How is it to be lived?
- The contradictions/ "grey zones" between Austria's neutral stance and its legal obligations to help other European Union member states in the event of conflict (TEU Art. 42(7), TFEU Art. 222).
- The risk of being entangled between "great powers": losing its position as a so-called 'bridge' between Russia and the West, while raising U.S.'s and Allies' doubts and accusations of moral duplicity.

Today, Austria remains on the periphery of the alliance as part of the larger, looser *Partnership for Peace* programme. Two options, which are not mutually exclusive, might allow the country to stretch the "appearance" of neutrality:

- To take profit of the current situation in Eastern Europe and the ongoing NATO "reset" to re-visit and reinvigorate its partnership with the Alliance. The idea would be to move it from a "security taker"/consumer-driven approach towards interest-driven partnership, based on more converging interests but also, from the partner country, political focus and support, proactive engagement and willingness to adequately resource its own efforts. Austria could ultimately reach the same degree of partnership and interoperability with NATO as the non-aligned Sweden and Finland before 2022. This would imply, *inter alia*, becoming an *Enhanced Opportunity Partner* under NATO's *Partnership Interoperability Initiative* (a partner country that makes particularly significant contributions to NATO's operations and other Alliance's objectives).

- To “surf” on the EU’s security “momentum”, in using the full potential of the EU Strategic Compass (March 2022) as well as the 3rd EU-NATO joint declaration (Jan. 2023) which encourages “the fullest possible involvement of the EU members that are not part of the Alliance in its initiatives”.

Finally, Sweden’s and Finland’s accession to NATO raise the issue of the fate of the WEP-5 group (Europe’s Neutral 5, the five Western European NATO partners Austria, Finland, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland). A useful format for consultation until 2022 (Nünlist, 2015), this club of non-aligned states has lost (or is about to lose, when it comes to Sweden) two prominent members and is shrinking to just three: Austria, Ireland, and Switzerland.¹ This questions the WEP-5’s geographical coherence, since Ireland is located at Europe’s North-Western periphery, while further highlighting Austria’s specific location in Europe’s very geographical heart, at a few hundred kilometres from a theatre of war and from NATO deployed combat formations. The issue of the WEP-5 will soon be addressed in a specific oiiip policy paper.

¹ Although Cyprus and Malta are also neutral non-NATO members, they have never participated in the WEP-5. Actually, the only obstacle to the Republic of Cyprus’s accession to NATO is the division of the island and Turkey’s strict obstruction policy.

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