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Sweden

Left resists as Sweden tilts at NATO membership

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Bella Frank is a journalist, working with the Swedish newspaper *Tidningen Global*, a paper that strives to reach and publish voices from around the world on issues such as climate change, human rights and labour rights.

In an interview with Farooq Sulehria, she examines the debate in Sweden on NATO membership. This debate has been triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Finland and Sweden, especially the latter, have been neutral for a long time. Now it seems both are ready to join NATO. Do you think if Ukraine had not been invaded, both would have stayed [most likely] neutral?

Yes, at least in the short term. I believe the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought home the issue for many Swedes in ways that would have been difficult to imagine earlier. Swedish neutrality has been broadly accepted as the most important factor as to why Sweden has been able to preserve peace within its borders for over 200 years.

Many Swedes are still firmly against NATO membership, but I think big sections of Swedish citizenry are simply trying to educate themselves more on the pros and cons regarding NATO membership. It must be said as well that even during times Sweden has claimed to be neutral, this hasn't necessarily been so in practice. For instance, since 2014 Sweden has had a closer cooperation with NATO as one of its "Enhanced Opportunity Partners". Sweden has also participated with troops in Afghanistan with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

According to opinion polls, there is 70% support for joining NATO in Finland. How is the public mood in Sweden?

I don't think there has been 70% support for joining NATO in Finland or Sweden. However, Finnish support may go up to 70% if Sweden also decides to join.

A week after the Russian invasion, the support for NATO membership in Sweden had increased sharply. In a survey by Novus published on March 4, 49% of respondents believed Sweden should join NATO, while 27% were against. A big chunk of the respondents, 24%, said they didn't know. Yet, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, around 40% used to say no to NATO and only about 35% would favour NATO membership. Another survey by DN/Ipsos shows there is a Swedish majority in favour of NATO membership if Finland joins in this case some 54% would support Swedish membership of NATO.

The public mood is kind of hard to gauge, many on the left in a broad sense feel that the debate now is skewed towards NATO membership. That there has become somewhat of a consensus that Sweden has to join even though there isn't even a clear majority for membership and many on the left and in the peace camp fear that NATO membership would be destabilising for the whole Baltic region. It might mean, critics argue, that Sweden will be drawn into military conflicts, and that Sweden should instead intensify work for demilitarisation. Many critics have also warned against making such an important decision in what may be a very short space of time. But some voices on the left now seem to consider Swedish membership as a necessary evil.

Even before the Ukraine war, the Swedish right-wing parties were advocating NATO membership. The mainstream Left (Social Democrats, Greens, Left Party) have been opposed to the idea. What is the mainstream left's stance now? Also in view of the fact that Sweden is heading for general elections September this year.

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Yes, it has remained largely a right-wing position until now. Some of the traditional right-wing parties have long pushed for a NATO membership. Moderaterna (Conservatives) as well as Liberalerna (Liberals) and since 2015 both Kristdemokraterna (Christian Democrats) and Centerpartiet (the Centre) have urged Sweden to join NATO. The far-right Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) have just recently changed position and are now for Swedish membership.

Miljöpartiet (The Greens) and Vänsterpartiet (the Left Party) are still strongly against Swedish membership. The governing Social Democrats have traditionally been against it, but there are reports they are about to change their position. If the Social Democrats go ahead with advocating NATO membership, there will be a majority for it in the Swedish parliament. There are reports that Sweden may then want to submit an application along with Finland as early as during the NATO summit at the end of June.

Ironically, Sweden and Finland both have women prime ministers. The Finnish government also takes pride in having a feminist government. How do you view this irony?

Well, Sweden has claimed to have a feminist foreign policy for some years now, and lots of feminists have consistently criticised it for not living up to its claim. I suppose the same will be said of both Magdalena Andersson, Swedish prime minister, and her Finnish counterpart, Sanna Marin, if both countries actually apply for NATO membership.

But in my view, more important than the fact they are women and leading somewhat feminist aspiring governments is the situation that has been created by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Obviously, this started back in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea but the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (and the Russian bombardments of Chechnya and Syria earlier) that is now taking place so close to EU borders has pushed the issue to the forefront, regardless of feminist ambitions of staying alliance-free. Many Swedish and Finnish feminists will disagree for sure, and one would find them both on the left and in the Swedish peace movement, they will continue resisting a Swedish NATO membership application.

From a realist perspective, do you think Sweden and Finland will be justified in joining NATO. For instance, in Ukraine the support for NATO membership went up to 80% after the invasion. "Logically", every Ukrainian would be justified in thinking that NATO membership would have provided them with a cushion against the barbaric Russian aggression. Your comments?

Well I think this is what a lot of people in Sweden are also thinking. To see the destruction of cities and people, a people that Vladimir Putin has called "brothers", the mass graves in Bucha and other cities, reports of rapes, implies that there is little or no illusion as to what Russia under Putin is capable of.

Some people are arguing that if Finland joins there is no need for Sweden to join NATO, as most countries around Sweden would be members of NATO. Others argue that it would be a very selfish position. If Finland decides to join, it will affect many Swedes, as Finland and Sweden have huge cultural proximity. Finland has a very long border with Russia more than 1300 kilometers long. Hence, I think there is now a greater understanding among Swedes how vulnerable Finland would be in the case of Russian aggression against it.

What about the peace movement in Sweden? Are there any peace groups or factions within the Social Democrats opposing NATO membership? What about the far left?

As stated above, the Left Party and Greens are still firmly against NATO membership. But the big question is the Social Democrats. The party wrote shortly after the invasion of Ukraine that there was a new security situation in

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Europe and Sweden: "There is an obvious before and after the 24th of February 2022," the party said in a statement and it nullified the "no" against NATO membership the party had voted on during their last party congress. They will have internal party discussions on the issue until the end of May and the party leadership will meet on May 24 to decide. Many old school Social Democrats are still firmly against NATO membership. However, the current leadership is, it seems, having a change of heart.

Meanwhile, the major peace organisations, such as Svenska Freds and Kvinnor för Fred besides many left-wing profiles remain steadfast in their opposition to NATO. This camp is urging demilitarisation, peace talks and investment in peaceful conflict resolution. They also warn that Sweden will lose its voice as an independent peace mediator if it decides to join NATO. Again, many have warned against a speedy process that may not allow a broad public debate. Some in this camp have suggested a referendum; others argue that there should at least be a majority in favour of NATO membership before an application is submitted.

Many who oppose NATO also point to the fact that the United States could have Donald Trump as a president again in a couple of years, and would Sweden want to be in NATO then? What about Erdogan's Turkey or Orbán's Hungary?

Do you think there are alternatives to the NATO membership?

Of course. There is the alternative of remaining alliance free, or to work for more of an EU security alliance. Then again, many of those in favour of NATO membership point to the fact that most of the EU member states are already NATO members, so why would they support strengthening an EU alliance instead? The former Left Party leader Jonas Sjöstedt has argued for a defence alliance among the Nordic countries, that would function in parallel with the EU and NATO.

Dmitry Medvedev, former Russian president, has warned that Russia will deploy nuclear warheads in the Baltic region if Sweden and Finland join NATO. How real is the nuclear threat in view of recent actions by the Putin regime?

I find that extremely difficult to assess. But people in the Baltic region, like Lithuania's defense minister Arvydas Anusauska, have pointed out that there are already Russian nuclear warheads in Russian Kaliningrad which is situated between Lithuania and Poland. These warheads have been there for about four years now. Kaliningrad is about 300 kilometres from Sweden. That is not to say that Russia wouldn't deploy a lot more nuclear warheads in the region should Sweden or Finland join NATO. Many who oppose NATO membership point to this as an argument for not joining, others refute the idea of allowing Russia to dictate what Sweden decides in relation to NATO.

Despite huge sympathy for Ukraine in Europe, we have not seen mass demonstrations and the emergence of a movement as was the case before the Iraq war. What explains this in your view?

There were huge demonstrations in Germany when the war started. In Sweden, there have been lots of smaller manifestations. But of course nothing as huge as before the Iraq war in 2003, when the biggest demonstrations since the Vietnam war were held in Stockholm.

It may have something to do with the fact that there is such a massive official response from European governments that the need for a social movement to emerge isn't as great as in other cases. It may also have to do with the fact that the Swedish left, in a broad sense, has been more focused on other areas such as Latin America or the Middle East, hence there may be more established networks in those cases.

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Another aspect has to do with a sort of inertia in reacting against perpetrators such as Russia. Look at Syria, some groups have been consistently critical of Russia for bombing Syrian civilians year after year, but the resistance against Russia's brutality against Syrians never took on nearly the same outrage as against the US war in Iraq. Some people and groups seem to need the US to be the main perpetrator to really take to the streets in anger, something both Ukrainian and Syrian leftists, amongst others, have pointed out.

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Source: [Green Left](#).

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