Adan Anwar, rapport självständigt arbete

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Offentlig Diplomati och Desinformationskampanjer I En Digital Tidsålder:
En Studie av hur Socialtjänstens Desinformationskampanjer och NATO-medlemskapsansökan påverkade Sveriges Offentliga Diplomati

Sammanfattning

Detta examensarbete belyste hur desinformationskampanjer på sociala medieplattformar och nyhetskanaler användes som verktyg för att påverka svensk offentlig diplomati. För att åstadkomma detta syftade den till att svara på följande forskningsfråga "Hur påverkar desinformationskampanjer, genom sociala medieplattformar och nyhetskanaler, Sveriges offentliga diplomati?". Examensarbetet tillämpade två fallstudier, den första är en inhemsk kontext bestående av den svenska socialtjänsten (SSS) och den svenska lagen om vård av unga (LVU), och den andra en internationell kontext är Sverige som ansöker om ett NATO medlemskap. Analysen använde ett sociotekniskt tillvägagångssätt som tolkar tidningsartiklar, inlägg i sociala medier och rapporter, som utgjorde det empiriska materialet. Dessutom användes ett analytiskt ramverk, uppdelat i tre tematiska avsnitt. De tematiska avsnitten bestod av 1) bakgrunden till ärendet; 2) de desinformationskampanjer som genomfördes inklusive de inblandade aktörerna; 3) det svenska offentliga diplomatiska svaret baserat på Joseph Nyes teori om politisk makt och offentlig diplomati. Studien upptäckte att både den inhemska och internationella kontexten påverkade Sveriges offentliga diplomati, där staten och myndigheter vidtog åtgärder som de tidigare inte gjort. Dessutom upptäckte den att nyhetskanaler och sociala plattformar inte kunde ses som två separata enheter när de genomförde desinformationskampanjer, utan istället som en ytterligare tredje enhet. Slutligen fann avhandlingen att de två fallen var likartade, trots deras olika sammanhang, eftersom desinformationskampanjer ofta bygger på tidigare rykten.

Nyckelord: Desinformationskampanjer, Sverige, offentlig diplomati, sociala medier, nyhetskanaler, digital tidsålder, politisk makt.

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Swedish Defence University

Adan Anwar, Thesis report

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Public Diplomacy and Disinformation Campaigns In A Digital Age:
A Study of How the Swedish Social Services Disinformation Campaigns and NATO Membership Application Impacted the Public Diplomacy of Sweden

<u>Abstract</u>

This thesis highlighted how disinformation campaigns on social media platforms and news outlets were used as tools to influence Swedish public diplomacy. To accomplish this, it aimed to answer the following research question *"How are disinformation campaigns, through social media platforms and news outlets, impacting Sweden's public diplomacy?"*. The thesis applied two case studies, the first being a domestic context consisting of the Swedish Social Services (SSS) and the Swedish Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act (LVU), and the second an international context being Sweden applying for a NATO membership. The analysis utilized a sociotechnical approach interpreting newspaper article, social media posts, and reports that made up the empirical material. In addition, an analytical framework, divided into three thematic sections, was used for the analysis. The thematic sections consisted of 1) background of the case; 2) the disinformation campaigns that were conducted including the actors involved; 3) the Swedish public diplomatic response based on Joseph Nye's theory about political power and public diplomacy. The thesis discovered that both the domestic and international context impacted Sweden's public diplomacy, where the government and governmental agencies took measures that they previously had not. Furthermore, it discovered that news outlets and social platforms could not be viewed as two separate entities when conducting disinformation campaigns, but instead as an additional third entity. Lastly, the thesis found the two cases to be similar, despite their different contexts, as disinformation campaigns often build on previous rumors.

<u>Keywords:</u> Disinformation campaigns, Sweden, public diplomacy, social media, news outlets, digital age, political power.

Adan Anwar

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I want to thank my master's thesis supervisor Petter Narby for continuously answering my emails, messages, as well as for helping me throughout this period. This thesis would not have been possible without him challenging and allowing me to view information and public diplomacy in a different way.

To my parents, a judge and a dentist, who fled from a war-torn Kurdistan to Sweden for a better life.
To my siblings, my older brother and younger sister, who constantly support and inspire me.
To the two countries close to my heart, Sweden and Kurdistan.
Kurdistan, a country yet to be recognized, where the mountains continue to be immovable and proud.
Sweden, a country I have been calling home for my whole life, providing me with endless tools and possibilities.

My aim and goals are to contribute to the Swedish cause, drawing inspiration from the challenges of minorities all over the world that have not been as privileged as I have been.

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1 Introduction

Technological developments have come to shape societies all over the world. In recent years, the rapid advancement of technology and the widespread adoption of the Internet have had profound impacts on societies worldwide (see Figure 1). With the Internet serving as a primary means of communication and information distribution, users have been able to increase their presence on the web and reshape the way they interact with one another (Roser, Ritchie, & Ortiz-Ospina, 2023). Additionally, this has led to a new domain of public diplomacy, where states and non-state actors compete to assert their influence and power in addition to shape global narratives in the digital sphere (Jones, 2022, p. 58). As a result, power has shifted from centralized institutions to distributed networks, as nodes within networks, where users and states alike take advantage of the opportunities offered by the digitalization (Ibid., p. xvi).
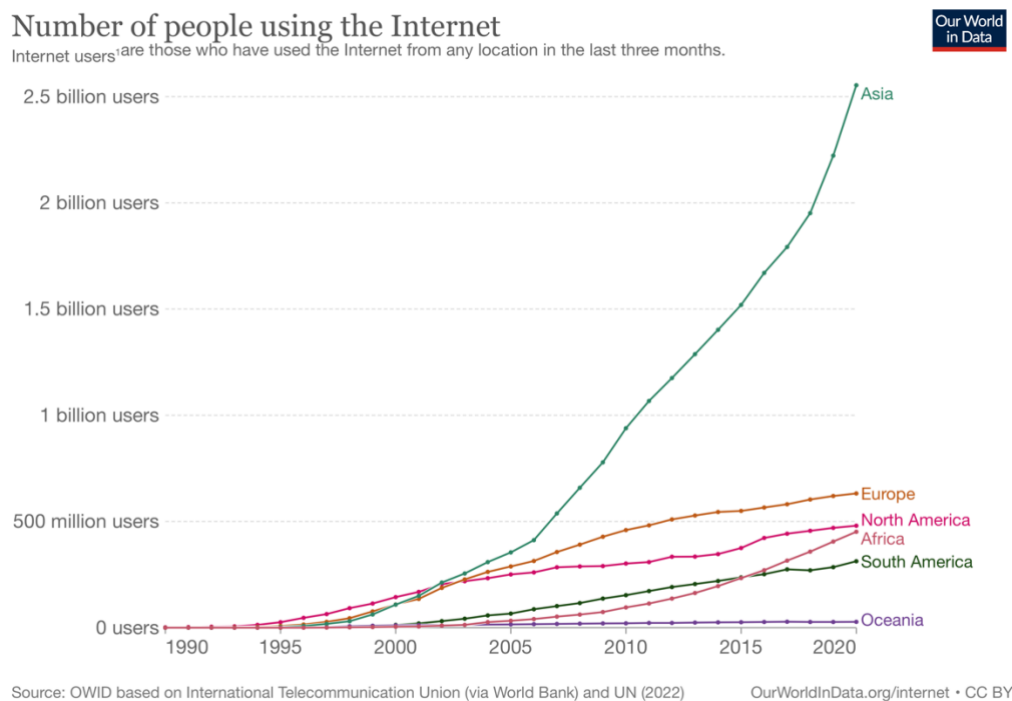
Figure 1. The increase of internet users (Roser, Ritchie, & Ortiz-Ospina, 2023)

Furthermore, technological developments have led to the introduction of social media platforms, that have allowed citizens to interact and communicate with each other, in spite of social and geopolitical constructions. With the rise of social media, people have come to be more reliant on these platforms, which have become virtual and boundless while offering security and encryption to users (Muro & Wilson, 2022, p. 350). State actors have increased their presence and influence in the digital era, but notably not all state-affiliated accounts are verified (Ibid., p. 351). As Yuval Noah Harari explains *"in the past, censorship worked by blocking the flow of information. In the twenty-first century, censorship works by flooding people with irrelevant information… in ancient times having power meant having access to data. Today, having power means knowing what to ignore."* (Harari, 2017, p. 419).

Smartphones have become the most common way of accessing news (Reuters Institute, 2022, p. 11). However, the complexity relies within continuing to engage people with the news, particularly when more people are becoming disengaged and disconnected, where they would rather pay attention to other content online (Ibid., p. 12). In 2022, there were approximately 9.5 million active social media users on a monthly basis in Sweden, with an annual growth rate of 11.2% from 2021 to 2022 (OOSGA, 2023). As seen on Figure 2, the interest among Swedish citizens has decreased since 2016, while there has been an increase between 2021 and 2022, most likely due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war (Ibid., p. 12). The decrease may also be due to "*selective news avoidance*", meaning that a great number of people choose to avoid the news or limit their exposure to it, due the news having a negative impact on them (Ibid., p. 13).
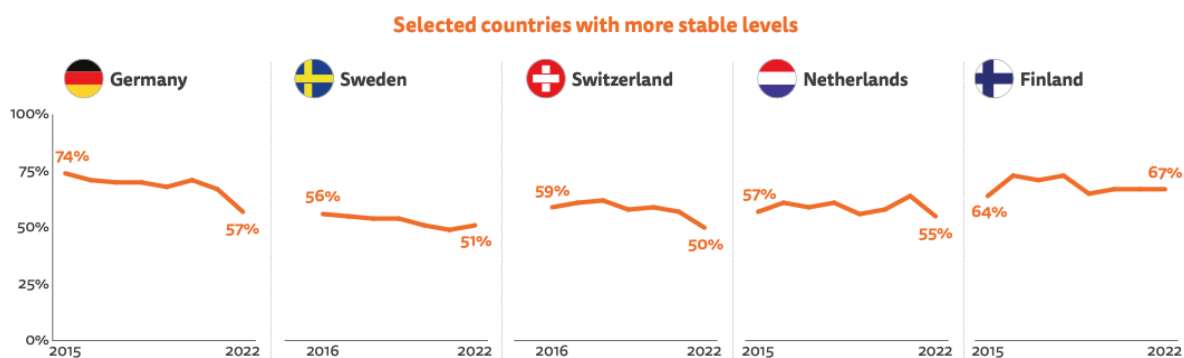
Figure 2. Displaying interest in news among citizens in European countries (Reuters Institute, 2022, p. 12)

Moreover, there are many other distractions surfacing on the web, making it more difficult to focus, resulting in a decrease of understanding of politics or science. (Harari, 2018). The three main drivers behind using social media in Sweden were *"Keeping in Touch with others"*, *"Filling Spare Time"*, *"Reading News Stories"* (see Figure 3). Hence, the issue is not the information not being published, but having an audience reading it and making sense of the information (OOSGA, 2023). A lot of the young audiences in Sweden have difficulties understanding journalism the way it is being carried out in news outlets, leaving space for news consumption on social media instead (Reuters Institute, 2022). This, in turn, creates an opportunity for state and non-state actors to use disinformation campaigns to target a wider audience in Sweden.
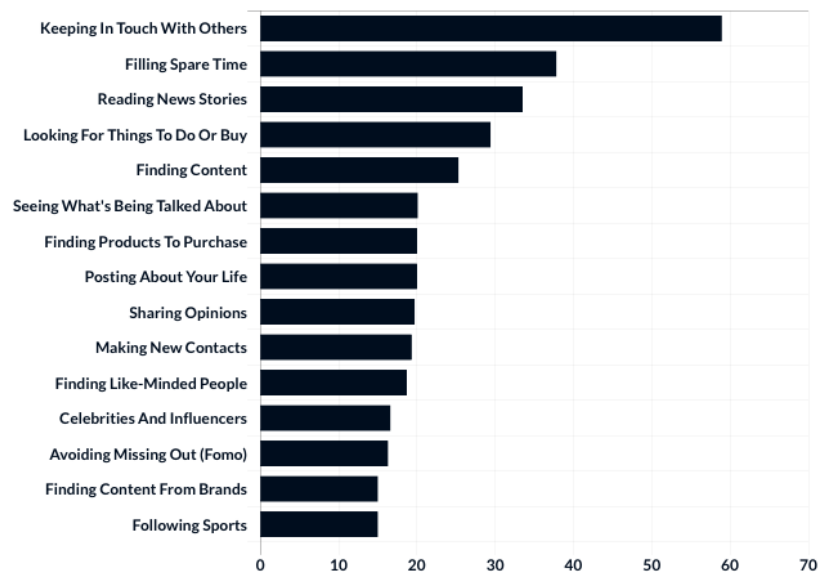
Figure 3. Main drivers behind using social media. Users in Sweden that are aged 16-64 years old (OOSGA, 2023)

1.1   Research Problem

The twenty-first century and its digital society has paved the way for complex hybrid polarized media landscapes, including the rapid increase of disinformation campaigns (Fjällhed, 2021, p. 227). Scholars have described the increase of disinformation as one the most vital implications, including society, politics, and media. Countering these disinformation campaigns, whether spread consciously or subconsciously, has been described as the "public diplomacy problem of our time" (Panment, 2018). A report evaluating the replies from 20 states to the disinformation threat described as *"the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has an important role to play in monitoring and providing early warning, especially in instances of malign campaigns targeting national interests abroad."* (Vilmer, Escorcia, Guillaume, & Herrera, 2018, p. 172).

The government of Sweden is devoted to deliver public services that works for every citizen, while simultaneously being accessible and transparent. In 2017, the government of Sweden established an objective to be the world leading at utilizing the opportunities created by digitization (Digitaliseringsrådet, 2023). This has also led to a major increase of usage regarding internet and various social media platforms. Antidemocratic disinformation campaigns conducted by certain actors targeting the democratic Swedish society, aiming to limit individuals' freedom and rights (Ranstorp, Ahlin, Hyllengren, & Normark, 2018, p. 10). These campaigns are often written in languages that are not taught in compulsory courses at the schools in Sweden (Norin, 2022, p. 30). Simultaneously, the trust for news in Sweden amid the citizens is at 50% (see Figure 4), proving that there is room for disinformation campaigns and other actors to interfere.

Figure 4. Proportion that trusts most news most of the time (Reuters Institute, 2022, p. 15)

Swedish embassies have noted the rise of lies circulating about the nation globally and domestically (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016). Consequently, Swedish government authorities declared *"the identification and countering of disinformation"* as a significant part of their priorities for the country's public diplomacy work (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2018).

Research has already sought to answer questions such as, How is social media impacting our use of internet? What kind of content are people seeking on social media? How are disinformation campaigns spread on social media? How can we decrease disinformation campaigns? (Bergh, 2019; Fjällhed, 2021; Jones, 2021). The impact of disinformation campaigns on public diplomacy in the digital age, mainly regarding Sweden, remains insufficient.

The purpose of this thesis is twofold. Firstly, it aims to contribute to our understanding of disinformation campaigns in public diplomacy from a Swedish perspective, which can be relevant for other nations as well. This includes analyzing how governments and governmental agencies respond to disinformation campaigns and the strategies they employ. Secondly, this thesis seeks to make theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions, with a particular focus on empirical research. The empirical analysis will study Sweden, beyond the threats faced from Russia, which is a novel approach compared to previous studies.

1.2   Aim and Research Question

The aim of this thesis is to highlight how numerous systematic domestic and global disinformation campaigns are used to impact public diplomacy (Tenove, 2020, p. 519; Ördén, 2022, p. 381). Especially as local actors discern and experience the influence of disinformation campaigns on a daily basis, often without knowing it. Therefore, the three specified contexts for the thesis are: Public diplomacy; Disinformation on social media and news outlets; Sweden. Resulting in the topic chosen for the thesis being *Public Diplomacy and Disinformation Campaigns in a Digital Age*. The reason to why this topic has been chosen is due to the Swedish society becoming more dependent on networked technologies for the infrastructures. Hence, public diplomacy is vital and relevant in the political and security policies of Sweden. This includes responding to disinformation campaigns from state and non-state actors.

The perspective can be viewed as socio-technical, instead of solely social or technical, indicating that these two aspects are not separate. Investigating social interactions from both a social science perspective and understanding how those interactions are impacted and made possible by technology will result in understanding how social aspects influence the development of technology (Bergh, 2019, p. 8). The type of disinformation campaigns mentioned in this thesis will view how it can decrease the trust to the state, but the aim is not to measure the decrease of trust, but to study it and see how this relates to Sweden's public diplomacy.

To accomplish this, the thesis will attempt to answer the following research question:
- **How are disinformation campaigns, through social media platforms and news outlets, impacting Sweden's public diplomacy?**

1.3   Disposition

The thesis comprises seven chapter. Chapter 1 introduced the topic of the thesis, the research problem in addition to the research question that this study aims to answer. Chapter 2 discusses previous research concerning the three contexts: public diplomacy with a focus on national images and global reputations; disinformation campaigns on social media and news outlets; and why Sweden has been chosen as the nation of interest. The theoretical premises of the thesis are presented in Chapter 3, while Chapter 4 outlines the research design, including an explanation of the analytical framework used in the analysis. Chapter 5 contains the empirical analysis and findings from the two cases studied. In chapter 6, the implications of the empirical findings are discussed, together with the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of disinformation campaigns and their impact on Sweden's public diplomacy. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the thesis.

2 Previous Research

The thesis builds upon previous research on public diplomacy, specifically examining the impact of national images and global reputations, as well as disinformation campaigns conducted through both social and news outlets, and their relevance to the Swedish context. This chapter presents the theories and findings that form the basis of the thesis, which will be further explained in the subsequent chapter.

2.1 Public Diplomacy (National Images and Global Reputations)

Taking into consideration that this study will be founded on sociotechnical concepts and models, it is of importance to gain a comprehensive understanding of previous research conducted on national images and global reputations. It can be claimed that we only comprehend a fraction of the world, and that this understanding is immensely dependent on what others have told us (Lippmann, 1922, p. xix). For this reason, an impact on the foreign publics' perception of a state can be seen as a social construction that is founded on personal connection along and mediated messages (Fjällhed, 2021, p. 230). A model of understanding national images through three various ways includes *" (1) personal experiences from travelling to or studying in another nation or by consuming locally branded products, (2) experiences of our personal connections in the form of tales we hear from friends and family, and (3) mediated messages as conveyed through print and broadcast media, through discussions on digital and social media or through the entertainment industry's portrayal of the nation in movies and books"* (Lee, Toth, & Shin, 2008, s. 274). Hence, prior research has shown that states and non-state actors often want to spread disinformation campaigns targeting one or multiple ones of these understandings of national images. As they are the most effective way to reach out to citizens, without having to construct completely new information. The attempts are often facilitated by the presence of minorities, as they exploit the feeling of non-belong (Vilmer, Escorcia, Guillaume, & Herrera, 2018, p. 65). A state with a strong global reputation, or as Van Ham (2001, p. 2) labels it "brand states" have become more dependent on their global reputations. A good reputation results in attracting foreign investments, tourists, wielding political influence and alliances. Concurrently, a negative global reputation would interfere with achieving the same goals (van Ham, 2008, s. 130). As such, a way of understanding a country's reputation is by looking at its ranking in the Nation Brand Index, which measures their international reputation.

Research on public diplomacy has further proven that in a world of political uncertainty, it is the responsibility of governments to inform the public and foreign policy decision-makers to reduce information uncertainty (Zhang, 2021, p. 305). The value of information lies in its ability to decrease uncertainty, which can be managed by exposing digital audiences to shared values, norms, and political aspirations (Ibid., p. 306). This is why news outlets and social media remains significant in further clarifying these values and maintaining transparency with citizens.

2.2 Disinformation Campaigns (Social Media and News Outlets)

Previous research within the field of disinformation campaigns has proven the study to be both complex and contested and can, depending on the researcher and context, refer to different meanings. This is also due to disinformation, as a recurring phenomenon in war, has been discussed through various concepts such as *war propaganda, psychological operations*, and *hybrid warfare* (Fjällhed, 2021, p. 227). Hence, I will not aim to come up with new definitions. This means that terms such as disinformation campaigns and propaganda will be used to describe the same phenomenon:

"*The goal of disinformation is to strategically influence decision-makers to pursue a pre-determined course of action in international affairs by altering their set of policy preferences, or if that's not possible, by paralyzing or neutralizing foreign policy decision-making processes.*" (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020, p. 645).

Using this definition for the terminologies that are studied for the different phenomenon, it will be uncomplicated to apply it in broader cases. This includes cases where disinformation is used by an initiating actor, or multiple actors, to interfere in the process of decision making amid a target audience that is outside their legal control, through generation and/or distributing information through publicly available social media platform (Jankowicz, 2020, p. xxvii; Jones, 2022, p. 8).

Moreover, Arild Bergh wrote a report on *"Social Network Centric Warfare*, where the aim was to provide the Norwegian Armed Forces and Ministry of Defense to expand their understanding of issues concerning social media-based influence operations (Bergh, 2019, p. 3). Bergh argues that *"a planned influence operations is executed by active operators and relies on social media affordances. These affordances aid influence operations' amplification and reach so that the content is spread widely and is added to the continuously aggregated and accumulated content stored by social media services.*" (Ibid., p. 3). This goes well with the description provided by Bjola & Papadakis (2020, p. 645), where information from influence operations is competing for the attention from individuals and groups, as an effort to enter into and manipulate their democracy and decision-making processes. Consequently, there has been a switch in power of controlling media to control public diplomacy, which is done through nodes within networks. A consequence of disinformation is its possibility to cause indoctrination, which can lead to incitement (Jones, 2022, p. 4). Depending on the type of indoctrination, the incitement can furthermore lead to violence and instability. It is vital to understand that disinformation campaigns are not about the truth per se, but about power.

It is often the case that social media platforms and news outlets are viewed as two different entities, used as tools to target state actors. However, a digital superpower requires using both human resources and digital technology to launch disinformation campaigns, often using social media platforms and news outlets interchangeably (Jones, 2022, p. 13). This requires the influence operations to be launched on domestic and international fronts (Ibid., p. 14).

2.2.1   News Outlets

News outlets aim to publish accurate information; however, disinformation has proven to spread faster than the truth (Jones, 2022, pp. 38-39). News outlets spend more time, patience, and effort into creating well-substantiated sourcing, confirmation along with expert evidence, which has resulted in them suffering from the fact of needing to be perceived as credible, truthful, and honest (Ibid., p. 194). This is due to more citizens consuming news on social media during the past decade, where the change has relied within the networks and social media platforms, they use (Reuters Institute, 2021, p. 51). In particular, journalists are excessively limited in their reporting, due to restrictions regarding time pressures, publicity space along with increasingly limited resources influencing the stories and events that are of importance (Fjällhed, 2021, p. 231). Despite that, traditional news outlets may also contribute to spreading disinformation through their own bias, for instance by being state-controlled. Scholars have for many years covered the global perspective of propaganda by state and non-state media, especially during times of war (Kamalipour & Snow, 2004; Jones, 2022: Muro & Wilson, 2022). These news outlets have been used to act as news makers and news breakers (Muro & Wilson, 2022, p. 359).

2.2.2   Social Media

Social media companies have created interactive platforms that provide users to create, modify, and exchange content (Muro & Wilson, 2022, p. 349). These social media platforms are composed of components that combine public with personal communication (Meikle, 2016, p. 6). In contrast to news outlets, these companies do not care about creating a neutral platform, instead, the focus is on business models depending on monitoring users, modifying and manipulating their behaviour, in addition to selling their attention to other companies for profit (Jones, 2022, p. 58). As argued by Marlies Glasius and Marcus Michaelsen *"[...] transcending spatial and political frontiers by design, the Internet has prompted a renegotiation of the boundaries of state power. As they seek to assert authority in the digital sphere, states increasingly depend on and cooperate with private companies that command online infrastructure and technical expertise. They also cooperate with and learn from one another, disseminating and legitimizing their ideas and tools for controlling the Internet in international and regional forums."* (Glasius & Michaelsen, 2018, p. 3796).

2.2.2.1   Twitter

This thesis will be including numerous social media platforms, however, the main one will be Twitter. This is due to many of the public diplomatic efforts being conducted there. Twitter is a social networking platform, including online news, where people can communicate through short messages known as tweets with a maximum of 280 characters, along with comment, share, like, and send private messages (Gil, 2021). Furthermore, users are able to post photos, URLs, videos, and plain text in their tweets (Seungeun Lee & D. Colautti, 2022, p. 1349). The range of possibilities of Twitter has made it into a very popular platform for citizens, governmental officials, news outlets, journalists, scholars, experts, and many others (Ibid., p. 1353). This allows for individuals, state, and non-state actors to express their opinions, but also influence a vast majority of users. Moreover, Twitter allows users to translate their

tweets into more than 34 different languages with a somewhat good accuracy (Twitter, 2022). This allows active and passive readers to not only read tweets, without having Twitter accounts, but also translate them into their language of choice (Muro & Wilson, 2022, p. 358). Content moderation has been a major challenge for Twitter, due to the functionality of hashtags, where they provide material to spread at a rapid pace through a targeted fashion (Wakeford & Smith, 2019, p. 172).

2.2.2.2   *Hijacking Trends and Hashtags on Twitter*

Hashtags on Twitter continue to be of great benefit as they allow users to teach out with their activities, and furthermore reach out with their disinformation campaigns, allowing the material to be spread at a rapid pace through a targeted fashion (Wakeford & Smith, 2019, p. 172). Any user is allowed to post with the hashtags of their choice, meaning that hijacking hashtags during events is an even greater possibility to gain traction. Moreover, hijacking a tweet allows for the message to reach an audience that may have not intended to seek that message in the first place.

2.2.3   Relation Between Social Media and News Outlets

The relation between social media and news outlets has become relevant to study as the dynamics between social media platforms and news outlets have change, due to the rise of social media as an alternative news source (Reuters Institute, 2022, p. 42). As seen on Figure 5, more 18–24-year-olds use social media as their primary source compared to news websites/apps. The main reason being that this age group grew up in the world of the social, participatory web, while also being more likely to access news sources such as social media, aggregator sites, and search engines, compared to the older groups (Ibid., p. 43). As such, the younger age groups are less critical of publishers and journalists, resulting in them being more susceptible to disinformation campaigns (Ibid., p. 35). This results in the possibility of social media and news outlets being viewed as a common entity, in addition to two separate entities as they have been in prior research.
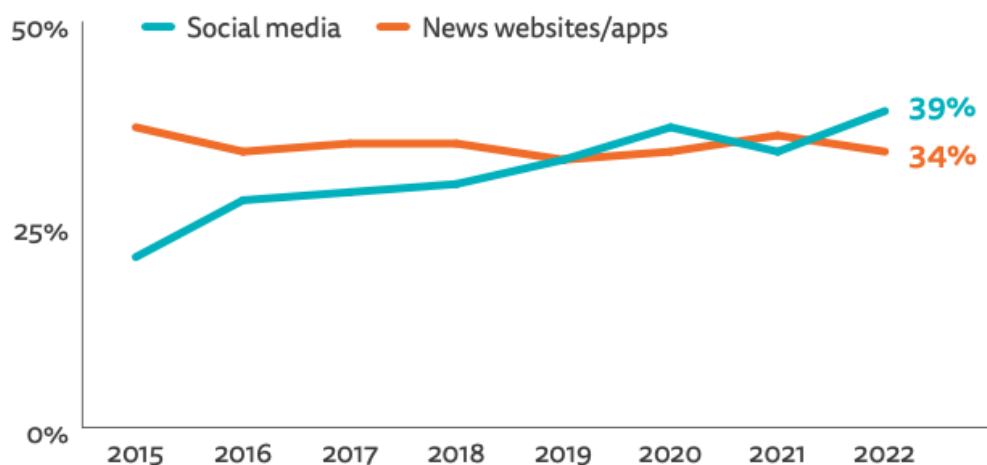
Figure 5. Proportion of 18–24-year-olds stating their main source of news (Reuters Institute, 2022, p. 42)

2.3   Sweden as a Context

The Swedish Institute (SI) publish yearly studies on Sweden's international reputation. According to the results from 2022, Sweden's reputation was generally positive (see Table 1), albeit evolving slowly (Swedish Institute, 2023, p. 4). The analysis conducted by SI is based on their own studies and encompasses the following: The perception of Sweden that different target groups have in addition to what they associate with Sweden and the interest in interacting with Sweden; publications about Sweden in international news and social media, including how Sweden is portrayed, how publications are spread and the interactions received; how Sweden performs in relation to other countries within a broad range of themes with relevance for activities promoting Sweden, manifested in international comparisons, surveys or published indexes (Ibid., p. 7).

Table 1. The Ten Highest Ranked Countries in the Nation Brand Index 2022 (Previous Year's Ranking in Parentheses) (Swedish Institute, 2023, p. 8)

Rank	Land (förändrad placering från 2021)	Förändrad poäng från föregående år
1	Tyskland (+/-)	-1,26
2	Japan (+1)	-0,99
3	Kanada (-1)	-1,12
4	Italien (+/-)	-0,97
5	Frankrike (+1)	-0,82
6	Storbritannien (-1)	-0,95
7	Schweiz (+/-)	-1,19
8	USA (+/-)	-1,39
9	Sverige (+/-)	-0,94
10	Australien (+/-)	-0,61

Swedish embassies have since 2016 reported about a growth of disinformation being spread about Sweden abroad (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016). This was related to the on-going European migration crisis, particularly Sweden's open migration policies, where the country was used as both a good and bad example. This impacted the initial utopian national image, where a dystopian portrayal accompanied. Disinformation regarding the police losing control in the suburbs and the Swedish law being replaced by Sharia-laws emerged (Fjällhed, 2021, p. 237). A study at that time stated that the image of Sweden remained mostly positive, however *"the presence of vast exaggerations and even pure disinformation about Sweden abroad is however new and must be considered severe"* in addition to these disinformation campaigns being spread by minor groups within the population (Swedish Institute, 2018, p. 28).

Previous research on disinformation campaigns directed at Sweden has been made, especially concerning state and non-state that have carried these out (Intelbrief, 2023; Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023; Norin, 2022). The research has mainly been focusing on threats from Salafists or Russia and the counter-measures on a technical or social level (Ranstorp et al., 2018, p. 9;

Manor & Bjola, 2021, p. 132). The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) provided a publication known as *"Countering information influence activities: A handbook for communicators"* in December 2019. Looking at the recommendations, the reports and articles do contain resources of combatting propaganda spread by Russia (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), 2019, p. 46). The purpose of the handbook is to *"increase your awareness and understanding of information influence campaign and develop your ability to respond."* (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), 2019, p. 9). Despite that, MSB express that the handbook does not provide a one-size-fits-all solution, due to each organization being dissimilar, communicates with various audiences, and faces different challenges (Ibid., p. 9). Moreover, the guidelines are more specific for communicators and discuss the different information influence techniques in addition to countering information influence.

Alicia Fjällhed published a report on *"Managing Disinformation Through Public Diplomacy"* where the Swedish countering strategies were emphasized (Fjällhed, 2021, p. 233). Fjällhed's research mainly included the example of former US President Donald Trump spreading alternative facts about Sweden not being a safe country (Ibid., p. 240). Moreover, she utilizes a pertinent analytical framework to help public diplomacy actors deal with uncertainties concerning disinformation, consisting of material based on a media analysis and a survey (Ibid., p. 235). The scarcity of previous research exploring the impact of disinformation campaigns, through social media platforms and news outlets, as a means to impact Sweden's public diplomacy further emphasizes the need for sociotechnical studies in this field.

2.4   Summary

Research on public diplomacy has primarily focused on the national image and global reputation of a nation. The emphasis for understanding a country has been through personal experiences or consumption of locally branded products; experiences from our personal connections; mediated messages as conveyed through media. Digitalization has led to states and non-states actors put major emphases on the latter two when spreading disinformation campaigns. Brand states have become more dependent on their global reputations, as these culminate in attracting foreign investments as well as political influences and alliances. Simultaneously, research on social media platforms proves that private companies tend to care more about profits than factual information. Social media and news outlets are often viewed as two separate entities, resulting in a parallel development where research has yet to explore the interactions. Moreover, research proves that digitalization has led to influence operations being launched on domestic, regional, and international fronts. Where news outlets have used social media platforms to spread their own states' propaganda. As a consequence, several of the development that the literature has observed seem to indicate that news outlets have gone beyond their own websites and magazines.

The lack of research on disinformation campaigns targeting Swedish public diplomacy, resulting in changes in political efforts and alliances is concerning. While there have been

measures taken to protect the Swedish nation from general disinformation campaigns, the defense against actors beyond Russia and extreme Islamists is limited. As such, there is ample room for this study to explore the impact of recent disinformation campaigns. Exploring this research gap may improve the understanding of how disinformation campaigns, from state and non-state actors, are used to interfere with public diplomacy, in a way where social media platforms and news outlets are used as two separate entities and interchangeably, to influence political interests and alliances.

3   Theory

This chapter outlines the theoretical premises that underpin the study. It will begin with explaining the role states and non-state actors play when attempting to interfere with the agenda and project power on a domestic and international scene. This will be done through drawing on findings from public diplomacy in a digital age. Lastly, the chapter will conclude by mentioning the theoretical expectations of the thesis.

3.1   Public Diplomacy as a Political Power in a Digital Age

In his book, "Homo Deus", Yuval Noah Harari emphasized the importance of knowing what to ignore in the age of information overload, where people are inundated with irrelevant information (Harari, 2017, p. 419). This idea has been echoed by other scholars as well, such as Joseph Nye, who pointed out that *"political leaders have long understood the power that comes from setting the agenda and determining the framework of a debate."* (Nye, 2008, p. 95). This thesis will make use of Joseph Nye's theory, as a central part, where soft powers have the ability to impact others in order to acquire the outcomes wanted through attraction (Ibid., p. 94). A country's soft power is similar to the previous research of brand states, where the power rests in resources of culture, values, and policies. Nye's theory on public diplomacy emphasizes three equally important dimensions. The first dimension involves daily communication, which entails providing context for domestic and foreign policy decisions and targeting the foreign press. This stage also requires preparation for handling crises, including swift responses to false charges and disinformation. The second dimension is strategic communication, which involves developing a clear and concise set of themes, similar to a political or advertising campaign. Lastly, the third dimension involves building long-lasting relationships with key individuals through conferences, seminars, and access to media channels (Nye, 2008, pp. 101-102).

Furthermore, studies on political power and public diplomacy have demonstrated that proactive or preemptive communication is significantly more effective than reactive communication (Nye., 2008, p. 101; Sheafer & Gabay, 2009, p. 462). The initiator of the communication is often successful in controlling the agenda, as long as the situation on which it is based continues (Sheafer & Gabay, 2009, p. 463). Research on defending against inaccurate information suggests that it is more challenging to debunk false information that to proactively counteract it, this is because corrections are inherently made in response to false claims (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021, p. 354). Challenging as it may be, debunking is often hindered by the tacit acceptance of the original, erroneous frame, which allows the actor responsible for spreading the falsehood to maintain control of the agenda (Ibid., p. 355).

Moreover, disinformation campaigns strive to attract the attention of individuals and groups, often by capitalizing on rumors. Events built on disinformation campaigns can lead to what is defined as *"rumor crises"* (Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 60). These refer to situations where false or misleading information are purposefully circulated to cause harm (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 67). Although the link between crisis communication and public diplomacy is seldom mentioned, they share similar qualities, including the ability to repair or

enhance the image and solve conflicts or crises to establish peace and stability (Auer, 2016, p. 128).

Media coverage has become a prerequisite for political influence (Sheafer & Gabay, 2009, p. 448). As a result, states and non-state actors have come to understand the importance of controlling the narrative and shaping public opinion through various means, including disinformation campaigns on social media and news outlets. Thus, this power of political influence is done through what Nye (2008, p. 97) describes as exerting their "soft power" and influencing the choices of other states.

With digitalization, the public now has more access to engage with public diplomacy through various media platforms, which creates a challenge for governments to control and neutralize public opinion. The low cost and flexibility of targeted messaging further gives political powers the ability to directly influence domestic state decision-making, culminating in public diplomacy becoming more complex (Nye, 2008, p. 104). It could be argued that Nye's study is not sufficiently exploring how public diplomacy is impacted by the interchangeable tools of social media platforms and news outlets. This is mostly due to the ever-expanding information and communication technology revolution, leading to state monopolies on information. Nye did assert that access to information has become a significant source of power, and a large part of the global population now has that access (Ibid., p. 99). However, where his theory is not sufficient is when stating *"Public diplomacy that generates into propaganda not only fails to convince, but can undercut soft power."* (Ibid., p. 108). Elaborating on Nye's theory, it is essential to focus on the impact of disinformation campaigns on social media platforms and news outlets. As mentioned by Bjola & Papadakis (2020, p. 645) the aim of disinformation will be to strategically influence decision-makers and altering their set of policy preferences.

3.2   Theoretical Expectations

Digitalization has allowed state and non-state actors to exist in a virtual world, which has become increasingly vital in today's day and age. These actors can exert political power by influencing the public diplomacy through disinformation campaigns. This goes to prove that social media platforms have paved the way for verified state news outlets to continue spreading disinformation, beyond traditional news outlets In addition, social media platforms and news outlets are used as interchangeable entities continuously used by state and non-state actors to target public diplomacy. In the Swedish context, this thesis expects that the Swedish government and the governmental agencies will not always fulfill Nye's three dimensions of public diplomacy. This will further impact their efforts in defending against disinformation campaigns on a domestic and international level.

4 Research Design

This chapter will explain the methodology of the thesis, followed by an explanation of how the analysis will be conducted using the theory and methodology. Subsequently, the material used for the cases will be discussed. Lastly, a developed analytical framework will be presented.

4.1 Methodology

4.1.1 Case Studies as a Research Method

The research method conducted for this thesis will be focusing on case studies. By using case studies, more thorough knowledge concerning a situation or specific aspects of an event can be described (Säfsten & Gustavsson, 2020, p. 105). This will be particularly useful when answering the research question of how disinformation campaigns are impacting Sweden's public diplomacy through social media platforms and news outlets. As previously mentioned, this field is relatively new and continues to expand vastly. Thus, by studying this less explored phenomena and situations, there is room for exploration (Ibid., p. 106). Furthermore, an additional advantage of case studies is that the phenomenon regarding disinformation campaigns can be studied in more detail in a natural environment, not being heavily dependent on other variables compared to alternative research methods. The challenge relies within the timeframe, as the cases mentioned will be from the past (retrospective) in addition to on-going occurrences. I am convinced by the notion of retrospective studies impacting real time case studies, wherein they can impact each other.

4.1.2 Misunderstandings About Case Studies

Choosing case studies as a research method, particularly for a phenomenon that is on-going, may lead to misunderstandings. Case studies are useful as they can be used during the preliminary stages of an analysis to generate hypotheses, where it is incorrect to assume that case studies only can be used as pilot methods in a "real study" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 219). Flyvbjerg identifies five misunderstandings concerning case studies, these include *"(a) theoretical knowledge is more valuable than practical knowledge; (b) one cannot generalize from a single case, therefore, the single-case study cannot contribute to scientific development; (c) the case study is most useful for generating hypotheses, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building; (d) the case study contains a bias toward verification and (e) it is often difficult to summarize specific case studies"* (Ibid., p. 220).

The various sorts of case studies provide different techniques when collecting data. A real time study stipulates the possibilities of participating in direct observations, in contrast, a retrospective case study provides the possibilities of viewing previous cases along with how other researchers have interpreted those (Säfsten & Gustavsson, 2020, p. 106). As this thesis will not be carried out over an extended period of time, allowing a cause-and-effect relationship to be studied may be difficult, which is why I have decided to combine it with retrospective case studies. Moreover, retrospective case studies enable selecting cases depending on their outcomes of what is necessary to be studied (Ibid., p. 107).

4.1.3   Multiple-Case Design

To analyze such a case, the study design will be taking advantage of the multiple-case design (also known as multiple-case study) where one unit will be analyzed (Denscombe, 2010, p. 62). Findings from the case studies will be representative, signifying that they can be generalized on the basis of research into one instance (Ibid., p. 63). This does not mean that each case is similar, but instead that each case is something distinctive, but can be related to the other cases. In that way, it should be easier to compare the case of Sweden to other countries to find similarities and discuss these. As Denscombe discusses in his book, the findings from case studies can be generalized to alternative examples depends on the length of the similarities between the case studies. Furthermore, the case studies are useful for generating and testing hypotheses but is not restricted to these research activities all alone (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229).

4.1.4   Generalizability of Case Studies

The aspect of generalizability of case studies is dependent on the strategies used for the selection of the cases. Flyvbjerg argues that when the aim is to attain the greatest possible amount of information regarding a specific problem or incident, then it is not most optimal to use a representative case or a random sample (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229). This is due to the classic or average cases will not contain most information. As an alternative, extreme cases often reveal more information, due to them activating more actors and more basic mechanisms required in the situation that is being studied (Ibid., p. 230). As this provides an understanding-oriented and an action-oriented-perspective, the importance of clarifying the extensive causes behind a designated problem and its consequences in contrast to describing the symptoms of the problem and how often they occur (Ibid., p. 231). Despite the thesis highlighting both cases, understanding the deeper causes of disinformation campaigns and the actors that may carry these out, is much more important than solely mentioning the cases. The strategy for the selection of samples and cases for this thesis will this be of the information-oriented selection using extreme cases (see Table 2).

Table 2. Strategies for the Selection of Samples and Cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230)

Type of Selection	Purpose
A. Random selection	To avoid systematic biases in the sample. The sample's size is decisive for generalization.
1. Random sample	To achieve a representative sample that allows for generalization for the entire population.
2. Stratified sample	To generalize for specially selected subgroups within the population.
B. Information-oriented selection	To maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases. Cases are selected on the basis of expectations about their information content.
1. Extreme/deviant cases	To obtain information on unusual cases, which can be especially problematic or especially good in a more closely defined sense.
2. Maximum variation cases	To obtain information about the significance of various circumstances for case process and outcome (e.g., three to four cases that are very different on one dimension: size, form of organization, location, budget).
3. Critical cases	To achieve information that permits logical deductions of the type, "If this is (not) valid for this case, then it applies to all (no) cases."
4. Paradigmatic cases	To develop a metaphor or establish a school for the domain that the case concerns.

4.1.5   Identifying Extreme Cases

The reason to why extreme cases has been chosen for this thesis, is because they often reveal more information as they include more actors and fundamental mechanisms concerning the studies cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229). Thus, it is vital to follow a good narrative, as it will reveal the complexities and contradictions of the real-life cases (Ibid., p. 236). Following a narrative, can be viewed by critics of case studies as difficult to summarize into general propositions (Benhabib, 1990, p. 173; Roth, 1989, p. 453). However, the cases chosen for this study do not aim to provide general propositions, but to highlight and provide information concerning the impact of disinformation campaigns on public diplomacy. The advantage of this is that the researcher has greater flexibility interpreting dense and complex cases, without the pressure of trying to summarize the findings (Peattie, 2010, pp. 260-261).

4.1.6   Qualitative Data

The cases studied will provide qualitative data. The main advantage of using qualitative data is a low-level standardization and formalization, allowing the possibilities of flexibility (Säfsten & Gustavsson, 2020, p. 37). This is useful when using sources that consist of literature, video, audio, in addition to secondary research and interviews. By studying relationships that can be viewed dynamic, the focus will be set on the entire concept, and not an individual part (Ibid., p. 38). A major challenge of the methodological approach is measuring the threat, as it is seldom something that is fixed. Furthermore, studying disinformation results in analyzing campaigns that are already known, thus hypothetically, complex disinformation campaigns are being performed constantly but are not being discovered (Jones, 2022, p. 18). Conducting quantitative methods (data-driven approaches)

when analyzing social media platforms may be less convenient when understanding how, why, and the consequences of people use social media platforms (Ibid., p. 19). The research will thus apply to activity on social media platforms along with the synergies between news outlets, social media, and any other relevant forms of deception.

4.2   Case Selection

When choosing a case study, Flyvbjerg recommends telling the story consisting of its diversity, as this allows it to narrate many-sided, complex, and sometimes contradictory cases. Instead of solely picking one theory of academic specialization, he recommends relating the case to broader philosophical positions relating to multiple theories and previous research (Ibid., p. 239). This allows the scope to be left for various readers, with dissimilar backgrounds, to draw their own conclusions and make their own interpretations (Nehamas, 1987, p. 163). By allowing the study to be different things to different people, the analysis used on the cases can be related to similar ones in the future (Ibid., p. 164). As such, the case stories will be the result, providing an easier way to understand the complex reality. Hence, the thesis will consist of two cases: 1) The Swedish Social Services and the Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act disinformation campaigns; 2) The NATO membership application. In addition, the Swedish public diplomacy, and the response during these two cases. These two cases, in addition to the Swedish context, have been selected due to a number for of reasons that are relevant to answer the research question and the aim of the thesis.

Firstly, the two cases have both made a major impact on Sweden's public diplomacy through disinformation campaigns on social media and news outlets. Secondly, the SSS and LVU campaigns and the Swedish NATO membership application have been viewed as two separate entities. This has made them of interest to study as both two separate cases, but also see if they are related. Thirdly, the actors involved in the disinformation campaigns have been on an international and domestic context. Resulting in Sweden's public diplomacy being impacted on multiple levels. Moreover, the Swedish Agency for Psychological Defense representative stated that the SSS and LVU campaigns are the largest Sweden has ever experienced (Sköld, 2023). Taken all together, these aspects provide the possibility of exploring the interaction between the SSS and LVU disinformation campaigns and the disinformation campaigns during the Sweden's NATO membership application.

4.3   Material

The study will cover disinformation campaigns related to the SSS and LVU, in addition to those that become known during the period when Sweden's potential NATO membership gained significance. A variety of empirical material will be used for the analysis. The primary sources will consist of official records and public documents published by the Swedish government and governmental agencies. Additionally, tweets made by governmental officials, agencies, and non-state actors. The secondary sources will consist of previous research and literature. I will not be extensively discussing in a chronological what occurred, but instead look at how journalists and other scholars described what occurred.

The analysis in chapter 5 will also include a 2022 master's thesis by Simon Norin titled *"Cooperation with Disinformation Campaigns as a Social Movement Strategy"* and an extensive 2023 report titled *"LVU-kampanjen"* by Magnus Ranstorp and Linda Ahlerup on behalf of the Agency for Psychological Defense. Both sources are recent and previous research on the connection between disinformation campaigns and social movements have been scarce (Norin, 2022, p. 2). As recent disinformation campaigns are increasing continuously (Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023, p. 70), it is difficult to keep track of all data. Thus, through using particularly recent reports, such as the one by Ranstorp & Ahlerup (2023), this study can aim at comparing the cases based on the time given, ensuring that reports have been peer reviewed.

4.3.1   News Outlets and Social Media

The study has analyzed material collected from Swedish, Turkish and Arabic news outlets and their social media accounts. There are numerous reasons to why both the news outlets and their social media accounts have been chosen: 1) official public diplomacy is often mentioned and carried out with the help of news outlets, as this helps them to reach out to a broader audience; 2) news outlets often post news and reports on social media before publishing a broad article and/or video on their website; 3) different news outlets report on stories dissimilarly, due to the being owned by states or having their own biases, further impacting the story shared with the audience; 4) news outlets is often viewed as the traditional source when citizens consume media, therefore the role of social is of interest as its impact has increased significantly. These delimitations are also intended to further contribute to the reliability of the thesis and its findings.

The analyzed articles were accumulated from their websites or devoted archives of each newspaper, using the following keywords in different combinations "Sweden", "disinformation campaign", "Muslim", "kidnapping", "Socialtjänsten", "LVU", "Social Services", in addition to using google searches using the same keyword. The search results were narrowed down by using tools such as setting the custom date (2021-2023) and time range. It should be noted that the study did exclude sources not having a broad reach and if the country was not of interest to the actors involved. This is due to them being deemed not pertain to the case. Thus, it is vital to consider the process of selection bias, since it requires the research to choose articles from the search results that are deemed relevant, since the search results will not on all occasions completely match the research objective.

4.3.2   Official Records and Public Documents

As the context of the study will be situated in Sweden, the official records and public documents will be the ones published by the Swedish government, including their governmental agencies. The aim of the research is to understand how disinformation campaigns impacted the public diplomacy of Sweden; hence, the interest relies in the procedures and response and not the reasoning. The governmental agencies included the Swedish Social Services, the Swedish Psychological Defense Agency, the Swedish Civil

Contingencies Agency, and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moreover, tweets from Swedish and Turkish ministers were included, as they were, and continue to be, heavily involved in the public diplomacy concerning Sweden's potential NATO membership.

4.3.3   Scope and Limitations

4.3.3.1   Scope

This study will use a socio-technical analysis to highlight and examine disinformation campaigns propagated through social media platforms and news outlets. It draws on relevant literature, reports, articles, public records and official documents from sociotechnical perspectives. The timeline of interest will be 2021-2023, where present reports and articles that are being released as of this writing will be taken into consideration. Although this approach may present some fallacies, it is essential to highlight the current state of disinformation campaigns and identify any relevant patterns that can be linked to past occurrences. Accordingly, this will further make this study more relevant in addition to the case studies interesting to analyze, as the phenomena of disinformation campaigns in Sweden, conducted by state and non-state actors beyond Russia and extreme Islam is relatively new.

4.3.3.2   Limitations

As the thesis will be focusing on what is occurring on social media platforms and news outlets, the broader aspects of other types of influence operations and kinetic warfare will be outside of the scope. Moreover, cyberattacks including phishing, hacking, and other types of cyberwarfare are also outside of the scope of this thesis. Additionally, it must be mentioned that the cases inspected will be focusing on Sweden and no other countries. There is also the aspect of newness and capacity of the field of disinformation campaigns. This means that cases discussed will be relatively new, some even on-going, and therefore not much analysis and reports have been released about these. Hence, this thesis will be examining disinformation campaigns that are aimed at the general population of Sweden as it has been in the past and how it is today.

This study will solely look at the impact on public diplomacy in Sweden, as the private diplomacy (behind closed doors), would lead to speculations and not concrete facts. Documents available for the public solely discuss these types of diplomatic relations. Due to time restriction, not all publicly available documents will be analyzed, instead a selection based on the ones relevant for topics concerning disinformation campaigns towards Sweden, along with applicable similar cases, will be mentioned.

The major challenge will be going through data that is written in a different language, including tweets, YouTube captions, news outlets, or even hashtags. Despite being able to translate the posts, the original language will always be more useful. The languages of focus will be Swedish, English, Arabic and Turkish. Therefore, analyzing aspects such as content, symbols, and metaphors, of the disinformation will be difficult, this does also prove the

intended target audience of the disinformation campaigns, meaning groups of people with non-Swedish origins.

4.4   Analytical Framework

4.4.1   Conducting Analysis Using Theory and Research Design

The analytical framework will move beyond previous analyses done, that have mostly focused on social tools or purely the technical tools that were used and the specific data (geolocation, likes, and comments) for each disinformation campaign. Furthermore, this is where the theory and method will be conceptualized. The conceptualization will thus be conducted as activities carried out using social media platforms and news outlets as tools. These activities can be done by an attacker using tools or third parties who are not deliberately sharing the same ideas nor goals as the attacker (Bergh, 2019, p. 14). The activities will also be discussed through the perspective of two separate entities, meaning social media platforms and news outlets, but also as a combined entity. A key aspect that will be discovering potential patterns and relations between the disinformation campaigns on social media and whether they impact the news outlets.

The empirical analysis would thus need to be conducted in a way that depicts the response of the Swedish government and governmental agencies. By comparing the case studies, the interests would be more evident, and thus the understanding of the impact on the public diplomacy in Sweden. The analysis would further require utilizing the theory on public diplomacy by Nye (2008, pp. 101-102) in addition to an understanding of disinformation campaigns as provided by Bjola and Papadakis (2020, p. 645). Additionally, the disinformation campaigns mentioned in the case studies would require some sort of previous interest or rumors being spread among the target audience (Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 60), in this case the citizens of Sweden.

4.4.2   Analytical Framework and Thematic Sections

The analytical framework for this study has been divided into four thematic sections 1) background of the case; 2) the challenges brought by the disinformation campaigns and the actors involved; 3) Nye's theory about political power and public diplomacy (Nye, 2008, p. 95); 4) the impact of the disinformation campaigns. The reason to why the analytical framework will consist of fourth thematic sections is due to the importance of understanding the background international and domestic case, comprehending how the disinformation campaigns were carried out along with their relevance. The challenges brought by the disinformation campaigns and the actors involves will provide a better insight for Nye's theory. Lastly, the impact of the disinformation campaigns will facilitate the possibilities of discussing the analysis. The thematic sections for the analytical framework were chosen based on the theory as explained in chapter 3.

5 Analysis

This chapter details the analysis, where the structure is in accordance with the analytical framework developed in section 4.4.2. The first section will look at the domestic case of the disinformation campaigns, beginning with a background on the Swedish Social. The second section will be following a similar structure but focusing on the case of Sweden's NATO membership application. The following sections will also consist of quotations and figures from the material that has been studied, this to provide examples in addition to highlight findings.

5.1 Case 1: Swedish Context (Swedish Social Services and LVU Disinformation Campaigns)

5.1.1 Background – Swedish Social Services and Swedish Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act

The first case study examined the domestic impact of disinformation campaigns on Sweden's public diplomacy, with a specific focus on the period from 2021 to 2023. This study analyzed disinformation campaigns that targeted the Swedish Social Services (SSS) under the Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act (LVU). The LVU states that the SSS can apprehend a minor before assessments have been completed, if they deem it likely for the minor to get care via the law in addition to concerns about the health of the minor being at risk during the evacuations of the minor's situation (Socialdepartementet, 1990). Moreover, the law can be used if the minor engages in substance abuse, criminality, or alternative social deviant behaviour (Ibid.).
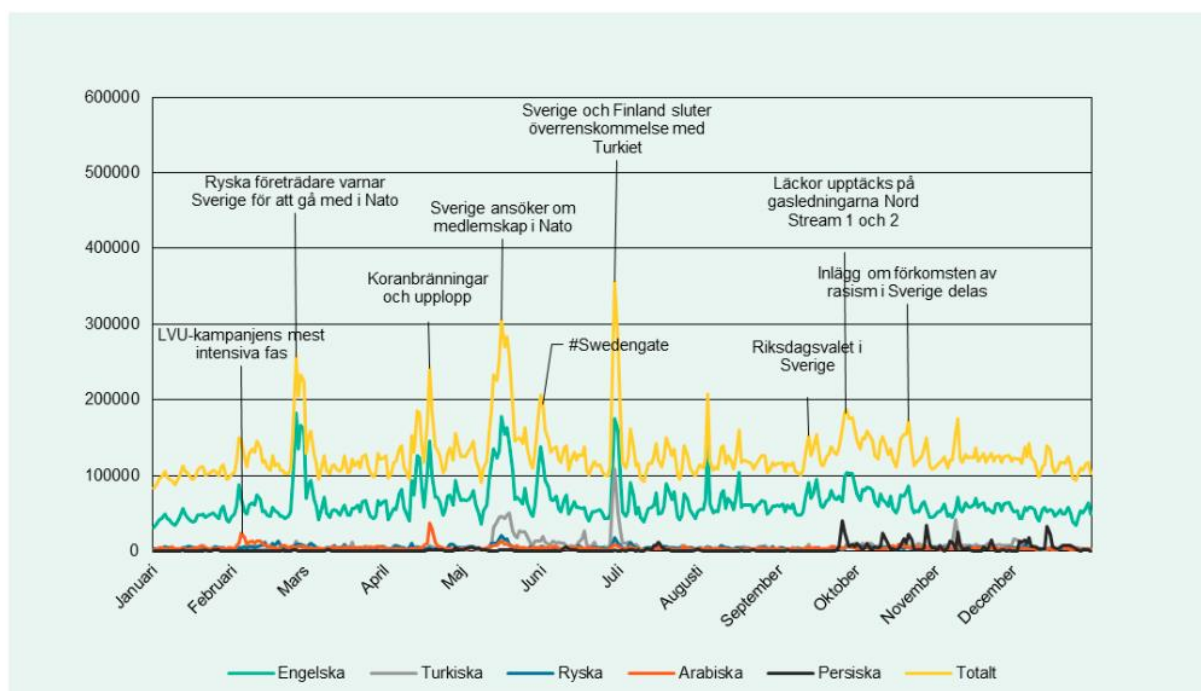

Figure 6. Graph showing amount of news articles and posts on social media, blogs, and forums about Sweden per day in 2022. The languages included are English, Turkish, Russian, Arabic, and Persian (Swedish Institute, 2023, p. 8)

The relevant events (see Figure 6) were the disinformation campaigns towards the Swedish Social Services, Sweden's NATO membership, Quran burnings and the Swedish election. The peaks in the figure can be explained as shorter periods where Sweden was mentioned a lot. Additionally, the results showed that global publications, including news outlets and social media platforms, covered Sweden significantly in 2022 compared to 2021, to a large extent due to the war in Ukraine and Sweden's application for NATO membership (Swedish Institute, 2023, p. 7).

5.1.2 Challenges

Ranstorp & Ahlerup (2023, p. 43) reported that the LVU campaigns and its appeal did not arise in a vacuum, but instead should be seen and understood in relation to some of the vulnerabilities and areas of conflict that exist in the Swedish society. Although disinformation campaigns against the Swedish Social Services peaked during the autumn of 2021 and spring of 2022, the Quran burnings of 2022 and 2023 resulted in a further increase of such campaigns (Norin, 2022, p. 1; Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023; p. 38).

The main actor spreading disinformation regarding how the SSS were misusing the LVU was Shuoun Islamiya, a self-titled Islamic news source, dedicated to spread Muslim issues and news globally (Shuoun Islamiya, 2023a). The central figure behind the account being Moustafa El-Sharqawy, who had been using a website and a YouTube channel, since 2018, to publish articles and videos as a means of spreading disinformation campaigns. The focus of the disinformation campaigns was to target Western governments and agencies. As per 2022, 48 out of 100 articles discussed the West, however, the YouTube channel uploads videos on a daily basis, where the keyword "السويد" (Sweden) was provided as a keyword, provided 510 videos (Ibid., p. 23). A translation of the video titles on YouTube provided contents related to Sweden. Furthermore, these discussed *"how Muslims in Sweden are discriminated against, or how the SSS kidnaps children"* (Norin, 2022, p. 23). Shuoun Islamiya's contents were exclusively published in Arabic, without providing any translations. The studied articles focused on Sweden and highlighted the following contexts from 2021: how it will be easier for the Swedish government to expel immigrants (Shuoun Islamiya 2021a); how the SSS and the Swedish state kidnaps children (Shuoun Islamiya 2022c; Shuoun Islamiya 2022d); how the Muslims are being discriminated (Shuoun Islamiya 2022e). The first video published concerning SSS kidnapping Muslim children was on the 18th of November 2021 and received more than 260 000 views (Shuoun Islamiya 2021c). Since then, the most popular videos about Sweden allegedly kidnapping Muslim children have received between 180 000 and 670 000 views on YouTube (Shuoun Islamiya, 2023b). Shuoun Islamiya created a series named *"What happens to children in Sweden"*, where they interview parents who have had their children apprehended by the SSS (Ibid.). Moreover, hashtags on Twitter helped Shuoun Islamiya spread their messages, including the aspect of hijacking hashtags to gain more influence. Ranstorp & Ahlerup (2023, p. 173) identified the ten most used hashtags in both English and Arabic during 2020 (see Figure 7).
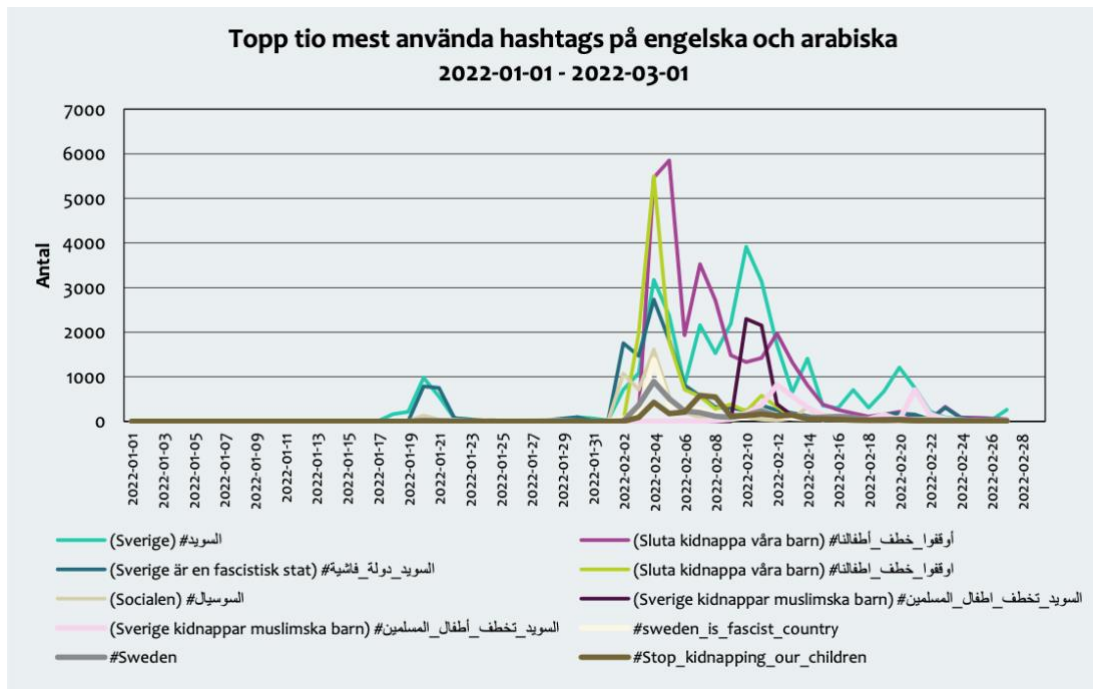
Figure 7. Top ten most used hashtags in English and Arabic (Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023, p. 173)

The influence of the disinformation campaigns from Shuoun Islamiya led to the organization Mina Rättigheter (Swedish for "My Rights") organizing demonstrations. The first recorded demonstration, consisting of approximately 60 participants, occurred in September 2021 in Gothenburg, as this was posted by the Mina Rättigheter (BARNENS RÄTTIGHETER MINA RÄTTIGHETER SVERIGE, 2021). Simultaneously, the hashtag *"#Slutakidnappavårabarn"* (Swedish for *"Stop kidnapping our children"*) was used when posting and writing about the alleged kidnappings (Ibid.). The demonstrations increased in number of participants and spread to other cities, such as the protests in Stockholm with roughly 200 participants (Ronge, Amiri, & Hamdé, 2022) and in Gothenburg with roughly 400 participants (Börjesson & Rogsten, 2022). Although the numbers of participants may not have been significant, the manifestations were brought to attention by the Qatari-based Al-Jazeera on Twitter, with 20.1 million followers (Ronge, Amiri, & Hamdé, 2022).

5.1.2.1 Rasmus Paludan's Quran Burning

Rasmus Paludan, a Swedish-Danish party leader for the right-wing Danish political party Stram Kurs and anti-Islam provocateur, has since 2020 carried out these anti-Islamic manifestations in Swedish cities, preferably in immigrant-dense areas in connection with mosques or Muslim gathering places (Larsson G. , 2022, p. 5). Additionally, Paludan's demonstrations aimed to take place in socio-economically disadvantaged areas where the majority of residents have an immigrant background and already pose major challenges, not least for law enforcement authorities (Ghazinour & Eriksson, 2022, p. 172).

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, the intensity of the SSS and LVU campaigns were dampened, as the focus in media shifted. Paludan planned multiple anti-Islam manifestations throughout Sweden during the spring of 2022, as it would be coinciding with the holy Islamic month of Ramadan (Larsson G. , 2022, p. 9). These

manifestations would follow a pattern similar to the ones establishing during previous actions in Denmark and Sweden, where the Quran would be burned. Protests against Paludan and Stram Kurs were held in numerous Swedish cities, including Stockholm, Malmö, Landskrona, Linköping, Norrköping and Örebro, which led to violent clashed between police and counter-demonstrators (Ibid., p. 9). The Swedish media came to refer the counter-demonstrations as the "Easter Riots". Reports by journalists at Dagens Nyheter (DN) proved that the conflict between the police and rioters was fueled by plenty foreign social media accounts (Ewald Hurinsky, Canoilas, & Alnahhal, 2022). One of the Arabic speaking YouTube accounts that first spread the news about the Quran burning was also the driving force in the disinformation campaigns against the SSS earlier in 2022 (Ibid.). TRT World, a news outlet available in 190 countries, published videos from the riots on both Facebook and Instagram (Ibid.). There was a major increase of tweets in Arabic that mentioned Sweden, increasing from approximately 1000 per day to more than 5000 per day, from the dates 11th to the 18th of April 2022 (see Table 2).
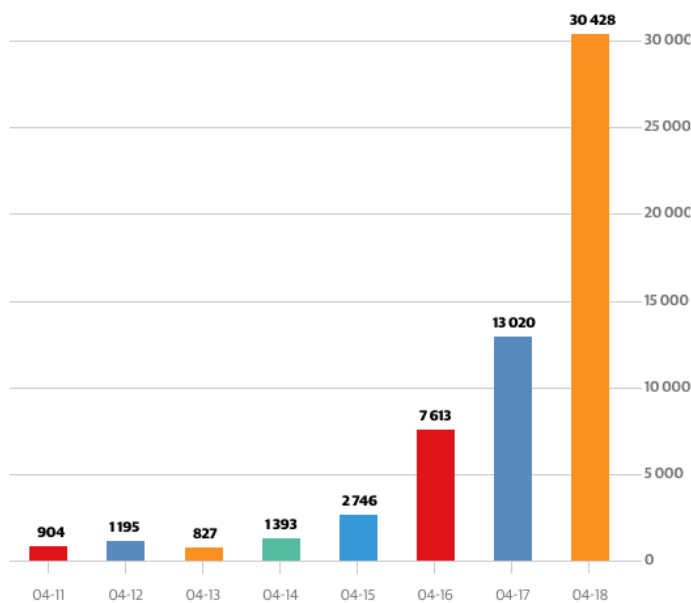
Table 2. Tweets on Twitter mentioning Sweden in Arabic (Ewald Hurinsky, Canoilas, & Alnahhal, 2022)

Despite the assessment that the riots were not coordinated or arose as a result of an undue influence campaign from abroad, foreign actors who were active in relation to the issue of LVU also get involved in the issue about Quran burnings. A major reason being El-Sharqawy continuously posting about the LVU campaigns on YouTube and Twitter during the Easter riots (Shuoun Islamiya, 2022). As a result, Saudi al-Arabiya and Qatari Al-Jazeera picked up the news concerning the riots and published boycott campaigns with the hashtag "Boycott Swedish products" against Sweden, which went viral in Arab countries (Ibid.). Several Arab countries condemned the incident followed by Iraq and Iran summoned the Swedish counselors at the Swedish embassies in their countries to criticize the incident, believing that it would *"risk Sweden's relationship with Muslims."* (Dahlin, 2022). Additionally, TRT Arabi, an Arabic speaking news outlet based in Türkiye with a reach of over 1.5 million followers, published about LVU campaigns (TRT Arabi, 2023). Despite the assessment that the Easter riots were not coordinated or gave rise as a result of a disinformation campaign

from abroad, nor were they organized by actors from abroad, it is still possible to witness how a number of foreign actors active in the issue of LVU got involved with the Quran burnings.

5.1.2.2 *Mikail Yüksel and the Nuance Party*

Mikail Yüksel, a Swedish politician of Turkish origin, and leader of Sweden's Islamist Nuance Party (Partiet Nyans) was also one of the driving forces of the disinformation campaigns in Sweden. Yüksel was one of the top names in the Center Party (Centerpartiet) before being expelled before the 2018 election, due to involvement with the Turkish far-right ultra-nationalist organization the Grey Wolves (Åhman & Israelsson, 2022). The Grey Wolves have been described as *"a fascist, ultra-nationalist, pan-Turkic organization"* and have been Turkish President Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) (Abdulkader, 2022, pp. 93-94).

Yüksel was at forefront claiming that Muslims in Sweden were under pressure by intelligence services and that the Swedish authorities wanted to strip Muslims of their rights and freedom (Sadikovic, Alnahhal, & Ewald Hurinsky, 2022). He, together with the other party members, spread these types of disinformation campaigns in Swedish, Arabic, and Turkish during the Swedish election in 2022 (Ibid.). The party's core issues included anti-racism, banning Quran burnings, recognizing Muslims as a national minority, and put an end to the Swedish Social Services' "abuse" of LVU (Partiet Nyans, 2023). Their campaigns received global traction when a video of one of their members stated in Arabic *"All Swedish parties, compete to put forward proposals to undermine religious freedom for Muslims. We are the only democratic party that stands against this oppression"* (Sadikovic, Alnahhal, & Ewald Hurinsky, 2022). The video was published by a YouTube channel close to the Swedish election day, by an account with more than 15 million followers and run by several people based in Türkiye but owned by a large construction company headquartered in the United Arab Emirates (Ibid.). Additional examples proved that several foreign accounts with many followers campaigned for the Nuance Party, the common theme being them operating from Türkiye (Ibid.). As a result, the Nuance Party received great voter support in the Sweden's multi-ethnic suburbs (Fahlman & Magnå, 2022). Yüksel did on multiple occasions speak negatively about the Swedish government and laws, for instance on TV programs and documentaries by TRT World (Yüksel, 2023). TRT World has previously been used as a public diplomacy tool by Erdoğan's AKP Party to promote his agenda globally (Elswah & Howard, 2022, p. 2079). This involved international broadcasters using different styles and purposes to manipulate voices, mold opinions, destabilize countries in addition to achieving public diplomacy objectives (Ibid., p. 2081). These findings align with the observed decline in media freedom in Türkiye in recent years (Ibid., p. 2092).

5.1.3 Nye's Theory

5.1.3.1 *First Dimension: Daily Communication*

The SSS and LVU disinformation campaigns resulted in Sweden's overseas communication being influenced by the communication of other actors, taking advantage of the false and

misleading stories to build up a wrong image of Sweden. This caused rumor crises that impacted the political situation of Sweden, as the state and politicians had to repeatedly deny the truthfulness of these rumors. Police chief Anders Thornberg and commanding officer Jonas Hysing held a press conference, suspecting that criminal gangs were behind the riots, but also that foreign social media accounts possibly influenced the violent Easter Riots (Ewald Hurinsky, Canoilas, & Alnahhal, 2022).

Additionally, the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs tweeted a thread (a series of multiple connected tweets) on the 11th of February 2022 (see Figure 8). This was well timed with the increase of SSS and LVU disinformation campaigns that were on a rise during that period.

Figure 8. Twitter thread regarding Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs response to SSS and LVU disinformation campaigns (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022b)

An additional instance is when the same Twitter account for the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs tweeted the following (see Figure 9) on the 24th of May 2023. This was posted approximately a month after the Easter Riots.
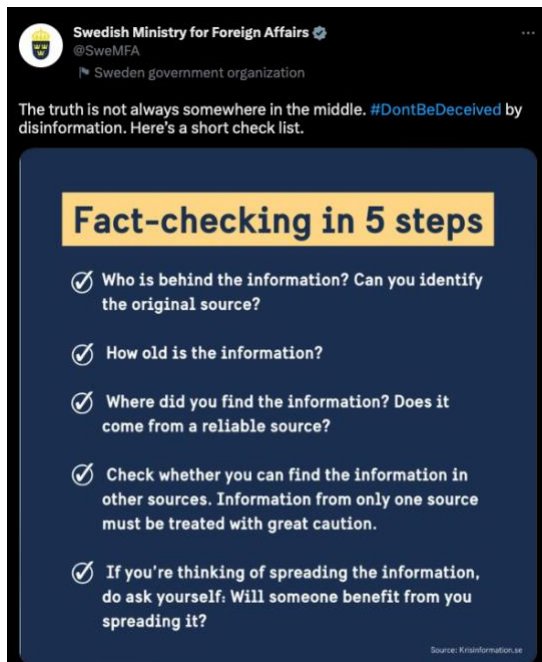
Figure 9. Tweet by Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs about Fact-Checking (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2022a)

5.1.3.2   Second Dimension: Strategic Communication

The strategic communication was during this period influenced by political campaigns that exploited disinformation campaigns. The Swedish general election, that was held on the 11th of September 2022, played an important role in determining the landscape of strategic communication. The responses from political party leaders in Sweden concerning the Quran burnings and riots were similar, despite their ideological differences. They claimed that the riots were illegal and criminal offences (Klintö, 2022). Ulf Kristersson, the leader for the Moderate Party ("Moderaterna") and a member of the center-right liberal-conservative political alliance known as "The Alliance", stated *"Riots should never be allowed to stifle freedom of expression"* (Ibid.). In a similar fashion, Ebba Busch, leader for Christian Democrats ("Kristdemokraterna") and member of The Alliance asked, *"Why do not we have at least 100 injured Islamists?"* (Ibid.). Both Kristersson and Busch were in opposition to the then Social Democratic-led government. Swedish politicians were clear that the Quran burning should be allowed as a means to Freedom of Expression.

5.1.3.3   Third Dimension: Building Long-Lasting Relationships

The approach made by the Swedish government to build long-lasting relationships consisted of reaching out to key figures within Sweden's Council of Imams (Sveriges Imamråd). The Imams issued a press release condemning, among other things, the spread of misinformation within and outside Sweden's borders and against its population (Sveriges Imamråd, 2022). They also came to play an important role in the society and among Muslim minority, aiming to contribute to decrease the disinformation campaigns towards SSS and LVU. The chairman of Sweden's Imam Council emphasized that alongside the ongoing spread of rumors, there are real problems concerning how children are cared for according to the LVU (Fares & Åberg, 2022). Moreover, the Imam pointed out that the issues needed to be handled with an understanding of the Swedish legislation, not through sharing on social media (Ibid.).

Additionally, the Islamic Cooperation Council (ISR) also published a statement on the issue, distancing itself from the disinformation campaigns that claimed the Swedish system to be corrupt and the country depriving Muslims of their children (Förenade Islamiska Föreningar I Sverige, 2022). The Swedish Government and Police managed through their working method to highlight the Muslim social actors as a resource in their preventive work aimed at decreasing riots (Ghazinour & Eriksson, 2022, p. 171).

5.1.4 Impact

The disinformation campaigns against the LVU placements of children reportedly had a direct impact on social services in Gothenburg. Several administrations raised concerns over the increasingly difficulty of recruiting new social workers (Socialförvaltning Nordost, 2023, p. 1). Besides, the disinformation campaigns attributed to the resignation of social workers (Ibid., p. 6). A particular consequence highlighted was that sheltered homes for young people who needed protection were forced to close down (Ibid., p. 12). The domestic disinformation campaigns also resulted in employees experiencing threatening situations, where they have been filmed, in addition to photos being taken of them and posted on social media (Ibid., p. 13).

5.1.4.1 *Swedish Police Denying Quran Burnings 2022*

Despite Swedish politicians stating that burning the Quran was an act of Freedom of Expression, Paludan was denied protesting on the 1st of May 2022. Further, the Police authority stopped examining each permit application from Paludan and solely stopped him from protesting (Erlandsson, 2023). Numerous administrative courts in Sweden came to the verdict of the Police ignoring the administrative rights, highlighting that the police and administrative courts contradicted one another (Ibid.).

5.1.4.2 *MPF Established to Combat Disinformation*

The Swedish Psychological Defense Agency (MPF), a government agency organized under the Ministry of Justice (Swedish Psychological Defence Agency, 2022), was established at the turn of the year 2021/2022. According to their website *"the main mission of the agency is to lead the coordination and development of Sweden's psychological defense in collaboration with public authorities and other stakeholders in society. We offer support to government agencies, municipalities, regions, the business sector, and organizations, as well as contribute to strengthening the resilience of our population."* (Swedish Psychological Defence Agency, 2022). The Swedish government felt a need to safeguard the open and democratic society, which is why there was a need of establishing a psychological defense, to identify, analyze, prevent, and counter foreign malign information influence activities together with disinformation directed at Sweden or at Swedish interests (Ibid.). They have since, continuously provided the public with situations images to reduce the pressure on individual social services, created an authority-wide situational picture, and identified priorities and appropriate measures (Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023, p. 189). In spite of MPF's purpose of reducing strain on individual social services, the disclaimers of disinformation campaigns by both FM and PM prove that there is still room for improvement. Furthermore,

MPF have also provided a handbook on recognizing and dealing with false and misleading information (Swedish Psychological Defence Agency, 2023).

5.2 Case 2: International Context (NATO Membership Application)

5.2.1 Background - Sweden and Finland Applying for NATO Membership

The political situation in Sweden changed rather rapidly on the 24th of February 2022 due to Russia launching a military invasion of Ukraine (Sveriges Radio, 2022). As a result, Sweden, together with Finland, applied for a NATO membership. The Swedish government deemed it too risky to have an election about entering NATO, because of fear of Russia impacting media, opinions, and decision makers (Silverberg, 2022). Both Sweden and Finland applied for NATO membership simultaneously on the 18th of May 2022 (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2023). Notably, Sweden has been experiencing more disinformation campaigns since applying for the NATO Membership (see Figure 10).
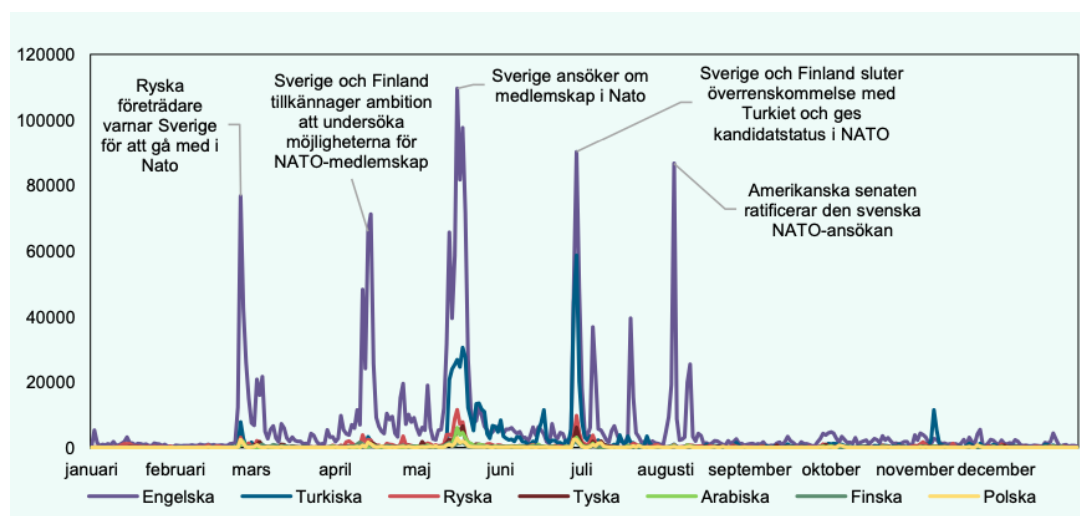
Figure 10. Graph displaying the amount of social media posts and media articles about Sweden and NATO in various languages in 2022 (Swedish Institute, 2023, p. 15)

5.2.2 Challenges

Sweden received the status of invitee country when they applied for NATO membership, as all NATO countries must ratify their application (Government Offices of Sweden, 2023). Türkiye was one of the countries, together with Hungary, denying the ratification Sweden's NATO membership (Ibid.). Notably, the Turkish government and politicians used this change in political situation to strengthen their own power and public diplomacy.

5.2.2.1 Disinformation Campaigns – The Terrorist Propaganda

The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan claimed Sweden being soft on terrorism, as a reason to why Türkiye continuously blocked their NATO accession bid (Bayer, 2022). The terrorists that Erdoğan referred to were mainly the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Syrian-Kurdish group the People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) in addition to the Gülen Movement (FETÖ) (Ibid.). These political groups have since many years back been deemed enemies of Ankara and therefore seen as a threat. The use of the word *"terrorism"* posed significant risks because of its charged nature and negative associations. By implying Sweden being associated with supporting and financing terrorists through types of disinformation

campaigns, Türkiye perpetuated a diplomatic approach that directly impacted Sweden's public image and caused rumors.

The rumors that targeted Sweden concentrated on topics that were already sensitive and polarized in the country (Intelbrief, 2023). The Turkish demands following a signed trilateral memorandum at a NATO summit in Madrid on the 28th of June 2022 stated that Sweden would *"commit to prevent activities of the PKK and all other terrorist organisations and their extensions, as well as activities by individuals in affiliated and inspired groups or networks linked to these organisations."* (NATO, 2022, p. 1). In addition, the following agreement was made *"[...] Sweden will not provide support to YPG/PYD, and the organization described as FETÖ in Türkiye. Türkiye also extends its full support to Finland and Sweden against threats to their national security. Finland and Sweden reject and condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, in the strongest terms."* (Ibid., p. 1).

The two statements from the trilateral memorandum proved that Sweden and Türkiye shared common values in terms of national and global security, but also the groups they viewed as terrorists. The major concern was the extent to which Sweden's agreement reflected the alignment with the terms stated, in contrast with compromises made out of an aspiration to join NATO. Additionally, it stated *"Finland and Sweden will address Türkiye's pending deportation or extradition requests of terror suspects expeditiously and thoroughly, taking into account information, evidence and intelligence provided by Türkiye, and establish necessary bilateral legal frameworks to facilitate extradition and security cooperation with Türkiye, in accordance with the European Convention on Extradition."* (NATO, 2022, p. 2).

The complete list of *"terrorists"* in Sweden that would be extradited was never announced to the public, however, the names that have been known included journalists and politicians that were in opposition to Türkiye (Chatterjee, 2022). Many of the accused *"terrorists"* were also of Kurdish descent or had ties with the FETÖ movement (Ibid.). Ankara increased over time the number of *"terrorists"* they want extradited: started with 33, then 45, then 74, then over 130, in unofficial lists that were published by news outlets close to the Turkish government (Aydogan, 2023). The Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson answered on the 16th of January 2023 that *"Türkiye sometimes names people that they would like to have extradited from Sweden, and it's well-known that Swedish legislation on that… is very clear: that courts [make] those decisions, there is no room for changing that"* (Camut, 2023). This proves that despite the trilateral agreement, two states continue to dispute public regarding what was agreed and not, through their public diplomacy.

5.2.2.2   *NATO Membership Application Leading to Protests (Social Movement)*
The NATO membership application caused a major stir among the citizens in Sweden, where public protests took place. A small pro-Kurdish group known as the Rojava Committee of Sweden, turned up at the Stockholm's City Hall with an effigy of Erdoğan on the 11th of January 2023. The picture was posted by the Rojava Committee on Twitter with the caption *"History shows how dictators often end, so for everyone's sake Erdoğan: Take the change now and leave, so you don't end up upside down at the Taksim Square! On January 21, we*

gather at Norra Bantorget for a demonstration: We say no to NATO! No alliance with fascists!" (Rojavakommittéerna, 2023). Türkiye did not take this lightly, as Sweden's ambassador to Türkiye was summoned to the foreign ministry the day after and Erdoğan's communication director, Fahrettin Altun, tweeted *"We condemn in the strongest possible terms the targeting of Türkiye and its democratically elected president by members of the terrorist organization PKK in Sweden . . . That PKK terrorist[s] can challenge the Swedish government at the heart of Stockholm is proof that the Swedish authorities have not taken necessary steps against terrorism — as they have been claiming in recent days."* (Altun, 2023). Moreover, the Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billström condemned the actions by the Rojava Committee by tweeting *"The government protects an open debate about the political choices, but strongly distances itself from threats and hatred against political representatives. Portraying a popularly elected president as being executed outside City Hall is abhorrent."* (Billström, 2023).

5.2.2.3 2023 – *Quran Burning, NATO Membership Application and Demonstrations*

Sweden's NATO membership application and global image was negatively affected when Rasmus Paludan burned a Quran outside Türkiye's embassy in Stockholm on the 21st of January 2023 (Rankin, 2023). Paludan claimed wanting to emphasize on Sweden's freedom of expression and as a reaction to Türkiye's condemnation of the actions by the Kurdish Rojava committee. The Swedish Police allowed Paludan's Quran burning protests to take place where they stated, *"The constitutional law provides strong protection and one must assess the value of being allowed to demonstrate and freedom of expression weighs heavily, and that is what has been discussed."* (Ögren, 2023). At the same time, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson expressed his sympathy, on Twitter, to all Muslims that had been offended by Paludan's actions (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Tweet by Swedish PM Ulf Kristersson (Kristersson, 2023)

Türkiye did not take Paludan's acts lights, as Numan Kurtulmuş (deputy chairman of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party) stated *"This incident has once again shown that Sweden has not given up on supporting terrorism."* (Braw, 2023). Hundreds of Turkish citizens gathered, on the 21st of January 2023, outside the Swedish embassy in Ankara and consulate-general in Istanbul to protest, where they set the Swedish flag on fire (Ibid.). As a result , the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs advised Swedish citizens in Türkiye to avoid

large gatherings and demonstrations (Embassy of Sweden, 2023). The warning issued also stated that continued demonstrations could be expected outside the embassy in Ankara and consulate-general in Istanbul during the coming days (Ibid.). Türkiye did also announce that they had cancelled a planned visit on the 27th of January 2023 by Swedish Defense Minister Pål Jonsson (DW, 2023). The Turkish Defense Minister stated *"At this point, the visit of Swedish Defense Minister Pal Jonsson to Türkiye on January 27 has become meaningless. So, we canceled the visit"* (Ibid.). Akar citing Sweden allowing Paludan to burn the Quran as the reason for the cancelation. On the contrary, Pål Jonsson tweeted the following *"Yesterday I met with my Turkish counterpart Hulusi Akar at the US military base in Ramstein, Germany. We decided then to postpone the planned meeting in Ankara until later. Our relations with Türkiye are very important to Sweden, and we look forward to continuing the dialogue on common security and defense issues at a later date."* (Ibid.). These two statements differed from each other, where Jonsson claimed the decision to be mutual.

Moreover, Paludan's actions made global headlines and led to protests in numerous countries. Not only did it make headlines on Turkish state-owned media, but multiple Arabic countries condemned the Quran burning. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan called upon the Swedish government to punish Paludan, while Kuwait, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia did condemn Sweden allowing Paludan to proceed with burning the Quran (Sjögren, 2023). Consequently, these actions made headlines on CNN, Spanish El País and The Guardian, where the focus was on anti-NATO protests (Ibid.).

5.2.3   Nye's Theory

5.2.3.1   Daily Communication

The daily communication by the Swedish government included swift responses to false charges and disinformation campaigns. The SSS and LVU disinformation campaigns increased in 2023, close to Sweden's NATO application and Paludan's Quran burnings (see Figure 8). Ulf Kristersson sought on the 3rd of February 2023 to discredit the claims that the Swedish Social Service is kidnapping Muslim children, adding that Sweden was once more experiencing a *"systematized"* and *"extensive"* disinformation campaign (AP News, 2023).

The Swedish Government published a report on the 6th of February with the headline *"Government taking strong action against disinformation and rumor-spreading campaign."* (Government of Sweden, 2023). Additionally, the Swedish Security Service (Säkerhetspolisen) published a report on the 8th of February stating *"The reaction to, among other things, the Quran burning outside the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm in January have been considerable. Our Service has previously stated that this situation could have threat-inducing effect and assesses that the security situation has been negatively impact"* (Säkerhetspolisen, 2023). No changes were made to the terrorist threat level, mainly due to it being based on a long-term assessment, but the statement did state *"The situations following recent events is concerning."* (Ibid.). The report was clear in that the attack threats targeted not only Sweden but Swedish interests abroad.

5.2.3.2 Strategic Communication

Sweden developed a strategic communication where the importance joining of NATO was constantly emphasized (Larsson L. , 2023). This reflected the strategic approach by the Swedish government, where the aim was to look at the bigger picture and focus on what was deemed as politically important. Particularly as this strengthen and guarantee Sweden's national security (Ibid.). Simultaneously, elections on the 14th of May 2023 were taking place in Türkiye, which influenced their strategic communication and relations with Sweden.

The strategic communication on a global level changed during Paludan's Quran burnings in 2023. As compared to Paludan's acts in 2022, the Quran burning in 2023 created a global major stir regarding Sweden's laws concerning Freedom of Expression, the NATO membership application, but also made a major impact on the Muslim community in Sweden and abroad. This time the political parties were left divided on the case of burning the Quran being an act of Freedom of Expression or a hate-crime towards Muslims. Kristersson (then opposition and now Swedish PM) expressed his sympathy for all Muslims (see Figure 11), comparatively to less than a year ago where he did not do such.

5.2.3.3 Long-Lasting Relationships

The public diplomatic measures taken by the Swedish government relied much on the shift of global security due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Both Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson and Foreign Minister Tobias Billström aimed at securing a Swedish NATO membership, especially by collaborating with Türkiye. Billström claimed Türkiye to be a democratic state with a popularly elected government and free elections, adding that states can have serious problems and still be a democracy (Heimersson, 2022). Moreover, while Billström condemned the Rojava Committee's effigy of Erdoğan, he did not make any statements concerning other protesters burning an effigy representing the Russian President Vladimir Putin outside the Russian embassy in Sweden (Westerberg & Turesson, 2023). Further proving that building relationships with Türkiye was a major goal of the Swedish governmental representatives. This was confirmed by Billström as he claimed *"It is important to be proactive and make it clear to the Turkish government. Otherwise, it would have been understood that we thought this [hanging of Erdoğan effigy] was something good."* (Strömberg & Nilsson, 2023).

5.2.4 Impact

5.2.4.1 Swedish Police Denying Quran Burnings 2023

On the 20th of February 2023, it was reported that the Swedish police had banned Quran burnings for safety reasons (Erlandsson, 2023). The ban was put in place for a new demonstration permit that included a Quran burning to be held at the Turkish embassy in Stockholm, similar to the ones carried out earlier by Rasmus Paludan (Ibid.). Notably, the ban only covered the Quran, and not any other religious texts, according to an internal document obtained by Dagens Nyheter. In Sweden, freedom of expression and freedom of demonstration have been strongly protected by the constitution, as such, it takes significant

cause for the police to deny a public assembly. The police made an extensive interpretation of the ordinance, and specifically deemed Quran burnings to increase the threat of attacks against Sweden and Swedish interests (Ibid.). Kristersson claimed that the police's decisions should be respected and on the 4th of April 2023, the verdict from the administrative court in Stockholm stated that the police's ban on Quran burnings was wrong (Ibid.).

5.2.4.2 Swedish Security Service (Säkerhetspolisen) Terrorist Threat Against Sweden Report

The Swedish Security Service (Säkerhetspolisen) communicated that violent Islamist circles globally were focusing to a greater extent on Sweden (Säkerhetspolisen, 2023). A full-year assessment summary on the terror threat towards Sweden was published by the Swedish Security Service, on the 8th of March 2023. The summary focused on *"Violent right-wing extremism"* and *"Violent Islamism"* in a digital age (Nationellt Centrum för Terrorhotbedömning, 2023, p. 1). Paludan's actions were deemed as *"right-wing extremism"* and Säkerhetspolisen asserted that Sweden would be a prioritized target for violence in the short-term half of 2023 and possibly the rest of the year, depending on the intensity of attention concerning future perceived provocations (Ibid., p. 2). Säkerhetspolisen believed that the targets would be public places difficult to protect; religious sites (particularly connected to Jews); the LGBTQ community; and symbolic targets, such as community representatives in the form of political representatives or government officials, which can be linked to perceived violations of Islam or Muslims (Ibid., p. 3). Moreover, the report highlighted that violent right-wing extremism and violent Islamism in Sweden have been characterized by hybridization, through incorporating conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns (Ibid., p. 4).

Comparatively, the reports from 2022 and 2023 slightly differed regarding the actors that were viewed as potential threats. The report from 2022 stated the following *"The threat of terrorist attacks against Sweden in 2022 comes mainly from actors who are motivated by a violent right-wing extremist or a violent Islamist ideology"* (Nationellt Centrum för Terrorhotbdeömning, 2022, p. 1). The two actors that are mentioned in the report were Daesh and al-Qaida. In contrast, the report from 2023 mentioned Daesh, al-Qaeda and the PKK (Nationellt Centrum för Terrorhotbedömning, 2023, p. 5).

5.2.4.3 Sweden's New Terror Law

Despite criticism from the Swedish Legislative Council, the Swedish government presented a bill to criminalize participation in terrorist organizations, including *"material assistance or assistance in the form of participation in activities – maintain and strengthen the organi-sation and thus its ability to commit terrorist offences"* (Ministry of Justice, 2023). This was due to the Minister for Justice emphasizing a new heightened threat of terrorism in Sweden, whereupon the new law would result as a power tool to combat terrorism and safeguard the society (Ibid.). The new law, entering into force on the 1st of June 2023, was viewed as a pawn in the game concerning Swedish NATO membership (Knutson, 2023). Notably, the bill to participate in terrorist organizations was presented by the previous Social Democratic-led

government. However, that bill was prevented by the Legislative Council citing that it was against the constitution (Ibid.). Hence, a constitutional amendment was carried out since then.

6 Discussion

The research problem was how disinformation campaigns impact public diplomacy in a digital age, particularly in Sweden. From the results gathered in the method, it is clear that the Swedish public diplomacy was impacted during the SSS and LVU disinformation campaigns and the NATO membership application. To avoid overinterpretations and speculations, it is vital to discuss the analysis and empirical data based on what is known and acknowledged. As stated in the introduction, the aim is to highlight how Sweden's public diplomacy was impacted and the factors behind the campaigns. The discussion is thus broken down into three sections: 1) Comparison of the cases; 2) Public diplomacy in a digital age; 3) Threat beyond Russia. The results further prove that actors wanting to assert power and spread disinformation, seldom create new propaganda, instead they make use of the rumors that are already impacting the state. This can be proven by looking at Sweden from a domestic and global perspective, where disinformation campaigns targeting the Swedish Social Services increased close to Sweden joining NATO.

6.1 Comparison of the Cases

The results from both cases prove that despite their similarities, there were differences. Most notably, the Swedish politicians responding to the Quran burnings in 2022 compared to 2023. While it is clear that both cases led to increases of disinformation campaigns, the reactions from the Swedish government differed. Kristersson did not express his sympathy to the Muslim community in 2022 but did so in 2023. Instead, he stated in 2022 that riots should never be allowed to stifle freedom of expression, which is a contrast to his previous remarks. However, this could be explained by his role. Kristersson being the prime minister of Sweden, participating in negotiations with a Pro-Islamic state such as Türkiye, changed his political position. The increased threat from other actors, massive backlash on news outlets and social media platforms, resulted in the Swedish state having to take necessary precautions. Although the Swedish police took measures in preventing Paludan from protesting in 2022 due to the Easter Riots, the international external threats against Sweden in 2023 remarkably changed Sweden's view of national security attributable to the NATO application.

Moreover, the establishment of the Swedish Psychological Defense Agency during the turn of the year 2021/2022 likely played a significant role in contextualizing and disseminating frequent disinformation campaigns. This can be attributed to the previous lack of an agency that actively addresses the public and continuously provides visual material, statistics, and factual information. Such initiatives intend to reduce pressure on the government and the agencies (such the Swedish Social Services). Both cases further show the importance of an agency's presence online in addition to the ability to monitor, analyze, and detect information in various languages (Swedish, English, Turkish, and Arabic) on numerous social media platforms to detect disinformation campaigns against Sweden. The fact that Swedish actors, ministers, and governmental agencies, on multiple occasions interacted with El-Sharqawy along with Arabic and Turkish news outlets and on social media platforms, resulted in the disinformation campaigns reaching a much broader audience. This is further due to fact that

the foreign news outlets, especially TRT World, being closely tied to the Turkish government and hence not working transparently. Consequently, the broader scale of foreign actors engaging with the disinformation campaigns, influenced the information posted being one-sided.

Additionally, there was a difference in the political stage during both cases. Looking at Figure 8 from the Analysis chapter, the election in Sweden in 2022, led to an increase of news articles and posts on social media. The total amount for the Swedish election was around 15,000 posts per day, Sweden applying for NATO membership reached around 30,000 posts per day, during their peaks. Additionally, the aspect of more citizens reading the news during the Russian invasion of Ukraine (see Figure 2), more citizens were susceptible to disinformation campaigns. A larger number of posts on both news outlets and social media platforms allowed for a higher potential of disinformation campaigns. Both the domestic and international context consisted of political election going on, the first one being in Sweden and the second one being in Türkiye. Thus, the Nye's strategic communication was important for Sweden and Türkiye throughout both cases.

6.2   Public Diplomacy In A Digital Age

6.2.1   Tools Used for Communication

As explained in the research design, and demonstrated in the analysis, the use of social media and news outlets was strategically combined to reach a wider audience, with the aim of gathering attention rather than simply conveying information. Twitter emerged as a particularly effective tools for state and non-state actors to express their opinions and exert influence with minimal effort. This dynamic ultimately prompted Swedish officials, including Foreign Minister Tobias Billström and Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, to leverage Twitter as a means of clarifying the situations and contextualizing events for the public. Moreover, non-state actors, such as Shuoun Islamiya, were able to hijack hashtags mentioning Sweden to reach an audience domestically and internationally.

6.2.2   Analysis According to Nye's Theory

The findings from the analysis align with the theoretical expectation that Sweden would not meet all three dimensions of Nye's theory about public diplomacy and political power. It is difficult to know what has been going on in terms of the diplomacy behind closed doors, however, Nye did not focus on that type of diplomacy in his theory. Looking at the theoretical expectations and Nye's first dimension, Twitter was used as a platform to swiftly respond to charges and disinformation campaigns. Compared to the press releases made through the Government Offices of Sweden website, social media platforms allowed Swedish public diplomacy to be conducted directly with an audience, especially the domestic and foreign press. However, while Nye (2008, p. 101) emphasizes on the importance of daily communication, the response from Swedish ministers were often made after Turkish claims. Moreover, the tweets often differed from what had been said by Turkish ministers and news outlets compared to Swedish ones, which caused uncertainty. This gave rise to more of a

discussion between Swedish and Turkish ministers, where both used social media platforms and news outlets to state their grounds.

This leads to the second dimension of Nye's theory, where both countries aimed at a strategic communication. Although the Swedish government clarified the reasons to pursuing a NATO membership, the governmental policy came to change throughout this period. Especially when looking at the concessions being done in terms of governmental laws, such as the new law on terror and including the PKK in the Swedish Security Service report of terrorist threat against Sweden. It could therefore be claimed that Sweden allowed Türkiye to set the agenda and control the information domain, by targeting Swedish foreign publics and policies, which further relates to Nye's theory on public diplomacy and political power.

The third dimension of Nye's theory of developing lasting relationships is difficult, as the NATO membership application should have led to Sweden building close ties with NATO-allies, but instead discussions between Sweden and Türkiye became the main focus. This is another major reason to why Sweden did not manage to meet all of the dimensions set out by Joseph Nye according to political power and public diplomacy.

6.3   Threat Beyond Russia

As mentioned in the theoretical section of the thesis, the aim was to highlight disinformation campaigns that go beyond the threat from Russia. These have involved non-state actors such as Shuoun Islamiya and the Nuance Party, but also state actors that have taken advantage of the rumors in Sweden to strengthen their own domestic and foreign politics. Relating well to the second dimension of Nye's theory, where states pursue their own interests. However, this could also be applied for the non-state actors like Shuoun Islamiya and the Nuance Party.

6.3.1   Political Interference (Elections in Sweden and Türkiye)

Erdoğan most likely took advantage of Sweden's NATO application as a means to gain political advantage in the May 2023 Turkish election. As Türkiye is characterized by state media control, censorship and self-censorship is widespread in addition to media shutdowns (Utrikesdepartementet, 2021, p. 9). Türkiye ranked 165 out of 180 countries on the 2023 Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index, where the situation has gone from problematic to very bad, as they fell 16 spots since 2022 (Carlsson, 2023). This does not come as a surprise as 90% of the national media is under governmental (Ibid.). Hence, Erdoğan's public diplomacy reflects his political tactics in Türkiye, where accusations of "terrorism" are frequently used (Getz, 2022). In 2022, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that Türkiye was the fourth most prolific jailer of journalists, with the majority being Kurdish journalists jailed on suspicion of terrorism and associated with the outlawed PKK (Ibid.). Notably, Sweden ranks 4th on the Reporters Without Borders Freedom Index, which is an indicative of their strong press freedom (Carlsson, 2023). However, they lost one place in the index, where it was 3rd in 2022, which is, among other things, due to the new terrorism law and the law against foreign espionage that came into force at the turn of the year. The law makes it a criminal offense under certain circumstances to reveal secret

information that occurs within Sweden's international collaborations and that could harm Sweden's relationship with another state or international organization (TT Nyhetsbyrån, 2023). This further proves that Türkiye's public diplomacy efforts of targeting Sweden have been successful. As stated by Bjola & Papadakis (2020, p. 645), the purpose of disinformation is not to provide accurate information, but to influence, and this is facilitated by Swedish news outlets uncritically reporting news from Turkish news outlets. This resulted in the information spread on news outlets and social media platforms not being factual correct but managing to influence affect a broader audience.

6.3.2   Impact on Sweden's Public Image

Despite Sweden's public diplomacy being marginally more affected in 2023 compared to 2022), it was not as significant as expected. This may be due to multiple reasons. One possible reason for the lower impact on Sweden's public image is that foreign actors continue to use similar disinformation campaigns and tools, even when their intentions differ. That is because disinformation campaigns often build upon rumors. Despite the first case concerns to a domestic context and the second case pertaining a global context, both cases are rooted in disinformation campaigns exploited by actors who held significant relevance to citizens of the same ethnicity and/or minority. As mentioned earlier, previous research has been focusing on Russia as the main actor of conducting disinformation campaigns in Sweden, however, the findings prove that actors from Arabic and/or Turkish speaking languages have engaged more in publishing articles about Sweden during the NATO application process, SSS disinformation campaigns in addition to the Quran burnings (see Figure 6). Hence, although the threat from Russian propaganda should not be underestimated, the ones from Arabic and Turkish actors should be taken more into consideration.

Another contributing factor may be that other actors are employing disinformation campaigns to strategically influence decision-makers in international affairs by altering their policy preferences to align with pre-determined courses of action. This aligns with the theory proposed by Nye (2008, pp. 101-102) and the definition of disinformation campaigns made by Bjola & Papadakis (2020, p. 645). With the elections coming up in Türkiye, it is not unusual of President Erdoğan to target politicians/states he does not agree with by using often extreme remarks. This was shown when he on multiple occasions accused Sweden of hosting terrorists. The made remarks by Erdoğan caused major stir in Sweden, resulted into Swedish ministers having to post on social media and deny such claims, further impact the public image of Sweden. Furthermore, this allowed the Turkish president to gain the advantage in the NATO negotiations with Sweden, as Türkiye continues to be the main country required for Sweden's entry (Swedish Institute, 2023, p. 7). While it remains unclear whether Sweden were going to extradite members of the PKK and FETÖ in Sweden in the first place, the NATO application and Türkiye's remarks about terrorism did put a pressure on Sweden. A strong reason to this is the Swedish Security Service adding PKK to their terrorist threat list, which they have not done in previous years.

Further proof that Swedish ministers altered their policy preferences lies in the fact that the Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billström claimed in October 2022 Türkiye to be a democratic state with a popularly elected government and free election, adding that states can have serious problems and still be democracies, speaks volumes. Especially as Türkiye received 32 out of 100 points and were considered not free according to the Freedom House. In 2021, the Swedish Department of Foreign Affairs released a report which highlighted Türkiye's shift from a parliamentary republic to an executive presidential republic, with regular election. However, the report also drew attention to the erosion of fundamental values such as human rights democracy, and the principles of the rule of law (Utrikesdepartementet, 2021, p. 1). According to the report, laws concerning terrorism and crimes against the state, as well as allegations of insulting the president, have been utilized to stifle dissent and silence critics of the regime (Ibid., p. 3). As such, the Criminal Code allows for a broad interpretation of terms including terrorism, defamation of the President and insulting the nation, which undermines legal certainty. Billström claimed that his answer about Türkiye being a democracy and having free elections, was not affected by the agreement for the Swedish NATO membership application (Heimersson, 2022). It is clear that Billström was aware of the situation in Türkiye, as he did say *"States can have serious issues and still be a democracy."* (Ibid.). Hence, it is reasonable to argue that the Swedish government's public diplomacy efforts were impacted by Türkiye to improve Sweden's chances of obtaining NATO membership. This is noteworthy given that the Swedish government has not previously commented Türkiye for its human rights record or democratic processes.

7 Conclusions

This chapter is split into two parts. The first part sums up the findings of the thesis and the second part discussing the limitations of the study and possible future research.

7.1 Summary

The aim of this thesis was to highlight how disinformation campaigns, through social media platforms and news outlets, have impacted Sweden's public diplomacy. It sought to accomplish this by using two cases, a domestic and an international, where similar disinformation campaigns had been conducted in addition to the actors involved. Moreover, the study further sought to answer how social media platforms came to play a bigger role in the public diplomacy in a digital age, where news outlets and governments used these platforms to reach out to a broader audience.

The study was able to address the research aim of the paper, as the findings demonstrated the interactions of news outlets and social media platforms to affect public diplomacy. Although the context was focused on Sweden, the domestic and international cases of disinformation campaigns proved that these two dimensions cannot be seen as solely separate, but also as interrelated. This is similar to how social media platforms and news outlets need to be viewed as both separate and a combined entity. Furthermore, this shows that the threats and challenges in today's digital age are complex, and this has impacted the public diplomacy tremendously.

As a conclusion, it can be said that both the SSS and LVU disinformation campaigns proved that there are weaknesses and vulnerabilities in the Swedish society, which have been exploited by domestic and international actors. Furthermore, the NATO membership application showed that actors often use previous rumors and disinformation campaigns to disrupt the public diplomacy. Often this is carried out by state and non-state actors to gain their own political power through various agendas. This is also why it should not be expected that the SSS and LVU disinformation campaigns disappear any time soon. Particularly as the number of internet users are increasing, in addition to the younger ages of the audience susceptible to disinformation campaigns.

It is also vital to note that other actors, separate from the ones in Sweden, may take advantage of the current instability caused by disinformation campaigns. This includes disinformation campaigns concerning the SSS and LVU, the Quran burnings, along with Sweden's NATO membership application. Regardless of this study focusing on actors beyond Russia, it should not go unnoticed of the potential of Russia interfering and conducting such a psychological warfare.

7.2 Future Studies

Societies all over the world will continue to develop and digitalize, leading to more possibilities of disinformation campaigns. Although this study has focused on the Swedish context and the public diplomacy conducted by the Swedish government, the theories and

analyses can be applicable on a broader level. The likelihood of future disinformation campaigns, by various other state and non-state, taking advantage of the mentioned disinformation campaigns is possible.

Worthy of mention is that this exploratory study did not aim to draw any definitive conclusions. To this belongs the aspect of recommendations, instead the aim of the thesis was to highlight the impact of disinformation campaigns on Swedish public diplomacy. A major reason to this was the limit of sample actors and materials, using two case studies whereupon one of them (NATO membership application) is still in progress. It could be argued that the findings from this thesis can be generalized to other instances, due to the many similarities in disinformation campaigns. However, as this study focused solely on the Swedish context, it is possible that other studies of disinformation campaigns may have played out differently in the discourses of other states.

The most notable limitation of this study relies in the risk of selection bias. This is not uncommon for studies of this type but is important to highlight as the material was selected by the researcher. Hence, various researchers may have dissimilar findings and conclusions compared to the ones reported in this thesis, as each researcher working with interpretive research tradition brings different experiences. In spite of that, the study is useful as it set out to highlight a relatively new field, where one of the cases barely had been studied before. Future studies of other cases, preferably including other actors and distinct incidents, could further enhance our collective understanding of disinformation campaigns and public diplomacy in a digital age.

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