The odd man out

A study of the implications of the covid-19 pandemic for Nordic status seeking

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Thesis, 30 ECTS (hp)
Political Science with a focus on Crisis Management and Security
Master’s Programme in Politics and War
Autumn 2021
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Word count: 14 373
This thesis contributes to the literature on status seeking and transboundary crises by studying the dynamics of a group of states’ collective status seeking during times of crisis. The implications of the covid-19 pandemic for the common status seeking of the Nordic countries are explored through a study of the collective Nordic identity. A narrative analysis of the views on Sweden in the two Nordic countries Norway and Denmark is carried out using news media articles during first three months of the pandemic. The results show a rift in the collective Nordic identity during the covid-19 pandemic. The main conclusion is that a transboundary crisis can undermine states’ collective status seeking if the cooperative status seeking processes are not backed up by collaboration in times of crisis.

**Keywords:** status seeking, collective identity, the Nordic region, transboundary crisis, covid-19, narrative analysis.
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1. Introduction

1.1. Research problem

According to a 2021 report published by the Swedish government agency The Swedish Institute (Svenska institutet in Swedish), 39% of survey respondents from the other four Nordic countries (Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland) reported that their view of Sweden had changed for the worse during the previous year. The way that the corona pandemic was handled by Sweden was cited as the main reason, with migration and crime also mentioned as important factors (Svenska Institutet, 2021). This is an interesting but also troublesome development in light of the efforts that have been taken by the leaders of the Nordic countries in recent years to create a higher level of integration within the region and to boost the Nordic image abroad. The Nordic co-operation is a regional collaboration between the Nordic countries. The co-operation ‘seeks to safeguard Nordic and regional interests and principles in the global community (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019, p. 2). As a part of this deepened cooperation a shared strategy for international branding of the Nordic region was adopted in 2014. The strategy formulates common Nordic values and strategic focus areas and the underlying goal of the strategy is to ‘increase the visibility of the Nordic region and its influence in the world, and improve the region’s competitiveness’ (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019, pp. 7–9). ‘The Nordic Region will become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world’ is the 2030 vision decided on in 2019 by the Nordic prime ministers and the Nordic ministers for Cooperation (The Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers, n.d.).

Due to years of collaboration a specific dynamic has evolved where the status seeking processes of the Nordic countries have become intertwined with each other. Studies have shown that the Nordic states seek international status as a group. Røren (2019) shows how cooperation on status seeking within the Nordic countries has helped to form a collective Nordic identity. Through interviews with Nordic diplomats his study looks at how ‘friendship and the communal feeling of solidarity informs, constrains and shapes their status seeking’ (2019, p. 2). Røren suggests that the dynamic between the Nordic states when it comes to the quest for status can be conceptualized as a that of a friendly neighbourhood. He demonstrates how while the Nordic countries constantly seek to compete with each other for status on the international arena, they do so in a friendly way. At the same time they also seek to increase each other’s status through ‘shared cooperative practices’ (Røren, 2019, p. 16). The Nordic states are so intertwined with
each other that the possibility that one country would seek status in a way that would be harmful to the other Nordic countries’ status is seen as practically impossible.

However, during the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic Sweden received attention as the ‘odd man out’ both in the Nordic countries and internationally for their chosen strategy towards the pandemic. This strategy included a lack of coercive measures and the choice by Swedish authorities to allow large parts of Swedish society to remain ‘open’, as opposed to many other countries, including the other Nordic countries, who opted to impose restrictions that closed down various public places such as bars and restaurants, shops, schools, museums, gyms and libraries, as well as to impose border restrictions.

While the ambition to create and maintain a high international social standing for the Nordic region dates back to the Cold War, the recent intensification in efforts to boost status through active cooperation in combination with the increasingly negative view of Sweden amongst the rest of the Nordic populations gives us reason to inquire about the implications of the covid-19 pandemic for the common status seeking of the Nordic countries.

Status in international politics can be defined as ‘collective beliefs about a given state’s ranking on valued attributes’ (Larson et al., 2014, p. 7). This thesis argues that status seeking should be understood as a relational process inherent to states’ identity formation processes. These processes are constantly ongoing and never finished. The Nordic countries cooperate with each other in order to gain and maintain a specific status as ‘moral authorities’ or ‘good states’ on the world arena. Nordic status seeking can therefore be said to mainly focus on creating a competitive identity through emphasis on common Nordic cultural values, as opposed to for example economic or military capabilities. Due to the emphasis on values, it can be argued that the Nordic countries have merged not just their cooperative practices but to a certain extent also their identities, leaving them more vulnerable to the actions of each other as well as the recognition of each other. It is interesting to see if there is a disparity between the values that are highlighted as signifiers of a Nordic identity and the way that the Nordic countries view the actions of one of their own in times of crisis. Are the other Nordic countries giving expression to a distancing from Sweden, with the Swedish identity viewed as increasingly incompatible with the Nordic identity? This thesis asks if the Nordic dynamic described by Røren is intact, or what other types of implications can be found for the cohesiveness of the global collective identity of the Nordics. The reactions to Sweden’s pandemic strategy by the two Nordic
countries Denmark and Norway are therefore analysed, asking what these reactions can tell us about the views of Sweden within the Nordic region, and what the implications of this might be for the cooperation and status seeking of the Nordic region as a whole. The research problem of this study is therefore how a transboundary crisis like the pandemic can affect the common status seeking abilities of a community of states like the Nordics.

1.2. Aim and Research Questions
The aim of this study is to analyse the narratives about Sweden and the covid-19 pandemic in Danish and Norwegian discourses in order to explore the implications of a transboundary crisis for state community’s collective status seeking processes.

In order to be able to analyse a sufficient amount of empirical material within the scope of the thesis the study is limited to Denmark and Norway. In order to access Danish and Norwegian narratives I use news media. News media is a suitable source when the goal is to explore the larger, collective conversations, views or narratives that are present in a specific society, since news media can be said to both mirror discourses present in society while at the same time playing an active part in forming these discourses.

Because status seeking processes are connected to identity formation processes, the research questions are posed with this in mind. Studying the narratives about Sweden and the covid-19 pandemic allows for the study of the views of Sweden and the Swedish identity in relation to the Danish and Norwegian national identities and/or a Nordic identity.

The research questions are:

1. What were the narratives about Sweden and the covid-19 pandemic in Norwegian and Danish news media discourses from March 2020 through May 2020?
2. How is Sweden positioned in the Nordic context in regard to identity in Norwegian and Danish news media narratives from March 2020 through May 2020?
2. Previous Research and Theory

2.1. The role of status in world politics

According to traditionalist perspectives a state’s status can be derived from its material resources. The more resources a state has, the higher its status can be presumed to be and the more likely other actors are to view its actions as legitimate (Gilpin, 1981, p. 30). A constructivist approach disagrees with this assumption and instead understands status as a social construct which cannot be objectively derived from material resources, since it is a ‘contingent and dynamic concept dependent on perceptual judgements of the self and others, social institutions, and the interaction of actors over time’ (Clunan, 2014, pp. 273–274). Status can be defined as ‘collective beliefs about a given state’s ranking on valued attributes’ (Larson et al., 2014, p. 7). Exactly what attributes are perceived as valuable and worthy of high status is determined through social interaction. Status is therefore subjective; an actor’s status cannot be understood in isolation since it is dependent on the recognition by others. Status can both take the form of club membership and a relative standing within a group. The two are interlinked. For example, membership in a certain group can help elevate a state’s relative standing (Larson et al., 2014, p. 7).

While status by definition is hierarchical and status seeking therefore can be understood as a competition (Neumann & de Carvalho, 2014, pp. 4–5), status seeking can also be understood as the quest to gain recognition for a specific identity, as to have a specific status is to ‘be considered a true bearer of some valued attributes that are distinguishing and place one in a socially constructed group’ (Clunan, 2014, p. 279). States aim to receive recognition for a certain identity that is perceived as valuable, i.e. recognition as not just a state but a specific type of state. Status seeking is therefore a type of state identity politics (Murray, 2019, p. 12; Neumann & de Carvalho, 2014, p. 5).

While high status can create a range of positive effects such as collective self-esteem and pride, status is also important for security through its instrumental creation of soft power. The higher status a state has the more ‘other states adjust their policies to accommodate its interests, institutions, and ideas’ (Larson et al., 2014, pp. 18–19). Status is therefore an important aspect of state security, especially for those states that lack considerable material resources. Small states that lack significant material resources can ‘compensate’ for their lack of resources and
instead aim to achieve status through moral authority, or being a ‘good power’ (Neumann & de Carvalho, 2014). By definition, having the status of a moral authority means that the attributes a country is associated with are deemed valuable and good. In this thesis, the focus is largely on the specific status of the Nordic countries as moral authorities. The relevant concern is that those countries that the Nordic countries want to either cooperate with or in some other way influence, agree first of all that these are valuable attributes, and second that the Nordics are true bearers of these attributes.

Status has been shown to be a significant driving factor behind conflict and interstate war (Barnhart, 2016; Dafoe et al., 2014; Götz, 2021; Macdonald & Parent, 2020; Wolf, 2019). However, status is also an important factor when it comes to more routine issues of the day-to-day life of international politics, influencing state actions (Wohlforth et al., 2018, p. 527). As such, a state that is consistently seen by others to ‘underperform’ could risk to see its status damaged or weakened (Sundaram, 2020).

2.2. Nordic status as a moral authority

Status seeking by the Nordic countries and the notion of a common Nordic identity has a long history. During the Cold War the concept of the ‘Nordic welfare state’ was established and the Nordic countries were increasingly associated with terms such as openness, equality, peacefulness, bridge building, internationalist solidarism and egalitarian social democracy (Browning, 2007). Since then, the idea of the Nordic welfare model has been actively repackaged and appropriated by the Nordic countries into certain ‘progressive’ values, coded as specifically Nordic (Marklund, 2017). Ingebritsen calls the Nordic countries ‘norm entrepreneurs’ and demonstrates how the Nordic countries have exercised soft power on the international arena through the promotion of specific values and by influencing certain international norms, such as sustainable development, peaceful resolution of conflict and norms of foreign aid, thereby elevating their own international status (Ingebritsen, 2002). This shows that even small states, without large economic or military resources, can have an impact on what values are considered worthy of status in world politics. It is also an example of how the definition of what attributes are considered worthy of high status is something that is subject to contestation and change. High-status attributes in international politics today are not the same as 200 years ago.
The valued attributes historically connected to the status of the Nordic countries can be defined as those of a ‘good power’, or ‘moral authority’, and these are largely mirrored in the values that are highlighted in the Nordic branding strategy. The values that are defined as specifically Nordic in the strategy for international branding of the Nordic Region 2019-2021 are trust, equality, sustainability, innovation, and openness. These values are said to ‘position the Nordics in relation to the rest of the world’ and the strategy states that ‘the more Nordic actors “live the brand” in practice, and show the world around us that there is truth behind the words, the greater the synergies and the Nordic benefits achieved’ (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019, p. 15). In a study on Nordic place branding research Cassinger et al show how the Nordic countries use their citizens’ wellbeing and happiness as a key asset in the narratives used to promote themselves internationally (Cassinger et al., 2021, p. 70). The values that are associated with the Nordic countries, including for example freedom, social cohesion, solidarity, and cooperation, make up a ‘recurring and self-reinforcing normative mantra and practice’ in the Nordic countries (Cassinger et al., 2021, p. 71).

Interesting to note is that in the foreword to the strategy for international branding of the Nordic region 2015-2018, which was the first strategy for Nordic branding, it is stated that ‘the Nordic region first started to distinguish itself internationally in the aftermath of the financial crisis. The Nordic governance and welfare model once again showed it was capable of renewing itself’ (The Nordic Council of Ministers, 2014, p. 5). The financial crisis of 2008 was, similarly to the covid-19 pandemic, a transboundary crisis. During this crisis the Nordic countries fared considerably well compared to many other countries in the world. This attribute also seems to be a part of the self-image of the Nordic identity; the very capability of being able to act and adapt in times of crisis, as well as being a role model for others to follow.

Røren (2019) concludes from studying the dynamics of the collective status seeking of the Nordic countries that the trust that exists between the Nordic countries is what 'enables them to posture as a collective polity, which, when practiced, grants them more recognition and broader access to status privileges in world politics than what they would gain if pursued independently’ (Røren, 2019, p. 16). In the next section I expand on what this means and how we can explore the collective identity of the Nordics through the study of narratives.
2.3. A collective Nordic identity

While non-traditionalist approaches to the study of status in world politics share the notion that recognition is an important aspect of status, there are some key distinctions between how different approaches conceptualize the concept of status in itself. One such distinction has to do with assumptions about identity formation. According to some approaches, the identity of a state is assumed to exist a priori to its interaction with others. Status seeking is here understood as the process through which states try to gain recognition for their chosen identity (see for example Larson, 2017). A contrasting view is that a state’s identity is formed in part through the status seeking process (Paci et al., 2020). As Pouliot writes: ‘status-seeking is an identity-transforming phenomenon – it makes people do things that they would not have done otherwise [...] Status competition also defines the actors’ identities in the first place’ (2014, p. 198, emphasis in original). This thesis subscribes to the latter perspective by assuming that status seeking is a part of the identity formation processes of states.

Because status seeking is a relational process, the recognition of an actor’s identity is in itself a part of what brings this identity into existence, as well as a part of the identity’s never-ending process of change. States that seek status together as a group are not just using the collective power of the group in an attempt to try to persuade other states of their own high status, but the very action of seeking status as a collective becomes a part of these states’ identity formation. In short, status seeking and identity formation are two mutually constitutive processes and because status is linked to identity, a study of status calls for a study of identity. Røren (2019) shows how collective status seeking within the Nordic countries not only helps to elevate the Nordic countries status but how it also has played a part in the formation of a collective Nordic identity. Røren’s article is important because it gives us a deeper understanding of the dynamics between the Nordic countries when it comes to status seeking. His main argument is that the social interactions between the Nordic countries have shaped the way that they seek status. The Nordic states are so intertwined with each other that the possibility that one country would seek status in a way that would be harmful to the other Nordic countries’ status is seen as practically impossible. Not only have the social interactions of the Nordic countries shaped their status seeking practices, but the status seeking practices have in turn shaped the interactions of the Nordic countries and the shared sense of ‘we-ness’. A Nordic collective identity has therefore been shaped by the Nordic states’ cooperative status seeking practices over time. On the one hand this shows a cohesiveness and strength between the Nordic countries, but it also means
that a distancing or othering of one of the members of the club that is the Nordics might have implications for the whole region, and not only the distanced member itself.

Collective identities are a type of socially constructed identity based on a connection to a group. A national identity is an example of a collective identity, and so are regional identities such as a Nordic identity. Most people identify with multiple collective identities. Collective identities can be more or less contested, and more or less strong. They ‘convey a sense of “we-ness,”’ of (imagined) community usually based on collective narratives of a common fate, a common history, and a common culture’ (Risse, 2010, pp. 25–26). The collective identity of the Nordic countries is according to Røren strong enough to be labelled a friendship, built on mutual trust, and involving a ‘constitutive process of positive identification’ (Røren, 2019, p. 14). This forms the basis for the collective status seeking and promotion of the Nordic region in an international context and it is this trust and friendship that gives the Nordic region a competitive edge. This is also why the Nordic countries are careful not to act in a way that could hurt their neighbours’ reputation or status. If the perception of a collective Nordic identity is weakened, then the possibility to promote this collective identity would also be impaired (Røren, 2019, p. 15).

To be able to access articulations and projections of identity within the Nordic context this thesis studies narratives. Through the subjective selection and ordering of the ‘potentially limitless array of social experiences’, humans create narratives that gives meaning to our social reality (Somers, 1994, p. 617). Assuming that identities are fluid and malleable as opposed to being pregiven, a narrative approach to the study of identities understands narratives as the way through which identities come to exist, through a constant intersubjective process of negotiation. Narratives is in this sense a way to perform identity (Browning, 2007, pp. 28–29). Narratives validate certain social and cultural discourses while they call others into question. In this sense, the use of narratives is a political act (Prokkola, 2014, p. 445). Studying narratives is a way to study how different groups make sense out of the world around them, including the national identities they themselves identify with, and the national identities of for example neighbouring countries. Narratives about a specific group of people or a culture, such as the national identity, are shaped through collective mental processes and references to a common, socially constructed past (Bruner, 1991, as cited in Robertson, 2012, p. 226). If we want to understand how collective identities are created and recreated, the study of narratives is therefore one powerful way to do so (Robertson, 2012, p. 221). The narratives that can be found in the Norwegian and Danish public discourses are not just representations of the Danish and
Norwegian views of Sweden but also a part of the process that shapes the identities of these countries in relation to Sweden in the first place.

2.4. The coronavirus pandemic as a transboundary crisis

The coronavirus pandemic can be classified as a transboundary crisis. A transboundary crisis is a crisis that ‘exceeds geographical, policy, cultural, public–private and legal boundaries that normally enable public managers to classify, contain and manage a crisis’ (Boin, 2019, p. 94). A few different factors characterize transboundary crises. These include rapid escalation, a blurring of organizational boundaries and a lack of easy or conventional solutions (Boin, 2019, p. 95). These factors make the transboundary crisis complex and ambiguous, opening up for number of possible different interpretations and courses of action. The covid-19 pandemic is a useful case for studying the common status seeking of the Nordic states because of its magnitude, its rapid escalation, and the potential severe effects on lives and health. As well as the fact that the virus originated outside of the Nordic region and affected all of the Nordic countries at roughly the same time.

The question is if the pandemic is making Norway and Denmark view Sweden as less of a friend, as someone to distance themselves from? Or is the sense of we-ness within the Nordic identity so strong that potential tensions created by the crisis are resolved through a re-negotiation of the collective identity? Are there competing narratives? It might be that Denmark and Norway distance themselves from Sweden because Sweden is potentially jeopardizing the status of them all. However, it is also possible that Denmark and Norway see themselves so intimately connected to Sweden that the safeguarding of the common status is given priority. Yet another outcome is that there is a mix of different competing narratives.

In order to empirically analyse the implications of the covid-19 pandemic for the Nordic status, I will conduct a narrative analysis of Danish and Norwegian media coverage during first three months of the pandemic.

3. Methodology

In this section the method of analysis, coding scheme and procedure are presented, as well as the collection of material. First, I discuss the limitations of only studying two of the Nordic countries.
I analyse Danish and Norwegian narratives about Sweden and the Nordic region during the covid-19 pandemic using newspaper articles from each country. In addition to Sweden, Norway and Denmark, the Nordic region also includes Finland and Iceland (as well as two autonomous territories and one autonomous region\(^1\)). The research questions call for a substantial enough material collected over a long enough time period that it is possible to discuss what the articulations and projections of identity in this material can tell us about the collective Nordic identity. For this reason, and because of language barriers, I have chosen to limit the study to Denmark and Norway. While a study including all of the Nordic countries would have been optimal, the narratives in Denmark and Norway carry with them important insight on the implications for the collective status seeking of all whole Nordic region. A potential negative positioning or distancing from Sweden in these two countries carry implications for the cohesiveness of the collective identity of region as whole, regardless of if an analysis of narratives from the two other countries would show a different result.

### 3.1. Narrative analysis

The newspaper articles in Denmark and Norway are analysed using narrative analysis. Narrative analysis as a method is useful when the aim is to make sense out of how different actors see themselves, others, and themselves in relation to others. Narrative analysis can help reveal how an actor organises events in order to create meaning, and it is an especially useful method for answering questions of agency and identity (Haste et al., 2015, pp. 314–316). The method rests on the idea that social life, including our identities, is created, made sense out, and constantly renegotiated through stories (Robertson, 2012, p. 221).

By applying narrative analysis to the study of news media, we can make manifest the expressions of collective understandings of the Swedish identity in Norway and Denmark, as well as the relationships between the nations. News media is an appropriate material to use in an analysis aiming to capture the public narratives in a society. News media work with cultural codes in order for their coverage to make sense to their audience. Representations and images that are circulated and settled in popular culture, including print media, can be analysed in order to deconstruct how certain national identities are created and recreated. These discourses are also relevant for the political elites in a country, as they may ‘share public imaginaries, may

\(^1\) Greenland, Faroe Islands, and Åland.
actively seek to shape them, or indeed, make policy choices based upon them’ (Mawdsley, 2008, pp. 510–511).

Robertson (2012) references Chatman’s definition of narratives as including both a story (histoire), and a discourse (discours). That is, when analysing a narrative it is possible to ask questions about both what and how. Through the questions of what we are able to say something about the contents of the narrative, such as what is happening, where and when the story is taking place and who the actors are which are present. Through the questions of how we are also able to analyse the ways in which the content of the story is being told and how this gives meaning to the story (Robertson, 2012, p. 230). When analysing narratives in order to say something about identity, both aspects are relevant to keep in mind. In this case the overarching question I want to be able to answer through analysing narratives is regarding what type of character Sweden emerges as through these narratives as well as the relationship between Sweden and the other Nordic countries. This can be communicated both through the content of the story and the discourse. Hence, the coding of the news media in this thesis is designed to account for which story is being told as well as how it is being told.

In order to identify and analyse the narratives in the newspapers I use a coding scheme. The coding scheme consist of a number of questions that are answered for each individual news article. The questions are formulated to help break down the components of the articles in order to investigate how these stories come to be and the ways in which they create meaning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>What is the main message of the story?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>From whose perspective is the story being told, and by whom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Where is the story taking place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. a)</td>
<td>Who or what represents Sweden? b) How are they/it portrayed? c) If there are other actors in the article, who or what do they represent? How are they portrayed, and in what relation to Sweden?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. a)</td>
<td>What is the problem or conflict in the article? b) Who is defining the conflict or problem? c) What is the reason for the problem or conflict?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Coding scheme.

Asking who or what Sweden is represented by in each article turns the attention towards the choices made when telling the story of Sweden and the pandemic. What things, places or actors
are connected to Sweden amongst a large list of possibilities? How is meaning attached to and categorized around the imagined community that is ‘Sweden’? Is the focus mainly on ordinary people and their lives during the pandemic or is the focus on policy decisions or statements made by the political elites? Or is Sweden represented by something completely different? By asking where the story takes place and what the problem or conflict is in the story the focus is turned to what is happening, in what order of events, and why. For example, if the main conflict in a story is that people in Sweden are dying from the coronavirus and the reason for this is presented as bad luck, the impression of Sweden and the Swedish people that the reader is left with will be different compared to if the reasons for the spread of the virus have to do with bad decision making, incompetence, or an irresponsible attitude. The conflict formulations can reveal a lot about how a specific situation is framed and how each actor in it is represented.

3.2. Material

News articles from two of the largest daily newspapers in Denmark and Norway are used as empirical material. These newspapers are Politiken and Jyllands-Posten (Denmark), and VG and Aftenposten (Norway). News articles published between the 1st of March 2020 until the 31st of May 2020 were collected. The period was chosen to include the first three months after the coronavirus had initially spread to the Nordic countries. The period is treated as a single unit of time, meaning that potential changes in the narratives throughout the three-month period are not analysed.

The newspapers were chosen because of the number of readers as well as their national coverage (Mediebedriftene, 2022; Statistia, 2022). The second largest newspaper in Denmark in numbers of readers is B.T. Due to lack of accessibility B.T. was not used in the study. However, since the difference in numbers of readers between B.T. and the third largest newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, is very marginal, and both papers have a national coverage, Jyllands-Posten was instead chosen.²

The newspaper articles were collected using the search term ‘Sweden’ in combination with one of the terms ‘corona’ and ‘covid-19’ in Danish and Norwegian, respectively.³ The search engine Retriever was used to access news articles from Aftenposten and VG and the search engine

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² For the year 2020.
³ In Norwegian both ‘corona’ and ‘korona’ were used.
Pressreader was used to access news articles from Politiken and Jyllands-Posten. News articles that only mention Sweden briefly but do not offer any more information about the topic were disregarded. A total of 106 news articles was used in the analysis, 47 Danish and 59 Norwegian.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jyllands-Posten</th>
<th>Politiken</th>
<th>VG</th>
<th>Aftenposten</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 2020</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2020</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2020</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Number of news articles per newspaper, per month.

Each article was coded in accordance with the scheme. Having gone through all the articles the main messages were identified and grouped together in order to present the main narratives of each country’s set of articles. Taken together, these narratives are analysed with the aim to reveal identity articulations and representations of Sweden, as well as the positioning of Sweden within the Nordic context.

4. Analysis

In this section the identified narratives of each country are presented and analysed. The implications of these findings for the collective identity of the Nordics are then discussed.

4.1. Norway

Four main narratives about Sweden and the covid-19 pandemic were identified in the Norwegian discourse. In the following section I will present these narratives and show how they were articulated.

**Sweden has chosen a bad corona strategy and it is failing**

One narrative that emerges in the Norwegian news articles is that Sweden has chosen a different strategy against the coronavirus pandemic compared to both Norway, the rest of the Nordic countries, as well as most other countries in the (Western) world. This strategy has failed because a large number of people in Sweden have died, which could have been avoided if Sweden had chosen a different strategy (Rosef, 2020; Thorp Bjørnstad, 2020; Trus, 2020). Sweden and Norway are presented as two opposites with the Norwegian government’s actions

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4 All quotes have been translated to English from Norwegian or Danish by the author.
deemed as the rational and appropriate reaction to the virus. The developments in Sweden are presented with headlines such as ‘The Country That is Different’, ‘One Virus – Two Strategies’, ‘Here the Swedes Have Failed’ and ‘A Bad Assessment’ (Engen & Røsvik, 2020; Husby Sandnes, 2020b, 2020d; Huse Amundsen, 2020b). The articles are often structured as a comparison between the two countries, accompanied by pictures of empty streets, schools, ski slopes and restaurants in Norway side by side with pictures from Sweden depicting lively parties, schoolyards full of children and crowded streets. One article in VG reporting on the situation in Sweden states that:

Sweden has so far stood out significantly when it comes to choosing a strategy for dealing with the corona pandemic. While large parts of the Western world have introduced massive measures, the Swedes have received criticism for keeping most things open.

(Quist, 2020)

Sweden does not only deviate from other Western countries in their management of the crisis, but Sweden is also depicted as a chaotic country. The Norwegian papers use war metaphors to depict the precarious situation, where the spread of the virus in Sweden has created a chaotic situation and the Swedish health care sector is struggling to keep it under control.

– It's like a theater of war, a battlefield. This is where the war against corona is taking place, says intensive care nurse and union representative Charlotta Dickman. […] – We know that the relatives are restless and sad. We do not have time to receive calls from them. We have instead called in psychologists to call the relatives, says Charlotte Dickman.

(Andreassen, 2020e)

The use of war references and the inability to carry out normal functions such as communication with relatives is illustrating the seriousness of the situation. The situation in Sweden is described using the term 'Swedish conditions’, a term that previously has been used in the Norwegian debate on immigration and crime, where the ‘Swedish conditions’ refers to a perceived negative trend that Norway should be careful not to follow. This term has now been widened to also include the coronavirus pandemic.

Some of the articles written about people who have died from covid-19 are more personal portraits, featuring interviews with relatives of those who have died (Andreassen, 2020b; Trus, 2020). In one article in Aftenposten the son of a Swedish man who died from covid-19 while living in a care home expresses his views on who is to blame.
- He was a cheerful, caring, and good 92-year-old who spent his life in the service of the state, and who paid his taxes with joy, says Björn. Björn believes that the Swedish state should have used some of this tax money to improve crisis preparedness. - Finland had well-stocked emergency reserves, while Sweden had apparently sold everything in a kind of naive belief in neutrality. At least that's how it feels, says Björn. [...] I called it Russian roulette before but considering how the elderly have been treated in Sweden, I’d rather call it Swedish roulette.

(Andreassen, 2020b)

The government and the lack of crisis preparedness is according to Björn the reason for his father’s death. The references to paying tax and serving your country but still dying as a victim of your own government’s game of chance conveys a deep sense of disappointment and anger. It is clear that the decisions made by the Swedish government are here understood as both irresponsible and unjust.

It is not just the elderly who are presented as the victims of the Swedish governments actions but also other groups such as the inhabitants in areas where the infection rate is considerably higher than in the rest of the country (Andreassen, 2020a). These areas are described as ‘particularly vulnerable areas with a high proportion of inhabitants with an immigrant background. People live in cramped conditions, there are many social problems, exclusion, and poverty. Many have a mother tongue other than Swedish’ (Moe, 2020). The message here is that previous political decisions which have led to social inequalities, has created a situation where some of the Swedish citizens are now paying the price.

The crisis in Sweden stands in stark contrast to the situation in Norway, which is serious but under control. While the health care sector is struggling, the representatives of the Swedish government are downplaying the differences between Norway and Sweden. Swedish state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, who is the actor that most often represents and speaks in the name of the Swedish government, explains the differences in numbers of infected and dead between Norway and Sweden as the result of the countries being at different stages of the pandemic (Husby Sandnes, 2020a; Huse Amundsen, 2020a; Moe, 2020). From the Swedish perspective the reactions to the pandemic are largely the same in Sweden and Norway, as both countries are acting with the same end goal of slowing down the spread of the virus. Both the Swedish political representatives as well as the Swedish people are also putting their full trust
in ‘their’ experts, as ‘social engineering with its trust in policies drawn up by experts is both ideology and practice in Sweden’ (Arvidsson, 2020).

**The Swedes are not very concerned about the pandemic**

There is a general tone of bewilderment and disappointment in the reporting about Sweden and the choice to keep large parts of society open, despite the fact that many people are dying because of this. Both the Swedish government as well as the Swedish people are portrayed as being aware of the covid-19 death rate and the spread of the virus, but still convinced that the choice of action taken by the Swedish government is correct. The explanations brought forward for this are mostly about the importance of allowing the citizens of Sweden the freedom to choose to act rather than to force action through formal restrictions. The emphasis is on trusting the Swedes to act in an appropriate manner through distancing and avoiding the spread of the virus.

The Swedes who are interviewed in vox pop interviews in the street, both young and old, are seen drinking, laughing, and having fun in Stockholm. The image of Swedes relaxing together outside at open air cafés and bars, enjoying the sun, and drinking cold beer is frequently depicted in both written form and pictures (Andreassen, 2020d; Husby Sandnes, 2020b; Thorp Bjørnstad, 2020). This in contrast to the situation in Norway where, the articles remind the readers, all alcohol service has been suspended. In one article the decision to suspend alcohol service in Norway is described as something the Swedes are fascinated by and struggle to understand (Andreassen, 2020d). The depictions of Swedes enjoying beer in the sun often come right after or right before descriptions of the virus spreading fast and wide throughout the Swedish society and the growing number of related deaths. This sharp contrast between disease and death and the relaxed and happy Swedes creates a sense of bewilderment and surprise that the Swedes are either unaware of the death and tragedy happening around them, or aware but still choosing not to care or act. These quotes by two different Swedes commenting on the situation while drinking inside a bar in Stockholm illustrate this attitude:

‘–This is typical of Sweden! To say that there is a problem, but not do much about it, laughs 19-year-old Ebba Deusdel. […] –It is difficult to know who is right, Norway or Sweden. But it's nice to be able to have a beer’

(Husby Sandnes, 2020c)
The 19-year-old’s laughter right after the admittance of a problem, as well as the statement by the second person about appreciating being able to have a beer helps create the impression that the Swedes are not too concerned about the ongoing situation. And the trust in the Swedish people to practice distancing without being forced to do so comes across as naïve in this context. This quote from an outdoor bar in central Stockholm also adds to the feeling that Swedes realise what is happening, but still do not really care:

Several of the young men around the table suspect that they have been infected, but none of them have had it confirmed. The test regime is poorly developed. One of them tells a horror story about a 22-year-old friend who became so ill that he had to be hospitalized and connected to a respirator to survive. Nevertheless, they do not feel that they are in danger. "I do not feel like I'm in the risk group," says one of them.

(Andreassen, 2020d)

The lack of concern expressed by the young man, despite the fact that he personally knows someone who has been seriously ill from the virus and therefore might be expected to understand the gravity of the situation, leaves the reader with a sense of puzzlement. The setting of the story with the young men casually talking about the situation while drinking beer in a crowded outdoor bar in central Stockholm adds to the impression of Swedes as care-free or even nonchalant in the face of crisis (Andreassen, 2020d).

It's not just the younger citizens of Sweden who have a relaxed and carefree attitude towards the virus. Older Swedes are also supporting the Swedish government’s strategy. An interview in Stockholm with a couple who are 70- and 64-years old reveals that ‘[t]hey trust the Swedish model and believe that it is best for the professional authorities to be in control. It is always "fun" to be scientific guinea pigs, the couple says’ (Husby Sandnes, 2020b). A 71-year-old woman inside a hamburger bar in Stockholm city shares a similar perspective: ‘“The Swedish model is good, compared to the Norwegian,” says Harreith, who enjoys a glass of sparkling wine’ (Husby Sandnes, 2020b). The feeling the reader is left with is that in general, the Swedes are happy with way things are going, and enjoy being able to carry on with their lives almost as normal.

**Sweden is poorly prepared for crisis**

Sweden is portrayed as a society that is unprepared to handle crisis. The lack of preparedness is displayed in a number of ways such as the lack of emergency stocks of personal protective
equipment, authorities that are slow to react, a poorly designed system for sick leave and bad communications between different levels of administration within the Swedish health care sector (Andreassen, 2020c, 2020b, 2020d; Fevang & Mamelund, 2020; Quist, 2020; Senneset, 2020). In the majority of articles, the situation in Sweden is compared to that in Norway, where these concerns are not present, or at least not to the same extent. References to Sweden’s lack of experience of crisis, war, and hardship, in combination with the failure to control the spread of the virus tells the story of a country and a culture that lacks the proper experience for crisis management. The failing of the Swedish strategy is understood to not just be about timing or bad luck but is rather symptoms of deeper cultural and historical factors, such as the absence of a major crisis in modern Swedish history:

Perhaps because Sweden differs in almost all areas from almost all other countries. The most striking thing is that Sweden has had peace for more than 200 years. No wars, no revolutions, no major social upheavals. And thus, no existential conflicts where life is set against life.  

(Rosenberg, 2020)

The Swedes are not prepared to make hard decisions because they have not been forced to do so in the last few hundred years. The strong ability to work together in crisis is in contrast used to explain the quick and successful response of the Norwegian people. A professor in rhetoric evaluates the Norwegian response in an article in Aftenposten stating that ‘- it is as if a war-like state has struck the people. The belief in community, responsibility, collective hard work, herd mentality, the feeling of national unity’ (Pettrém, 2020). The Norwegian word ‘dugnad’ is used to describe the Norwegian people’s state of mind, a word which roughly translates to collective voluntary work, used to describe the action of being there for your fellow human being and working together. The Norwegian government has invited this reaction not through fear but rather through an ‘invitation to work together with a shared responsibility’, as opposed to in both Sweden and Denmark where the governments have been more focused on giving orders to the people (Pettrém, 2020).

Other situations where Sweden has acted in what is seen as an irrational or naïve way, especially compared to the rest of the Nordic countries, are referenced in order to put the Swedish coronavirus strategy into a larger context. For example the so called migrant crisis in 2015 and the decision to downsize the Swedish Armed Forces at the beginning of the 21st century.
(Arvidsson, 2020). Even the Norwegian economy is understood to be more robust and well prepared for crisis than the Swedish one. The Norwegian finance minister Jan Tore Sanner is quoted saying: ‘the Swedish economy is in a different situation than here in Norway. The Norwegian economy is solid and we have good experience of dealing with setbacks and crises’ (Haugan, 2020). In contrast to the relaxed Swedes, the general public in Norway is making sacrifices in order to protect and keep their countrymen safe. A quote from a Norwegian ski entrepreneur who was forced to close down his whole business with a few days’ notice illustrates the Norwegian attitude: ‘–It is of course very sad. Giving people fantastic skiing and mountain experiences is what we live for. But we fully support the authorities' and the municipality's decision. Health and safety must come first’. This is stated in an article next to a large picture of Swedish people partying in a bar in Stockholm (Misje, 2020).

**It is impossible to say whether the Swedish or Norwegian strategy is right**

While the most prominent narratives in the Norwegian articles reveal projections of Sweden as an example not to follow, there is one narrative that emerges which says that we should be cautious about drawing too many definitive conclusions about who is the winner and who is loser of the pandemic. In this narrative, there is less criticism towards Sweden and instead a call for a less competitive and alienating rhetoric, urging the people in Norway not to focus on pinning the two countries against each other. In this narrative the readers are reminded that the Scandinavian countries have a lot in common (Berg Bentzørd, 2020; Slettholm, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

This is most clearly shown regarding the issue of closing schools and pre-schools. Here we can find a more positive or at least nuanced view towards Sweden. Sweden is still acting in a different manner than Norway, but this time in a way that Norway could perhaps learn something from. In contrast with Denmark and Norway, Sweden has decided to keep its schools and pre-schools open. Keeping the schools open helps to protect children, since the closing of schools is known to have negative effects on children in general, and children from socially or economically vulnerable homes in particular (Skogstrøm & Braathen, 2020; Vogt et al., 2020). One article references the Swedish decision regarding schools and argues that ‘we need to take a broader perspective on this pandemic. A one-sided look at the number of intensive care beds in hospitals is to do injustice to many vulnerable groups in society, with children being the most important example’ (Vogt et al., 2020). Because children rarely get seriously ill from covid-19, the choice to keep the schools open is considered the best choice for children overall, even
if it might not be the best choice for society at large. The issue here is that there exists no simple answers, but the decision to keep schools open is presented as testimony of Sweden at least taking responsibility for the wellbeing of its children.

4.2. Denmark

In total, five main narratives were identified in the Danish articles. They are presented in the following sections.

The Swedish corona strategy has failed

One of the identified narratives is, similarly to in Norway, that the Swedish strategy against the coronavirus has failed. The political decisions taken by the Swedish government are the reason for this, but also the general attitude amongst the Swedish population (“Corona i Sverige,” 2020; “Svenske Dødstal Kan Vaere Højere End Hidtil Antaget.,” 2020; “Sverige Var Ikke Forberedt Godt Nok På Corona,” 2020; Heltberg, 2020; Olsen, 2020; Olsson, 2020a). A quote from an article titled ‘Swedish bureaucrats have blood on their hands’ in Politiken in May 2020 written by a professor in social anthropology at a Swedish university illustrates this:

Infection and thousands of deaths in Sweden could in fact have been avoided if a different policy had been pursued. Not coronavirus, but Swedish policy in relation to corona has led to thousands of unnecessary Swedish deaths and grief for the families of the dead. [...] That the Swedes accept this ‘inevitability’ from their authorities is the real Swedish tragedy.

(Sampson, 2020)

It is not the virus in itself that is the reason for the failure, but the inadequate response to it. The reaction from the Swedish people is not only a part of the problem but even the ‘real’ tragedy, conveying a strong sense of disappointment in the Swedes, who the author would have expected to react differently when their government failed to take action. The fact that the author of the article is himself a Swede creates a sense of there being a small group of Swedish people who are recognizing what is happening, but who are not being heard by the rest of their society. It is not only articles written by Swedes who tell this story but articles written by Danish journalists also showcase a strong sense of bewilderment and disappointment in the Swedish response. In one article the author even goes as far as saying Sweden is a lost cause.

For heaven’s sake, what is happening, and why? The Swedish prime minister Stefan Löfven must be tossing and turning in bed at night over this nightmare which has turned
out to be persistent rather than temporary. When Sweden comes out on the other side there will be a great parliamentary debate about the policies that step by step have led the country to the cemetery of the global great losers. We can praise Sweden, which is something I happily do, but if you are walking down the road into the abyss, then stop walking! But now, it is too late.

(Heltberg, 2020)

Sweden is here seen to be voluntarily walking into the abyss without any plans of stopping. And at this point in time (noticeably around two months into the pandemic) it is already too late. Sweden is a lost cause, whose actions are hard to understand from the Danish perspective. Sweden is not only failing in comparison to Denmark, but it is deemed as one of the ‘great losers’ of the world. In a shorter send in article in Politiken where the readers of the paper are allowed to voice their opinion one reader writes in favour of closing the Sweden-Denmark border.

[Let the tourists wait. They would probably rather go home and fight for their own loved ones. We can already observe that the Danes to a large extent both understand and adapt to the information that our politicians provide. We simply take care of each other. We are each other's loved ones. It is possible that Sweden does not have quite as strong cohesiveness as we have in Denmark. I believe that our strong cohesiveness in Denmark will have a positive effect on how many human lives we manage to save.

(Fich, 2020)

Swedes are here reduced to tourists who should be kept out of the country as long as the virus is still spreading, in order to protect the Danish people. The author speculates how the reason for the failure of the Swedish strategy could be a lack of care for one another, as opposed to the Danish unity, which will help save lives.

In one article in Politiken in May 2020 the author states that ‘the unity in the Nordic region is being rocked in its foundation due to Sweden's covid-19 management’(Munch, 2020)s. In the article a number of Danish politicians share their support for keeping the border to Sweden closed until Sweden has gotten the situation under control. It is not only Denmark who wants to stop Swedes from entering their country, the minister for internal affairs in Finland also shares her views on the possibility of easing border restrictions in the region.

‘At this point in time a common Nordic approach for lifting travel restrictions between the Nordic countries is not on the agenda’, the Finnish Minister of Internal Affairs, Maria Ohisalo, told Sydsvenskan, identifying Sweden as the one country that is not welcome in
the club. ‘Norway, Denmark and Iceland have stabilized the situation. The situation in Sweden is more disquieting’.

(Munch, 2020)

Sweden is described as not just different from Denmark, but once again seen as the odd man out amongst all of its Nordic neighbours.

**The Danish fear of Sweden is an overreaction**

A competing narrative against the narrative of Sweden as a failure is a narrative which questions if the fear of Sweden that Danish people are giving expression to is reasonable. Comparisons between Sweden and Denmark are here said to be over exaggerating the difference between the two countries strategies (Clausen et al., 2020; Gøtzche, 2020; Rosborg, 2020; “Sverige Og Danmark Kan Ikke Sammenlignes,” 2020). An excerpt from an article in Politiken in April 2020 tells the story about a Danish woman who commutes to Sweden for work:

> [H]er children have reacted every time she has returned home from Sweden, potentially carrying the Swedish virus: ‘All this focus on the difference between Sweden and Denmark during corona has actually meant that my family has not dared to come close to me’, she says.

(Bech-Danielsen, 2020)

This story does two things. It demonstrates the level of threat people in Denmark feel against Sweden and what has been named ‘the Swedish virus’. Calling the virus ‘Swedish’ really demonstrates the association between the virus and Sweden. However, the story also portrays this as a tragedy. The narrator puts emphasis on how a fixation on the perceived differences between Denmark and Sweden is the reason why this woman’s own children are scared to come near her, and not the actual virus itself. This narrative is present in other articles, where the Danish perception of Sweden and the pandemic emerges as an overreaction. A Swedish journalist writes in Politiken describing her frustration about the views on Sweden in Denmark.

> [I]t is difficult not to look across the strait to Denmark, not least because Sweden once again is stirring up emotions. And they are not gentle, I must say. Some days I try to join discussions on social media and correct misunderstandings and outright lies, other days I have to log out when I see people using terms like 'Stockholm bloodbath' when making predictions about the Swedish strategy.

(Olsson, 2020c)

Stockholm bloodbath is a reference to a particularly violent historical event when the Danish king Christian II ordered the execution of a large number of Swedes in the days following his
coronation as monarch of Sweden in 1520. This creates a sense of an overly dramatic and even hostile Danish attitude towards the Swedes.

The Swedes feel betrayed by Denmark
The decision by the Danish government to close the border to Sweden with the aim of stopping the spread of the virus has created a great sense of disappointment and anger in Sweden, especially throughout the southern parts of Sweden. There is a sense amongst the people here of being alienated by Denmark, who they consider themselves to be closely connected to. The fact that the Danish government has opted to re-open the border between Denmark and Germany while choosing to keep the Swedish border closed, despite infection rates being higher in Copenhagen than in the southern parts of Sweden, is seen as hypocritical and discriminating. Especially since Danes are still free to travel to and from Sweden, and frequently do so. A hairdresser in Malmö says to Politiken that ‘but we can’t travel to Denmark, even if the infection rate in Skåne is lower than in Copenhagen. And now they also added that Germans and Norwegians can travel to Denmark, but we can’t. It’s pointless and shows a double standard’ (Bosrup, 2020).

It is not only ordinary citizens who are critical of the perceived Danish hypocrisy, Swedish politicians are also expressing their disapproval. A member of the Swedish parliament, representing the southern parts of Sweden, is quoted criticizing the logic behind the decision.

He understands the Danish worry about corona and the spread of infection but thinks it is important to keep in mind that the closure of the borders was not based on a professional judgement about health but was rather a political decision. ‘But now when you open the border again, you use the health as an argument. It worries me that freedom is being viewed as something that can be limited when it feels suitable ’, he says and calls it hypocrisy that Danes have been visited Scania a lot in recent weeks.

(Olsson, 2020b)

Both the Swedish Minister for Nordic Cooperation and Sweden’s Minister for Foreign Affairs are also heard expressing their concern about the one-sided border closing.

It will be unfortunate if Denmark chooses to open up towards Germany and discriminate against Sweden. We are very critical of that. And we have reprimanded Denmark for it. We do not think it is acceptable for one country to discriminate against another when it comes to open borders within the internal market.

(Sweden's minister for Nordic cooperation, Anna Hallberg, in Olsson, 2020a)
The fact that Sweden is being singled out as the only country in the region for whom the fundamental norm of open borders within the EU does not apply is met with a strong sense of indignation. Especially since the arguments that the decision is based upon are understood as illogical and even dishonest.

In the southern parts of Sweden there is an extra layer of disappointment about being treated the same way as the rest of Sweden, as there exists a special connection and shared identity between the south of Sweden and Denmark. This statement made by the major of a town in southern Sweden about the closed border demonstrates the Swedish perspective.

My suggestion is to start by opening the border to those who live in the old Danish areas of Scania, Halland and Blekinge. We have a very low spread of infection. To me, Copenhagen is more my capital than Stockholm is. I am more often in Copenhagen. We are 38 kilometers from Copenhagen and 500 kilometers from Stockholm.

(Thobo-Carlsen, 2020)

A clear articulation of a closeness and identification with Denmark can be found here through the historical reference to the time when the south of Sweden was a part of Denmark as well as the physical closeness to Denmark, here compared to the distant capital Stockholm. The line being drawn at the Sweden-Denmark border in order to stop the spread of the virus is seen as unfair and illogical, since the infection rate is lower in the southern parts of Sweden than in Denmark. There is a rejection of the idea of being grouped together with the rest of Sweden on this issue.

The importance of a strong connection between Denmark and the southern part of Sweden is however not only advocated by the Swedes but is also shared by parts of the Danish society. A member of the Swedish parliament representing the Swedish town of Malmö and a member of the Danish parliament argue together for the importance of keeping the border between the two regions open, in an opinion piece in Politiken in May 2020.

A strong Copenhagen is simply dependent on Scania and southern Sweden. But time and time again in the last few years, severe restrictions have been placed on the possibility of traveling across the Sound. This is not a sustainable option if we want a strong region that can compete with other metropolitan areas in Europe for talent, investment, and infrastructure.

(Carsten Nielsen & Paarup Petersen, 2020)
The Öresund region is from this perspective understood as a European metropolitan area, where the connection and cooperation between the two sides of the strait is a prerequisite for being a strong competitor amongst other areas in Europe. It is not just the south of Sweden that is dependent on Copenhagen, there is a perceived mutual dependency.

**The Swedes feel their views on freedom are different from the Danish**

While Sweden is seen as a failure, there is also a general tone of surprise about the lack of restrictions in Sweden, since the stereotype about Sweden in Denmark is that Swedes are a nation of ‘prohibition’ and caution, in contrast to the self-image of the Danish people as carefree and not too worried about rules. ‘Who would have thought? Carefree Denmark has turned into the cautious one in the group, when it comes to the opening of schools in the Nordic region’ (Fuglsang, 2020). These stereotypes have now been turned upside down by the countries’ reactions to the pandemic.

Sweden is in this narrative understood as careful not to compromise ‘democratic values’, such as individual freedom and wellbeing, through its actions during the pandemic (Rubin, 2020). In a leading article in Politiken with the title ‘Is the price too high?’ the lack of coercive measures in Sweden is compared to those put in place in Denmark and the reader is urged to take a critical approach to and, when necessary, challenge the decisions made by the Danish government, even in times of crisis: ‘even here in the moment of crisis and seriousness, it is important to remember that we are still a democracy and a liberal society’ (Politiken, 2020). In one article Sweden is referred to as ‘The Freedom country’ and here ordinary Swedes explain the importance of freedom of choice during the pandemic. A hairdresser in Malmö who is asked how he would feel about a ‘Danish’ decision by the Swedish authorities responds that: ‘I would struggle with that because it would restrict my freedom. I can take on that responsibility myself’ (Klarskov, 2020). He goes on to state:

In my personal view, restricted freedoms is an important issue. I would rather take responsibility for myself and my customers. I have a holiday home near Norrköping. I have not driven there in two to three months because of the situation. It is a responsibility that I take on myself. But freedom is important.

(Klarskov, 2020)

The Swedes feel that trusting the citizens to be careful and follow the advice of the authorities, for example not to travel to other parts of the country, without imposing coercive restrictions is
the most reasonable way to handle the pandemic. In this way, the freedom of the citizen is protected. The decision to allow most public places to remain open is also viewed as a good choice from a public health perspective. One woman explains to Politiken why.

Theres Zoi Karlsson is a supporter of the Swedish policy, personified by the country's controversial state epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell. Theres Zoi Karlsson believes he is right in his policies against the spread of the virus. ‘I think a lot of people feel bad about just being at home. I think the suicide rates, the self-harm will increase. That people will struggle with mental health. Our lives have not been put on hold. We have open restaurants and can do whatever we want. You just have to keep your distance, wash your hands and all that. And we do that too’, she says.

(Klarskov, 2020)

The state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell is described as controversial outside Sweden but as supported from the Swedes themselves. Anders Tegnell himself comments that ‘we have done what we normally do in Sweden in terms of public health; we ask people to take responsibility and do the things they think suit them best in terms of reducing infection’ (Rosborg, 2020). Allow and trusting the Swedish citizens to take the responsibility to stop the spread of the virus on their own initiative is understood as a positive and uncontroversial choice by both the Swedes and their government.

**Sweden and Denmark as partners within the EU**

A less prominent but still present narrative is that of Sweden and Denmark as partners within the EU in regard to the discussions about a financial EU recovery package. Denmark and Sweden are here grouped together along with Austria and The Netherlands in what is informally referred to as ‘the frugal four’, with the common stand that financial support to EU member states should be carried out primarily in the form of loans, rather than direct funds (Fris, 2020; Gram Jensen, 2020; Mikkelsen, 2020). In these articles the focus is usually instead on the divide between the South and the North of Europe.

It is in the southern European countries, including France and Spain, where the hospitals are hit the hardest. They are trapped in a vicious choice between stopping the spread of the virus or saving the economy […] The strict northern Europeans are demanding tough reforms to save the Greek economy.

(Mikkelsen, 2020)

Here Sweden is grouped in with the financially ‘strict Northern Europe’, and not even mentioned as one of the hardest hit countries in Europe.
4.3. Implications for the collective Nordic identity

In this section I discuss the second research question of how Sweden is positioned in the Nordic context in regard to identity, and the implications of this for the Nordic collective identity.

The majority of the Norwegian narratives portrays Sweden, understood here to also include the Swedish population, as irresponsible, unprepared and a bit naïve. The trust that is displayed between the Swedish citizens and the government appears to be misplaced. In general, the Norwegian narratives reveal a tone of bewilderment and disappointment, showing that Sweden is not living up to the expectations put on them by the Norwegians. Sweden is first and foremost compared to Norway but also positioned as different, in a negative way, from the rest of the Nordic countries and the rest of the Western world. The Danish narratives about Sweden offer a somewhat more ambiguous positioning of Sweden, where evidence can be found both of a Danish distancing from Sweden, as well as expressions of solidarity and a sense of shared identity. The Danish narratives are less pronounced and to a larger degree competing with each other, with some of them being positive towards Sweden, the Swedish people, and the Swedish strategy, whereas others are not. The less cohesive views on Sweden in Denmark might also reflect a sense of self-doubt in the Danish society, where the self-image of being the carefree neighbour to the otherwise strict and cautious Sweden has been challenged.

In both Norway and Denmark national identities are clearly attached to the strategies, through the ubiquitous use terms such as ‘the Swedish strategy’, ‘the Norwegian strategy’ or ‘The Danish choice’, clearly framing the strategies as representations of the nations themselves. Cultural and historical aspects are also used when trying to understand the different actions, where the caring and cohesiveness of the Norwegian people is highlighted as a fundamental aspect of Norwegian reaction, and Sweden’s lack of care and experience of crisis is at least heavily implied to be the reason behind their failure. There is also a sense of sadness and pitying of those Swedes that are victims of the pandemic, especially because so many of these deaths are seen as unnecessary and avoidable. References to other recent times issues where Sweden has also been deemed different from its neighbours are mentioned in relation to the pandemic as well. One such issue is immigration, where ‘discursive divisions’ have previously been identified as something that could become an issue for the projection of a Nordic narrative to the world (Marklund, 2017, p. 634).
There is also an attempt in Norway to counterbalance this narrative about Sweden by focusing on the complexity of the situation and those aspects of the crisis that unites the two countries. This, as well as the fact that Norway clearly expected Sweden to do better, shows that the relationship between the two countries is an important one for the Norwegians, even if this relationship now might have taken a hit.

The narratives reveal a lack of trust between the countries. The Norwegians cannot understand the nonchalant Swedish attitude in times of crisis and do not see Sweden as a someone you can count on in times of crisis. The Danish on their side have decided to block Swedes from entering Denmark from a fear of the spread of the ‘Swedish’ virus, a decision which has exasperated both Swedes and some Danes and called the openness of the Swedish-Danish relationship into question.

In both Denmark and Norway outright references to the Nordic region as a whole are not very common but in those cases the Nordic region is mentioned Sweden is most often referred to as a hinderance to cooperation. At least in this initial stage the pandemic is not recognized as an issue which can be tackled through cooperation, not unless Sweden gets the situation under control. The Öresund region is the main exception to the otherwise large focus on differences between the nations. Here people on both sides of the border project a sense of common identity, which must be protected. The south of Sweden is here instead seen to distance itself from the rest of Sweden, rather than there being an attempt to bring the whole of the two countries closer together.

While the Swedish stance is that the differences between the countries’ strategies and the severity of the situation in each country have been overblown, the Swedes are giving expression to a distinction between them and the Norwegians and Danes when it comes to the interpretation of freedom during the pandemic. Trust in people to do the right thing without being forced to do so is highly valued, and the Danish and Norwegian responses are seen as unreasonable and unnecessary violations of individual freedom.
5. Conclusion

In this section I discuss the implications of the findings for the Nordic collective status seeking, the contributions made to the research field of political science, some of the limitations of this study, as well as suggestions for future research.

The aim of this thesis was to explore the implications of a transboundary crisis on a community of states’ collective status seeking processes. I wanted to explore if Røren’s statement that the collective Nordic identity is based on such a strong sense of mutual trust and friendship that the Nordic countries would not act in such a way that their neighbours’ status might be challenged, held true at the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic. This was done through a narrative analysis of the narratives about Sweden and the pandemic in Norwegian and Danish newspapers during the spring of 2020. The analysis showed evidence of a distancing from Sweden in both Denmark and Norway. The distancing was however more noticeable in Norway than in Denmark. The distancing of Sweden from the two others, especially through narratives that questions if Sweden is living up to the values that the Nordic identity is based on in the first place, shows a rift in the collective identity of the Nordic countries. This could threaten the ability to project a common Nordic identity and the common Nordic status seeking in the long run. A significantly challenged status could also create potential security risk for countries like the Nordics who use their status for influence and security.

All collective identities can be said to be built upon a certain level of trust. If that trust is damaged, then the collective identity, as well as the ability to project this identity towards the rest of the world, is undermined. However, the Nordic collective identity and status seeking contains an extra layer since the collective identity in itself is understood to be based on values such as freedom, trust, and openness. Upkeeping these values is to perform a Nordic identity. The narratives about Sweden in Norway and Denmark during the covid-19 pandemic show evidence of a disagreement about how to interpret and enact some of these values in times of crisis. The statements from all three countries are shown to undermine the belief in the other countries’ ability to uphold some of the values associated with the Nordic region, values that are used to promote Nordic region abroad. These include the wellbeing of citizens, freedom, and the ability to handle crisis. This raises questions about the use of these types of values and attributes for building a collective identity to seek status upon, especially for a group of states.
Values such as freedom and openness can be interpreted in a variety of ways and times of crisis seem to put these differences to the test in the Nordic countries.

Transboundary crises are likely to become more common. Through studying the implications of a transboundary crisis for the collective status seeking of a group of states, this thesis contributes to the literature on both status seeking and transboundary crises. It also adds insights about what role a transboundary crisis can play for the dynamics of the collective identity of a group of states. The analysis shows that a transboundary crisis can carry with it important implications for a group of states who cooperate on status seeking, if this cooperation is not also extended to cooperation in times of crisis, and a mutual understanding of how to handle a crisis. A transboundary crisis is by definition a complex crisis that forces states to make decisions without any pre-given answers. The fact that the crisis defies organisational and legal boundaries means that these decisions have effects beyond the boundaries of jurisdiction or authority of those who make the decisions.

It also seems possible from the results of the analysis that a transboundary crisis, because of its rapid pace, defiance of organisational boundaries and complexity can exacerbate already existing differences or disparities within a collective identity. This can be seen when references are made to past events where the actions of Sweden were negatively judged by their Nordic neighbours. This could however also mean that aspects that are hindering cooperation are brought to attention. This thesis had only studied the initial phase of the covid-19 pandemic and while the strength and cohesiveness of the Nordic identity was challenged during this time, it is not impossible that the events of the pandemic could lead to a reification and strengthening of the Nordic collective identity in the long run, which could in turn create better opportunities for a common status seeking. A study of the implications of the covid-19 pandemic for the common status seeking of the Nordic countries once the crisis has ended would therefore also be interesting. Because this study does not include Iceland and Finland, the conclusions that can be made are limited to the results of the analysis of the Danish and Norwegian discourse. A study of the evolvement of the collective Nordic identity and status seeking in light of the pandemic over time would ideally also include the rest of the Nordic countries.
6. References

6.1. Literature


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6.2. Empirical references

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Husby Sandnes, Å. (2020c, April 6). Full Pinne i Stockholm. *VG.*

Husby Sandnes, Å. (2020d, April 8). Annerledeslandet. *VG.*


Misje, H. K. (2020, April 6). Ingen pinne i Hemsedal. *VG.*


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Thorp Bjørnstad, N. (2020, April 21). Stille før «stormen». *VG.*


**Denmark**


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Appendix. Newspaper articles

Norway


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Rosef, T. (2020, April 22). Stockholm over toppen. VG.

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Sæther, A. S. (2020, April 13). Færre enn fryktet har dødd. VG.


Sfrintzeris, Y. (2020, May 22). Melvin (9) fikk sjeldne symptomer på corona. VG.


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Thorp Bjørnstad, N. (2020, April 21). Stille før «stormen». VG.


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**Denmark**


Sverige var ikke forberedt godt nok på corona. (2020, April 12). *Politiken.*


