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Identity Continuities, Far-Right Acquiescence, and the “New” and the “Old”: Finnish and Swedish NATO Accession and Neutrality

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Executive Summary

With Finland and Sweden’s accession to NATO, the number of neutral or non-aligned states in the EU has been reduced to three: Austria, Ireland, and Malta. How did Finland and Sweden’s shifts come about? What do these shifting neutrality – alliance membership constellations mean for the concept of neutrality, and for Austria’s position as a neutral state? This paper first examines the Finnish and Swedish debates pertaining to their own respective shifts, with particular attention to the far-right parties in those countries. It argues three things: first, contrary to most commentary, both the Finnish and Swedish policy shifts were underpinned by identity considerations, identities that remain largely the same under NATO membership as under non-alignment. Second, the far right’s acceptance of NATO membership has been a mix of opportunism and broadly engrained views of Russia. Third, particularly in Sweden, neutrality has become seen as a thing of the past, and alliance membership as new and exciting, with possible implications for how neutrality is understood internationally. The paper then examines the state of the neutrality debate in Austria, with particular attention to the notion of neutrality as Austrian identity, the role of the FPÖ, and the potential risks for “neutral Austria” going forward. It concludes with a summary of the paper’s findings; a look at how neutrality in Austria, too, might increasingly be seen as an “old” concept; and by offering examples of how foreign policy concepts have been successfully reimagined in the past.

Zusammenfassung

Mit dem Beitritt Finnlands und Schwedens zur NATO hat sich die Zahl der neutralen oder bündnisfreien Staaten in der EU auf drei reduziert: Österreich, Irland und Malta. Wie kam es zum NATO-Beitritt in Finnland und Schweden? Was bedeuten diese veränderten Konstellationen von Neutralität und Bündnizugehörigkeit für das Konzept der Neutralität und für Österreichs Position als neutraler Staat? In diesem Beitrag werden zunächst die finnischen und schwedischen NATO-Debatten untersucht, mit besonderem Blick auf die rechtsextremen Parteien in diesen Ländern. Dabei werden drei Argumente angeführt: Erstens wurden sowohl der finnische als auch der schwedische Kurswechsel von Identitätserwägungen getragen, und zwar von Identitätserwägungen, die unter der NATO-Mitgliedschaft weitgehend dieselben bleiben wie unter der Blockfreiheit. Zweitens war die Zustimmung der extremen Rechten zur NATO-Mitgliedschaft eine Mischung aus Opportunismus und weit verbreiteten Ansichten über Russland. Drittens wird insbesondere in Schweden die Neutralität als eine Sache der Vergangenheit und die Bündnismitgliedschaft als etwas Neues und Aufregendes angesehen, was sich möglicherweise auf das internationale Verständnis der Neutralität auswirkt. Der Beitrag untersucht dann den Stand der Neutralitätsdebatte in Österreich, mit besonderem Augenmerk auf dem Begriff der Neutralität als österreichische Identität, der Rolle der FPÖ und den potenziellen Risiken für das „neutrale Österreich“.

Der Beitrag endet mit einer Zusammenfassung der Ergebnisse und mit einem Blick darauf, dass Neutralität auch in Österreich zunehmend als „altes“ Konzept gesehen werden könnte als auch mit Beispielen, wie außenpolitische Konzepte in der Vergangenheit erfolgreich umgestaltet wurden.

Keywords:

Neutrality, Identity, Sweden, Finland, Security, Austria, Foreign Policy, NATO, Far-Right

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Introduction

Following Finland’s accession to NATO in April 2023, Sweden became the alliance’s 32nd member on March 7, 2024. In the EU, this reduces the number of neutral or non-aligned states to three: Austria, Ireland, and Malta. What do these developments mean for the remaining European neutrals? There are a number of concrete and foreseeable implications. For example, that Finland and Sweden leave the Partnership for Peace in favor of NATO membership means that they also leave the Western European Partners grouping within the Partnership for Peace, in which the two countries have collaborated with other European neutrals. Yet Finland’s and Sweden’s NATO membership and the debates that unfolded in both countries have arguably also altered the conception of neutrality in the international arena. This paper focuses on the ideas of neutrality and alliance membership; how these concepts are understood, and primarily how they intersect with identity.

Neutrality and alliance membership are not unchangeable concepts; they carry different meanings in different contexts, and these meanings change when actors’ understandings of them change. For Austria, changing understandings of neutrality can have implications for the state’s agency in international relations. For example, it could mean that if neu-

trality is increasingly associated with freeriding, not showing solidarity or other negative attributes, “neutral Austria” might lose international influence. At this juncture of shifting neutrality-alliance constellations in Europe and given the debate in Austria on its own security and role on the world stage, it is worth taking stock of the implications of this development for the concept of neutrality. To that end, this paper first examines the Finnish and Swedish debates pertaining to their own respective shifts, with particular attention to the far-right parties in those countries. It argues three things: first, contrary to most commentary, both the Finnish and Swedish policy shifts were underpinned by identity considerations, identities that remain largely the same under NATO membership as under non-alignment. Second, the far right’s acceptance of NATO membership has been a mix of opportunism and broadly engrained views of Russia. Third, particularly in Sweden, neutrality has become seen as a thing of the past, and alliance membership as new and exciting, with possible implications for how neutrality is understood internationally. The paper then examines the state of the neutrality debate in Austria, with particular attention to the notion of neutrality as Austrian identity, the role of the FPÖ, and the potential risks for “neutral Austria” going forward. It concludes with a summary of the paper’s findings; a look at how neutrality in Austria, too, might increasingly be seen as an “old” concept; and by offering examples of

how foreign policy concepts have been successfully reimagined in the past.

Neutrality and the NATO debate in Finland

Finland’s neutrality stretched back to the Finnish-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, concluded in 1948. At the time, Finland calculated that as long as it could convince the Soviet Union that it did not constitute a threat by potentially becoming occupied by Germany or its allies, it would be able to safeguard its social, economic and political system. The treaty thus stipulated that Finland had to fight if its territory were to be attacked by those countries. While it did not explicitly mention neutrality, the treaty’s preamble affirmed Finland’s aspiration to “stand aside from the contradictions of interests of the Great Powers”, (Sheehan 2013, pp. 129-130) and its Article 4 confirmed a mutual pledge “not to conclude any alliance or join any coalition directed against the other” (Heninen.net 2023). Compared to Swedish neutrality, which, as we shall see, was rather based in an older tradition, the roots of Finnish neutrality bear certain resemblance to that of

Austria in that it involved adopting armed neutrality in exchange for sovereignty through negotiations with the Cold War superpowers.¹

Neutrality guided Finland through the Cold War, and its function remained primarily to manage the country’s difficult position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. A debate on the future role of neutrality first started in the mid-1990s, when NATO announced its Open-Door policy, Finland joined the EU, and Russian democratization stalled. This debate was still a lopsided affair; those who explicitly argued for Finnish NATO membership were few, with the prominent Finnish diplomat Max Jacobson among the more vocal NATO proponents. Most of those considered positive toward NATO rather focused on the need for an open debate on Finland’s options. The Finnish government affirmed that it was not seeking new defense solutions, but the debate resulted in the formulation of the so-called NATO option whereby membership in the future was left open dependent on the security environment. In Tuomas Forsberg’s (2023a) narrative, this first debate was followed by one in the 2000s where the question of membership became largely normalized through support from print

¹ Thanks go out to a reviewer of the paper for pointing this out. James Sheehan (2013, p. 130), for his part, has likened Austrian neutrality to Finnish neutrality due to both being “the product of those two

closely connected developments that dominated Europe’s international history in the postwar era: the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union and the disappearance of Germany as a potential European hegemon”.

media, the foreign policy elite and at least tacitly from the center-right National Coalition Party.

A third debate on neutrality was ignited with Vladimir Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, where some, like then-foreign minister Alexander Stubb, advocated for increased frequency in evaluating Finland’s security policy options. Fundamentally, however, neither Russia’s 2008 Georgia incursion nor its annexation of Crimea in 2014 changed the dominant view that Finnish NATO accession would be provocative in times of crisis. Public opinion remained decidedly against NATO membership (Forsberg, 2023a, pp. 42-46).

The watershed moment in Finland’s NATO debate came with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which, illustratively, the head of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs Mika Aaltola called “Europe’s 9/11 for Finns” (Kauranen and Lehto 2022). At the time of Finland’s NATO application, the government was a coalition of the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People’s Party, with the parliamentary opposition made up by the center-right National Coalition Party, the far-right Finns Party, and the Christian Democratic Party. Out of these, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, only the National Coalition Party and the Swedish People’s Party had been in favor of Finnish NATO membership. After February

24, 2022, all parties in the Finnish parliament acquiesced to NATO membership, a shift that was enabled by rapidly shifting public opinion coupled with a heightened sense of geopolitical vulnerability (Vanhanen 2022). The unity was underscored by the fact that the road toward NATO membership was paved both by Social Democratic prime minister Sanna Marin and President Sauli Niinistö, who prior to his election had been in the National Coalition Party (Fredagsintervjun 2024).

Public opinion changed from 28 percent in favor of NATO membership in January 2022, to 76 percent at the time of the official application in May of the same year. The debate had already started flaring up in January, after Russia had demanded a new security architecture in Europe and that NATO not enlarge further. National Coalition leader Petteri Orpo – himself long in favor – urged members of parliament to all take a position, but the number of those who actually took that step already before the invasion was limited. One of the key actors in Finland’s security policy, President Sauli Niinistö – who had been in the National Coalition Party until his presidency – had long been perceived as NATO-friendly. Still, after the invasion in February, he emphasized that while Russia’s “mask” had now come off, there was no current threat to Finland, and that the shift in public opinion was to be expected (Forsberg 2023a, pp. 46-47). After meeting with Joe Biden in the beginning of March, he

urged “cool heads” and “assessing carefully the impact of the changes that have already taken place and of those that might still happen” (Kauranen and Lehto 2022).

Previously during his presidency, Niinistö had argued that the Finnish people had to be in favor for Finland to join NATO. With public opinion having shifted radically since February 2022, that condition for Finnish NATO membership was seen as having been fulfilled (Forsberg 2023a, p. 47). A domestic political dialogue was initiated, where the political parties held internal debates to gain legitimacy for what was seen as a decision in the making to apply for membership. Tuomas Forsberg (2023b, p. 92) has called the process after which Finland decided to apply a demonstration of a “behavioral tendency to show unity in questions of national security”. Finland’s experience during World War II, and as a state next to a potentially aggressive neighbor during the Cold War, had engrained a lesson to reach unity in Finnish collective memory that came of use during the domestic NATO debate.

Security or Identity? Security as Identity?

The Finnish experience of leaving neutrality and joining NATO has been described as being based in careful consideration of its security interests, particularly in comparison to how the

debate played out in Sweden, where it is said to have focused more on identity issues (Forsberg 2023, p. 92). A broadly constructivist perspective would, on the other hand, see identities as constitutive of interests – not as two separate variables where one matters more than the other depending on context. It is indeed true that the Finnish discourse on NATO in 2022 focused primarily on security issues, as opposed to, for example, what kind of country Finland should be. For example, prime minister Marin stated to parliament on May 16, 2022, that “above all, by joining NATO, Finland would strengthen its own security” (Finnish Government 2022), and president Niinistö stated at a press conference with Marin after the decision to apply had been made that “the result will be a protected Finland that is part of a strong, stable, and responsible Nordic region” (President of the Republic of Finland 2022). While these statements indeed emphasize that Finland will be securer inside of NATO than outside, particularly the second seems to play with identity: Finland as a strong, stable, responsible, and Nordic country.

Moreover, the intense focus on security itself, on unity in the face of an adversarial environment, and on a pragmatic stance - which was often the way Finnish neutrality was narrated in the Cold War - can be seen as part of identity construction. Contesting what they call the dominant story on Finnish neutrality, namely that it was a pragmatic choice that had nothing

to do with identity, Juhana Aunesluoma and Johanna Rainio-Niemi (2016, p. 59) argue that it did. As the idea that Finland was being “pragmatically” neutral was repeated again and again, they contend, it took on the character of a political identity. Newly elected president Alexander Stubb wrote in his manifesto for the presidential election of 2024 that “the will to defend our country is fundamental to our independence and is a uniting factor”, and that “for us, foreign and security policy has always been an existential question” (Kokoomus 2023). It is easy to understand what Stubb is referring to: a feeling of physical vulnerability given Finland’s long border with and history of having been invaded by Russia. At the same time, that feeling does not emerge independent of politics; it is created and reproduced in political narratives exactly like Stubb’s, narratives that have, understandably, increased as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Forsberg’s “behavioral tendency to show unity in questions of national security” mentioned above can in this way be seen as constructing and affirming national identity. As such, the Finnish move toward NATO was enabled by identity considerations, where being physically secure, united, and acting in a pragmatic way constituted the identity - an identity that, indeed, was the same during the “pragmatic neutral” period. Given the prominent role played by the

FPÖ in public, political discourse on neutrality in Austria today, the next section examines how the far right in Finland approached neutrality and NATO membership.

The Finns Party and NATO

The far-right Finns Party, previously known as the True Finns, was founded in 1995 by former members of Finland’s by then-defunct Cold War-era agrarian populist party, the Finnish Rural Party – a anti-communist, anti-urban, and anti-elite party. (Palonen and Sunnercrantz 2021; Lahti and Palonen 2023). Yannick Lahti and Emilia Palonen (2023) classify the Finns Party primarily as part of what Cas Mudde (2019) calls the European “radical right” as opposed to the “extreme right”, where the radical right mostly works within the democratic system and the extreme right seeks to subvert it, with both being part of the umbrella term “far right”. Lahti and Palonen (2023) have argued that the party is a “distinct outlier” among European far right parties as it has not adopted official pro-Putin or pro-Russia stances – although as shown below, that needs to be qualified by highlighting the pro-Putin elements that do exist.²The party has positioned itself in favor of defending Ukraine, a

² As a reviewer of the paper pointed out, particularly right-wing populist parties in some countries of the former Warsaw Pact, notably Poland and the Baltics, share the Finns’ Party’s negative views of

Russia. The argument that the Finns Party is a “distinct outlier” might relate more to the context of large right-wing populist parties in western Europe,

positioning that has been nurtured by a widely shared skepticism toward Russia in Finnish society, where analogies between the War in Ukraine and Finland’s Winter War (1939-40) are regularly drawn (Lahti and Palonen 2023).

The Finns Party has always had a more radical wing where affinity for Russia has existed, and this came to the surface in February 2022. Just before the invasion, the party’s chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee in parliament argued for French president Emmanuel Macron to step in and ease Russia’s concerns by putting a stop to Ukraine joining NATO, a statement that was criticized across the political spectrum. This part of the party was, Lahti and Palonen (2023) argue, undermined not only by a general lack of affinity for Russia in Finnish society and politics. Particularly the positioning of influential former leader of the Finns Party Jussi Halla-aho - himself part of the radical wing – mattered. Halla-aho has a background of having studied Slavonic linguistics and Ukrainian history, which they argue made him sympathetic to Ukraine. With statements like “if killing Russian soldiers in this situation is right and necessary, then anything that promotes their killing is also right and necessary”, Halla-aho directed his far-right radicalism against Russia. The anti-Soviet and anti-communist roots of the party, along with Halla-aho’s personal views and influence, have as

such both contributed to the party’s non-affinity for Russia.

In the Finns Party, “sovereignism” and “taking back control” as populist priorities have dovetailed well with the mental image of Russia as the Other threatening the Finnish border, further smoothing the alignment of that party with NATO (Lahti and Palonen 2023). As part of this positioning against Russia, in 2023, the party left the far-right, Putin-friendly Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the European Parliament and (re)joined the more Russia-hawkish European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) (Kajander 2023). Speaking to the online magazine *The European Conservative*, Finns Party minister for economic Affairs Wille Rydman – the party entered government in 2023 – explained this switch by saying that Ukraine must be defended, and Putin “must be stopped now” (O’Reilly 2024). This does not mean that the Finns Party has changed its radical right outlook fundamentally: Rydman himself had his very own racist texting scandal in the press in 2023 where he talked about people from the Middle East as being “monkeys” (Mac Dougall 2023). It does suggest, however, that collective memory regarding Russian aggression runs deep in Finland, which has conditioned the Finns Party’s anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian position - whether based on political conviction or political expediency.

such as the AfD in Germany and National Rally in France.

Neutrality and the NATO debate in Sweden

The roots of Swedish neutrality are to be found in Crown Prince Karl Johan’s (Jean Baptiste Bernadotte) 1814 declaration, which is often said to have been motivated by geopolitical imperatives where Sweden had to find a new way forward as a diminished and in the early 19th century ultimately defeated empire in the Napoleonic Wars. The policy was deeply connected to this experience, and to an ideal of avoiding the costliness of wars. Through the 19th century, the idea of what it meant to be neutral was embroiled in debates between those seeking greater Scandinavian integration and a continued hawkish policy toward Russia, and those who were in favor of stricter neutrality.

Neutrality was tested during the World Wars but was held onto – not without criticism for being self-serving and for failing particularly Sweden’s Scandinavian neighbors in the face of German aggression in World War II (Agius 2006, pp. 61-80). After World War II, the concept became increasingly embraced by the dominant Social Democratic Party as an internationalist policy that allowed Sweden to contribute to international solidarity with the “Third World”, criticize the superpowers, and pursue disarmament (Agius 2006, p. 90-91). While Sweden since 1949 had defined itself as

“non-aligned in peacetime, aiming for neutrality in wartime” the “neutral” part of that identification became increasingly deemphasized during the center-right Bildt government (1991-1994) and around the time of Swedish EU accession in 1995 (Aguis 2006, pp. 150-151). In later years and up until Sweden became a NATO member, the notion that Sweden was “neutral” had become largely replaced by “non-aligned” (*alliansfritt*) in public and political discourse (Riksdagen 1997; Stenberg 2024). During the period since the end of the Cold War, all political parties of the center-right came out in favor of NATO membership: the Liberals in 1999 (Eriksson 1999), the Moderate Party in 2003 (TT 2003), and the Center Party and the Christian Democrats in 2015, after the annexation of Crimea (Delling 2015; Lauffs 2015). While the Cold War-era “neutral internationalist” discourse had clear social democratic characteristics, some of its tenets resonated with and influenced a self-perception of Sweden across the political spectrum as a country that “does good” and promotes liberal democratic values internationally (Aggestam et al. 2023).

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Swedish shift away from neutrality and nonalignment toward NATO membership was similar to Finland’s. Most of the arguments were the same, but the process was dependent on Finland’s actions; the change in Finnish public opinion in February 2022 was decisive

not just for Finland, but for Sweden as well (Forsberg 2023b, p. 89). At the beginning of March 2022, Swedish Social Democratic prime minister Magdalena Andersson argued that an application for NATO membership would destabilize the Baltic Sea; at the end of March, she said applying was not out of question, and at the beginning of April, after a meeting with Finnish prime minister Sanna Marin, Andersson said that Sweden might apply if Finland did (ibid., p. 92).

A second major factor for the shift was the Social Democratic Party’s position. Not only was the party in (a one-party minority) government at the time of the invasion, but its support for continued non-alignment meant that the issue of NATO divided the Swedish political landscape almost completely along the left-right axis.³ In a country where security policy had traditionally been formulated in consensus across the political spectrum (or at least between the center-right parties and the traditionally dominant Social Democrats), the fact that no such consensus existed on the issue of NATO made an accession debate out of the question. On May 16, 2022, a day after the Finnish government had publicly announced its intention to apply, and after internal deliberations in the previously opposed Swedish So-

cial Democratic Party, Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson held a press conference together with leader of the opposition Ulf Kristersson where the government’s decision to apply for membership was announced (Wahlgren 2022). The Social Democrats’ abrupt policy change was probably a mix of sensing electoral vulnerability in the upcoming election in fall 2022 as public opinion on NATO started shifting (Ronquist 2022), and a perceived need for Sweden not to deviate from Finland’s path in security policy, a recurring theme in security relations between the two countries (Lundquist 2022).

Defending democracy, pursuing the new?

Swedish non-alignment and NATO membership was conspicuously absent from the election campaign in 2022, a campaign that took place after the application had been sent in and as ratifications were being processed (Bolin 2023). In terms of the public debate, the Swedish shift from non-alignment to NATO membership has, thus far, been a rather quiet affair. This might be surprising given how Swedish neutrality and non-alignment had been the official policy for 200 years. As mentioned

³ Before the invasion, the center-right parties mentioned above were all in favor of NATO membership, while the left of center parties the Social Democratic Party, the Green Party, and the Left Party

were all against. The right-wing populist Sweden Democrats were the holdouts on the right against NATO.

above, it could be seen as particularly perplexing since the commitment to non-alignment had been seen by some as more of an identity-related commitment in Sweden than it had been in Finland (Forsberg 2023b, p. 92). If the shift had indeed been motivated by identity concerns, it might make sense that an abrupt change of identity would cause a debate.

The lack of a lingering debate on what Sweden is and on neutrality and NATO is less perplexing, however, if we consider the possibility that NATO accession did not really upend Swedish identity. To the contrary, NATO membership has become connected with the aforementioned long-standing Swedish self-perceptions of doing good and promoting liberal internationalism. This is arguably the identity conception that dominates Swedish politics, before and after NATO accession. While there are NATO opponents who still do express their identification with the Social Democratic, internationalist neutrality policy of former prime minister Olof Palme, these are a shrinking minority, and a rather homogenous group consisting of retired diplomats (Sveriges Radio 2023; Hirdman 2024). Today, identity-oriented statements by journalists and politicians tend to celebrate Sweden’s new position as a NATO member, couching it in liberal internationalist language. This can be illustrated by prime minister Ulf Kristersson’s proclamation upon Sweden becoming a member: “[...] Sweden has come home. Home to the security cooperation

of democracies. Home to the security cooperation of our good neighbours,” (Ulf Kristersson 2024) a narrative that has been echoed by other politicians and commentators particularly on the political right (Billström 2024; SvD Ledare). While those on the left – who had previously been opposed to NATO – tended to couch their new support in terms of “the world has changed” (necessitating a change to Swedish security policy) (e.g. Suhonen 2022), defending Sweden’s democracy figures prominently as well (Socialdemokraterna 2024). Whether the left’s narratives are qualitatively different from those of the right or not, the point remains that they seldom cling to non-alignment or neutrality.

The second point to be made regarding identity and the Swedish shift is the tendency to portray NATO membership as a new; progressive; future-oriented move and being non-aligned and neutral as a thing of the past – sometimes as an illusory policy. Veteran Moderate Party politician Gunnar Hökmark tells this story well in his critique of Swedish WWII and Cold War foreign policy: in the former, it was not adherence to neutrality, but opportunistic deviance from neutrality that kept Sweden out of the war; in the latter, the presence of NATO in Europe was what guaranteed Sweden’s security (Hökmark 2024). In Hökmark’s narrative, the “illusory” neutral past is contrasted with Sweden’s recent coming to its senses about the right path by joining

NATO. The next section looks at the role of the far-right Sweden Democrats in the Swedish debate on neutrality and NATO.

The Sweden Democrats and NATO

The far-right party in the Swedish parliament, the Sweden Democrats, was founded in 1988 by former members of various racist and far-right political groupings (Larsson and Ekman 2001). The party had been largely kept out of political influence until the center-right Moderate Party and the Christian Democratic Party accepted the idea of governing with their passive support in 2018. That year’s election saw them fail to reach a majority; in 2022, however, they did, and formed the first center-right government since 2014, and the first government supported by the Sweden Democrats (Bolin 2023). Before the 2022 election, the Sweden Democrats had, in spite of their long-standing opposition, accepted Sweden’s NATO application, which was filed in May 2022. The shift was part of the larger story of a general shift in favor of NATO accession with Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine, buoyed by public opinion. It is also likely that the party did not see NATO and opposition to it as a very important issue, particularly in comparison to migration and “law and order”. Since foreign security policy was one of the few remaining areas of disagreement between the center-right parties

and the Sweden Democrats – the center-right parties had already adopted much of the Sweden Democrats’ political rhetoric and policies on migration from 2018 and onward – the Sweden Democrats were arguably keen to neutralize that disagreement in order to nurture their relations with the center-right.⁴ With regard to the party’s stance on Russia, in 2018, the Russia-critical Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats had announced a cooperation agreement, and both now sit in the ECR group in the European Parliament rather than in ID, ostensibly because of the pro-Russian positions of some of the ID parties (Kenes, 2020, p. 34). However, a wariness of Russian influence or being seen as pro-Russian was not always the case with the Sweden Democrats. As with other European far right parties – including the Finns Party - the Sweden Democrats had long nurtured pro-Russian sentiments particularly among the grass roots although they had seldom been articulated in official party policy (Bolin 2023).

Nevertheless, criticism of the Sweden Democrats’ closeness to Russia has been a recurring theme in Swedish political discourse. In 2015, an analysis of Sweden Democrats votes in the European Parliament found the party to be among the most positive toward Russia,

⁴ Thanks to a reviewer for pointing this out. The argument can be illustrated by looking at policy areas that Sweden Democrat voters ranked as important at the elections in 2022: out of 19 areas, “law and

order” and “refugees/migration” ranked at 1 and 2, while “defense” ranked at 10 (Holmberg et al. 2023).

whereas the Finns Party votes were the complete opposite (EUbloggen 2015). Sweden Democrat politicians have appeared on Russian platforms like RT and Sputnik (Bolin 2023) and have legitimized Russian elections as observers and participated in state arranged conferences (Sundbom 2018). In February 2022, just before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, long-time party leader Jimmie Åkesson refused to answer whether he prefers Vladimir Putin or Joe Biden as a political leader (Odmalm 2022). At the same time, the party has changed its outlook on Russia since the annexation of Crimea, arguing for “clear sanctions” in its last election manifesto (Bolin 2023). In a remarkable change from the 2015 European Parliament voting analysis, VoteWatch in 2022 qualified the Sweden Democrats as one of the “most assertive” parties in voting against Russian interests in the European Parliament, along with the rest of the ECR group (VoteWatch 2022).

As Niklas Bolin (2023) argues, the Russian invasion of Ukraine made any kinds of accusations of being pro-Russian – which the Sweden Democrats still faced – increasingly a political liability. While the party had been traditionally against NATO membership, this political predicament, together with the fact that the Sweden Democrats center-right cooperation partners were all in favor of NATO membership even before the invasion, likely made the party see continued opposition as untenable and

damaging to the party. In April 2022, party leader Åkesson announced the shift, a decision that was reportedly solely taken by the leader, as opposed to the regular party processes a policy change would normally go through (Det politiska spelet 2024).

Whither Austrian neutrality?

Austrian neutrality has certain similarities to both the Finnish and Swedish dittos. Similar to the former – as was mentioned above – Austrian neutrality was also born out of what we might call geopolitical necessity after World War II. Similar to the latter, it has also been described as a national identity commitment, both by political officials (see ORF 2023; Parliament Österreich 2024) and in academic research (e.g. Senn 2023). A major difference in the contemporary debate on Austrian neutrality compared to both debates in Finland and Sweden is that no parliamentary party in Austria openly and directly advocates for the abolition of neutrality. NEOS officials come closest to such a view but tend to restrict their criticism to talking about how neutrality can be done differently or downplaying the importance of neutrality for Austrian security policy (see Jungwirth 2023; Kleine Zeitung 2024).

The claim that Austrian neutrality is an identity or part of an identity raises a couple of questions. What is “Austrian neutrality”; what is

identified with? That question is in turn not easily answered without asking *who* is identifying; to *whom* is neutrality an identity? Gallup has asked Austrian users of the internet explicitly if neutrality is part of national identity, to which 86% answered yes (Gallup Institut 2022). That still does not say anything about how these web users define neutrality. Among a large sample of people, there are likely to be variations in exactly what people think of when they hear “Austrian neutrality”. What can be derived from such results, however, is that the very idea that Austrian national identity is partly based on neutrality – however defined – holds sway among Austrian (internet user)s. The reason why respondents answer in the affirmative is – most probably – not that they have looked up the 1955 neutrality law and found empirical evidence that somehow connects it to “Austrian identity”. The reason is rather that “neutrality as identity” is a story that is told and retold in Austrian public discourse, including by politically powerful actors such as Minister of European Affairs Karoline Edtstadler (ORF 2023). It matters less why or with what motives these actors tell and retell these stories; “neutrality as identity” comes into existence and becomes institutionalized in public discourse the more that story is retold. In other words, the narrative itself is that which brings “neutrality as identity” into being, what International Relations research has called narrative ontology (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019).

In the contemporary Austrian neutrality debate, the FPÖ plays a somewhat particular role. Likely owing to the popular appeal of neutrality in public opinion polls, it has made defense of neutrality one of its core issues since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This is different to how the far-right parties in Finland and Sweden responded in their domestic debates, a difference that illustrates how particularly Russia-connected issues have caused a split in the European far right. The FPÖ’s defense of neutrality is frequently done through vocal criticism of the government, and not seldom in conjunction with criticism of the government’s Corona policy (e.g. Kickl 2022), an area where the party sunk deep into conspiracy theories. In this vein, the party sends out press statements focusing exclusively on “protection of our neutrality [...] and dealing with the Corona madness” (Freiheitlicher Parlamentsklub 2023), rhetorically connecting the two. It regularly tells a story of how Austrian neutrality is threatened by what it calls the government’s “economic war” against Russia, glossing over Russia’s very real war against Ukraine (FPÖ 2024). This essentially argues for a neutrality that means little else than taking a lenient position vis-à-vis state aggression. In the case of Finland, Yan Xia et al. (2024) find that Finnish NATO debate on Twitter became depolarized as a result of the “external threat” of Russia invading Ukraine. Most actors on the political

right and left coalesced in “retweeting patterns”, joined together by their condemnation of Russia, leaving a smaller conspiratorial bubble isolated. The FPÖ’s agitation on Corona policy and neutrality, as well as its tendency toward pro-Putin positioning, raises question marks about whether the “conspiratorial bubble” would be as isolated in Austria as it was in Finland. The rhetorical connection between neutrality and Corona policy criticism, and neutrality and Putinist lines of argumentation, arguably has the effect of increasing the share of conspiratorial arguments in the neutrality debate in Austria. While, for example, Martin Senn (2023) has argued that Austrian neutrality in later years has taken on a depoliticized character, these developments suggest that this depoliticized status might be changing, if it has not already.⁵ On the opposite side of the FPÖ, commentators and security policy experts increasingly favor a debate on the issue of Austrian neutrality, a discourse that also seems to point in the direction of increased politicization (e.g. uneresicherheit.at 2022; Dengler and Nowak 2023).

Foreign policy discourse- has a performative or generative character, where the uttering constitutes the actual effect - not unrelated to the aforementioned concept of narrative ontology. From this perspective, a dominance of

FPÖ narratives in the debate on neutrality effectively means that those narratives determine what neutrality is and is not, since there are few other (uttered) alternatives for the audience to interpret and make their own or reject. As long as the FPÖ is not in government, the affected audience is arguably primarily domestic, but if the party achieves actual influence on foreign policy, they will be able to “perform” neutrality in the way that they see fit not only to the domestic “audience”, but on the international “stage” too. If other actors do not provide other stories of what Austrian neutrality is— and the FPÖ keeps pushing their stories on neutrality, exclusionary stories that are primarily geared toward gaining domestic political wins, and as such provide very few solutions for what Austria can and should actually do in its foreign policy— that will make Austrian foreign policy increasingly a tool for individuals and parties to gain and remain in power. A potentially dangerous scenario for Austria is one where the reduction of foreign policy into a tool for domestic politics reduces the confidence of other state actors in Austria. In the long run, such an outcome could be an existential threat, as it would circumscribe the Austrian state’s agency in its relations with other states.

⁵ Senn argues that depoliticization risks making neutrality a burden for Austrian foreign policy rather than an instrument. The politicization that the FPÖ has been standing for since the invasion of

Ukraine, on the other hand, is arguably a type that does little to further neutrality as a useful instrument.

Conclusions

By sketching the development of the roads of Finland and Sweden toward NATO membership, this paper has attempted to illustrate three main characteristics that relate to both of these countries’ identity conceptions and ideas of neutrality and alliance membership, and to how the far-right parties in Sweden and Finland approached the issue of NATO membership. On the latter point, it suggests that the shift of the far-right Finns Party had much to do with the widely shared Finnish historical memory of Russia as an aggressor. In the case of the Sweden Democrats’ shift, together with domestic political considerations, Russia as an historical Other is likely to have played a role, but one that was complicated by a more recent history of latent pro-Russianism in the party. Political considerations— a desire for international affiliation not least with the Finns Party, and the fact that all of the party’s allies in Swedish domestic politics were in favor of NATO—are likely to have been decisive. For the ongoing Austrian debate on neutrality and its security policy, the moves taken by the Nordic far right parties seem to contradict that of the FPÖ. On the other hand, this could relate to a willingness of Swedish actors to align themselves with what is seen as “new” and “progressive”. In the Austrian debate, too, there exists carefully worded criticism of neutrality as

“perhaps not in line with the times” (e.g. Kurier 2022; John 2023). If this debate continues and the idea of neutrality becomes increasingly identified in Austria too as a concept of the past, it is perhaps even likely that the FPÖ’s populist element seeks to capitalize on that. Another take might be that the FPÖ’s recent support for neutrality cements their image as the party of the past. Either way, the dichotomy of “new and old” – “modern and unmodern” – should not be disregarded in how neutrality and alliance membership might become increasingly constructed, as illustrated by the Swedish example.

Even if neutrality internationally becomes increasingly understood as an “old” concept, and alliance membership as “new”, which was the case in the Swedish debate, nothing is given by such a state of affairs. As Sanna Strand (2023) has shown, the way by which the Swedish government reactivated military conscription in 2017— after a post-Cold War era where traditional conscription was seen as “unmodern” – laid strong emphasis on associating the “new” conscription with popular liberal, neoliberal, and liberal feminist ideals. Partly building on these findings, Saskia Stachowitsch and Sanna Strand (2024) show that Second Republic Austria’s conscription was legitimized and introduced through a rejection of militaristic and heroic ideals and an emphasis on responsibility, solidarity, and community— and indeed, an alternative masculinity that was supposed to

be the protector of the “neutral nation”. A rejection of militarism was, of course, to some extent a necessity given the country’s then recent history, but the chosen track nevertheless diverged from traditional republican “citizen-soldier” and “school of the nation” images of conscription.

These examples both show how seemingly unchanging ideas and concepts are subject to great flux. Swedish conscription was seen as hopelessly “unmodern” at the time that it was momentarily deactivated in 2010; only a couple of years later, at its reintroduction in 2017, it was successfully constructed as something modern and refreshing. In the Austrian case, how conscription was conceptualized diverged from the norm at the time. An example that relates to Finland is how the Finnish government actively tried to connect “neutrality” to “democracy” through public relations activities, research, and educational campaigns, an effort motivated by a will to strengthen psychological defense. To the extent that neutrality became an “integral part of how common people and policymakers alike thought about Finland” (Aunesluoma and Rainio-Niemi 2016), this was a success in meaning engineering, and an example of the malleability of concepts. If these examples show how conscription was rein-

vented in different epochs in Austria and Sweden, and neutrality was made popular in Finland, actors in the Austrian political landscape ought to be able to construct narratives of Austrian neutrality that fit both with the geopolitical context and with Austrian politics.

The dichotomy of new and old might be most likely to influence the parties in Austria where an internal debate on neutrality is already underway: in the Social Democratic Party and the Austrian People’s Party, and particularly NEOS, for example, there are critics of neutrality, where the criticism is not seldom expressed by asking if neutrality still conforms to the times (John 2023; APA 2022). The examples of shifts from non-aligned to alliance member brought up in this paper suggest that Finland and Sweden have managed these while at the same time holding on to what they have seen as quintessentially Finnish and Swedish for a long time: facing adversaries united, and standing for liberal internationalism. This suggests that – particularly in an international politics where neutrality is increasingly seen as a thing of the past– the step from neutral or nonaligned state to alliance member state might not be as big as it has been seen to be in terms of national identity conceptions.

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