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Homonationalism on the Defensive: News Media Responses to Nationalist Anti-LGBTQ Attacks in Sweden

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Abstract: Examining how gender and sexuality norms are expressed through nationalist ideology, this article argues that homonationalist hegemony is being reinforced through media representations of nationalist social movements attacking LGBTQ people, events, and symbols. The argument builds on a critical discourse analysis of 320 newspaper articles published between 2016 and 2020. The discourses in the material manifest how the neo-Nazi groups the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) and Nordic Youth (NY), as well as the nationalist party Sweden Democrats (SD), have respectively been represented as threats to Swedish national unity in media due to their anti-LGBTQ attacks or statements. The analysis concludes that nationalism is reproduced through struggles over its symbolic expressions, especially through changing articulations of who belongs to the nation and who constitutes its "Others". The symbolism of gendered and sexual norms is crucial to these struggles, as the evolvements of homonationalist discourse highlights the struggle to define national unity.

Keywords: homonationalism, Sweden, nationalism, neo-Nazism, far right, LGBTQ

Introduction

Homonationalism is a nationalist discourse produced through the joint ideologies of national and sexual exceptionalism: the nation is considered exceptionally sexually progressive in comparison to other nations. The concept was coined by Jasbir Puar (2017) in her book *Terrorist Assemblages*, explaining discourses of race and sexuality shaped by the USA's war on terrorism, but has since been reworked over the years to signify how LGBTQ rights and visibility globally have become core elements in nationalist discourses. Some LGBTQ rights have been incorporated in (some) state policies and legal frameworks, as well as ideological narratives of national or regional characteristics, which are often connected to wider ideas of the moral superiority of Western, liberal modernity. The inclusion of these rights in several states, starting around the late 1990s, marks a change where some non-straight activities and identities, mainly homosexuality, went from being considered incompatible with national identity to being included in—and at times even symbolising—the nation. LGBTQ people have in the same shift gone from being threats to the nation-state to being considered potential victims of (non-

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state or external states') violence, thus needing protection offered by the nation-state (Moran and Skeggs 2014; Puar 2017).

Central to the homonationalist discourse is the assumption of anti-LGBTQ sentiment and violence being reduced mainly or solely by the actions of the nation-state (such as state legislation), which reproduces an ideological dichotomy of "LGBTQ-friendly" versus "homophobic" nations and nationalities (Puar 2013). This dichotomy has been theorised as a continuation of the colonial distinction between a "civilized" or "modern" West and a "primitive" South and East (Rao 2020). An ideological division that has exclusionary functions, as subjects who are denied entry to the LGBTQ-friendly nation (through recognised belonging) or the state (attaining residence permits or citizenship) are being displaced and disdained with justifications of labelling them as hostile, homophobic, and generally "backwards" (Haritaworn 2015). These discursive reproductions of "LGBTQ-friendly" places (mainly in Western nation-states) are thus ideologically constructed through comparisons to the "global South" (Jungar and Peltonen 2017; Rao 2020), or racial minorities and migrants within Europe (Haritaworn 2015).

What has hitherto been largely missing from scholarship on homonationalism is the question of "domestic" anti-LGBTQ politics and violence. This gap has proven to be an even more pressing academic and political issue as several events in nation-states considered "homonationalist" disprove the claims of them, or any nation-state, being completely "LGBTQ-friendly". These include for example attacks from white supremacists in the USA (Gabbatt 2022), as well as several right and far-right movements and actors all over Europe (ILGA-Europe 2023), many of whom act in nation-states commonly considered "LGBTQ-friendly". In Sweden, the nation-state examined for this article, many anti-LGBTQ statements and attacks carried out in public have come from neo-Nazis, especially from the two organisations the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) and Nordic Youth (NY). These groups have been spreading homophobic and transphobic propaganda, threatening LGBTQ venues and counterprotesting Pride festivals in the latter half of the decade of 2010 (Lagerman 2023; Linander et al. 2022), thus continuing the neo-Nazi history of targeting of LGBTQ people, alongside racial minorities and political opponents, and their events and spaces, that goes back at least to the 1980s, with previous violent attacks, assaults, and even murders (Lööw 2015). Aside from neo-Nazi threats and attacks, the political party the Sweden Democrats (SD) have worked against LGBTQ rights and interests in local governments, advocating for withdrawal of financial and symbolic support for LGBTQ organisations (RFSU 2020). Politicians from SD have also made several anti-LGBTQ statements and campaigns, including recent attempts to whip up anger against Pride parades (Christensen 2023), and ban drag story readings at public libraries (Eliden 2022).

The types of attacks against LGBTQ people, places, and events examined in this article, taking place in 2016 to 2020, have thus been carried out through parliamentary decisions, verbal statements, threats, and hate speech. While direct physical violence conduced by nationalists against LGBTQ people was seldom publicly commented upon in Sweden during 2016-2020, the risks of physical harm are

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still highly present, especially coming from neo-Nazis. In their activism, they both imply and explicitly state that they aim to (and could) violently harm and murder people. Between 1991 and 2010, Sweden was the Western European country with the highest number of right-wing extremist fatal attacks per capita (Ravndal et al. 2021:9), and active or former members in NRM have been sentenced for assaults, attempts of manslaughter and murder. There were also instances of assaults at LGBTQ events in 2016 to 2020, as well as violent deeds against other targets, including bomb detonations at two refugee homes and a syndicalist organisation venue in 2016. These and many other instances of violence conducted by neo-Nazis led to even their seemingly "non-violent" actions (counterprotesting, leafleting, etc.) being interpreted and experienced as violent. Even if many anti-LGBTQ events in the researched years did not have fatal or severe physical outcomes, they nonetheless carried the threat of bodily harm.

With exceptions (Savci 2016; Slootmaeckers 2019), the role of nationally "domestic" (i.e. subjects who are not racialised as migrants or foreigners to the nation) anti-LGBTQ actors' discursive and material impact on nationalist ideology has been unexamined. In line with Savci's and Slootmaeckers' work, and political geographic inquiries of "Othering" (see Eriksson 2008; Jansson 2017), this article examines how homonationalist ideology has been reproduced not only in response to anti-LGBTQ violence *outside* of the nation-state or conducted by racialised minorities inside its borders. Instead, it examines how homonationalism has been reproduced and developed in response to anti-LGBTQ discourse, violence, and threats coming from white, self-proclaimed nationalists *within* the nation itself. By focusing on homonationalist discourses articulated in responses to nationalist far-right anti-LGBTQ action, the article's beneficence lies in providing a critical analysis of how nationalism in general and homonationalism in particular is articulated through struggles over the "proper" sexual norms within the nation. Using Swedish nationalism as its example, this is accomplished through answering how white nationalist anti-LGBTQ actions contest, align with, or shape wider (liberal, or "mainstream") Swedish (homo)nationalist discourses.

The article distinguishes between nationalist social movements (national*ists*) and nationalist discourse (national*ism*). The former definition concerns movements politically identifying themselves as nationalists—self-proclaimed voices of the nation, such as NRM, NY, and SD (Teitelbaum 2017). The latter refers to the wider ideology of there being a (Swedish) nation, with specific traits which makes it a source of pride. Nationalist social movements are not the sole producers of nationalism. They do however play a crucial part in shaping it. Their impact is not mainly achieved through convincing "non-nationalists" to join their cause, but through making the struggle over national identity the core issue both for their supporters and opponents. This is the article's main argument, that far-right nationalists and their opponents who speak through news media are together reinforcing nationalism, by struggling over its definition. Sexuality and gender are at the core of this struggle, as symbolic representations of LGBTQ people are utilised by both sides as signifying national superiority, either through viewing them as "enemies" or as subjects worthy of protection from "enemies".

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Hateful Nationalists in a Loving Nation

In Sweden, neo-Nazis, particularly those who are or were active in a movement calling themselves the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), active under the name the Swedish Resistance Movement until 2015, have on multiple occasions occupied and disturbed political events in public spaces in Sweden. This includes 1st of May marches, protesting or attacking Pride marches and anti-racist demonstrations, and campaigning at other public political forums (Expo 2022). NRM have through these actions sought to interrupt or attack activities and spaces of people they define as "enemies" to the nation: racial minorities, anti-racists and anti-fascists, leftists, feminists, Jewish communities, refugees, LGBTQ people and allies. Neo-Nazism has historically been present in many Swedish towns and cities, tracing back to Nazi organising during the early 20th century. Their activities gained an increased intensity and public awareness in the 1980s and 1990s (Lööw 2015; Pred 1997), and have re-appeared in the public sphere in the 2010s, especially through the public actions of NRM who conducted much of their neo-Nazi activism in public spaces between 2013 and 2020 (up until the COVID-19 pandemic). During those years, substantial parts (but certainly not all) of NRM's activism were directly, or indirectly, aimed at LGBTQ people, symbols, and events, such as meeting places, cafés, bars, organising venues, and Pride events.

Another now dispersed organisation called Nordic Youth (NY) also became known for its anti-LGBTQ actions, mainly by counterprotesting or interrupting the Stockholm Pride parades in 2016, 2017, and 2018. Like NRM, NY carried out other actions in public spaces, such as attacking demonstrations for asylum rights and organising their own marches. The visibility of NY and NRM correlated with the increased influence of nationalist politics, particularly in the form of the Sweden Democrats (SD), who became the second-largest party in the Swedish parliament after the 2022 election. On several occasions, officials from SD have been called out in the media for having made homophobic statements. Among the more recent of these statements were those of a member of parliament, SD's Björn Söder, who tweeted that the Stockholm Pride festival "encourages paedophilia". These scandals occur against the background of the party having frequently voted against financial support for LGBTQ NGOs and meeting spaces, as well as progressive sexual education initiatives (RFSU 2020).

NRM, NY, and SD held, and hold, different political positions in Sweden, having different tactics, not to say different access to legitimacy, as one is a political party holding a fifth of the seats in the parliament, and the other two are considered violent, extremist organisations, with at least one of them (NRM) being monitored by the Swedish Security Service (Jönsson 2018). Their differences aside, there are some organisational overlaps through members active in, using, or supporting far-right groups other than their main organisation (Baas and Leman 2022; Vergara 2014). More importantly, all three groups share (or *shared* in the case of NY) an overarching ideological commitment to "the (Swedish) nation", which they share with the global, wider spectrum of fascist and far-right ideologies (Ince 2019).

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This commitment includes constructing the social and material borders of the nation, through defining who belongs or does not belong within them: through "Othering". The boundaries (both material and symbolic) between "us" and "them"—the "Others"—are key to nationalist structures, discourses, and mobilisations (Paasi 2021). The categories of insiders and outsiders of the nation are not static but spatially and historically contingent, political, and politicised (Paasi 2021:20). This means that distinctions between insiders and outsiders are not defined only by individual nationalist movements, but in a much wider discursive, ideological arena in which groups like SD, NRM, and NY might not get the most resonance for their definitions. Since the categories of "us" and "them" are not static, they are subjected to much conflict over questions such as: Who are "they"? Who are "we"? Who decides the content of the opposing categories? And how are the categories of "we" and "they" signifying or legitimating political orders? (Paasi 2021:19). More importantly for this paper, is that Othering also occurs on various geographical scales (ibid.), such as "within" nations, as certain actors and places are represented as unsuccessful in living up to ideal nationality, despite formally being part of it through nativity or citizenship.

Struggles over "Swedishness"

The three different nationalist organisations have invoked an ongoing hegemonic struggle over national belonging and the very definitions of "Swedishness" ("us") and Others ("them"). Since the 1960s, Sweden has frequently been imagined as a progressive, morally superior nation-state (Jansson 2018). Imaginations which have been increasingly challenged, not least by SD entering state and local parliaments (Rydgren and van der Meiden 2019). Nonetheless, the imaginary of a morally exceptional Swedish nation-state has lived on, especially so in regard to gender and sexual equality, which is central to the national image (Cuesta and Mulinari 2018).

LGBTQ rights have recently been added to the list of evidence of progressive values assumedly proving the Swedish nation's moral exceptionality (Dahl 2018; Jungar and Peltonen 2017; Kehl 2018; Strand and Kehl 2019). This exceptionality, often termed as homonationalism, relies on an imagined binary between "homophobic" ("them") and "LGBTQ-friendly" ("us") geographic entities (Puar 2017:13). Alongside women, LGBTQ people are in these projections of homophobia symbolically feminised subjects needing to be saved from outsiders to the nation (Bracke 2012). As this occurs, immigrants and communities of colour risk being marked as more homophobic than white people, and further demonised based on that assumption (Haritaworn 2015; Puar 2017:29).

Due to the tendency of vilifying migrants and minority communities as sexist, homophobic threats, the homonationalist ideology risks being perceived as isolated to nationalist social movements and political parties (here NY, NRM, or SD) that "co-opt" LGBTQ rights, supporting them superficially in racist projects by describing immigrants as being a "foreign threat" to domestic LGBTQ people. Previous studies defining homonationalism have shown how Swedish nationalist movements, mainly SD, have articulated such homonationalist discourses, by

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claiming that Sweden is a "gay-friendly" nation and that all homophobia in Sweden comes from immigrants (Kehl 2018; Sörberg 2017). However, since the publication of Sörberg's and Kehl's works, there is little to suggest that SD would be the main advocates for homonationalist discourse in Sweden. The discourse analysis carried out for this article instead shows how SD members have been questioned and scrutinised for *opposing* homonationalist ideals, when they slander and attempt to hinder LGBTQ events, spaces, and organisations. While SD nonetheless have sometimes subscribed to homonationalism, this cannot be said of neo-Nazis, who have instead kept up their tradition of anti-LGBTQ threats and violence (see Linander et al. 2022; Lööw 2015). SD parliamentarians and neo-Nazis are certainly nationalists, but only occasionally *homonationalists*.

Evidently, it is not self-proclaimed national*ist* movements who are the main reproducers of homonational*ism*. Instead, the ideology of homonationalism is articulated through more mundane forms of everyday practice and knowledge of the world as dividable into nation-state entities, which can be classified as either "for" or "against" LGBTQ rights and people (Jungar and Peltonen 2017). Facing the reluctance of nationalist movements to embrace the homonationalist ideology, and instead outrightly oppose it, necessitates a critical expansion of the homonationalist concept for grappling with the increased intensity of anti-LGBTQ politics and activism globally, coming from far-right nationalist movements.

Examining the interactions of contesting nationalist articulations, I agree with Hart (2020:242), who writes that "multiple, conflicting articulations of 'the nation' and nationalism are always integral to bourgeois hegemony". The historical grounds of global processes of "racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and imperialism" (ibid.) laid the ground for current nation-state formation, meaning that the global, contemporary upsurge of racist, heterosexist populism is not as surprising or abruptly breaking with liberal democracies, as some might assume. This also means that the nation as an ideological, territorial construct is a terrain of struggle, not only for those who self-identify as nationalists, but among all who articulate the nation's existence and its meaning, or who reproduce it and live through it in their everyday lives (Koefoed and Simonsen 2007). In the contemporary struggles over defining nationalist ideology, intensified by nationalist movements, the symbolic role given to LGBTQ people is central but understudied. This article therefore draws upon a critical discourse analysis of news media articles and debate articles covering the questioning of, or attacks on, LGBTQ symbols, spaces, and the people creating and maintaining them.

Methods

Newspapers reproduce nationalism by describing the world as divided into nations, their readers as a unitary "us", or through taken-for-granted national references (Billig 1995). They represent reality through their selection of which events to mediate, while amplifying events' conflictual elements and narrating them to both fit and affect anticipated readers' conceptions (Hall et al. 2013:55–57). For those reasons, this article builds on a critical discourse analysis of news and debate articles published between 2016 and 2020, a five-year period which

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marks a time when nationalist and neo-Nazi groups were particularly successful in gaining media coverage for their activism generally (Holt 2020), and anti-LGBTQ activism specifically.

The substantial media attention paid to nationalist anti-LGBTQ politics and activism was evident in the number of articles found in the media archive provided by Retriever Research. I conducted keyword searches for organisation names (SD, NRM, or NY), or words used to describe them (Nazis and/or right-wing extremists) combined with keywords signifying LGBTQ themes: rainbow* pride, LGBT*, trans, homo, and/or RFSL (the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Rights—the largest LGBTQ civil society organisation in Sweden). Including only articles written in Swedish from 2016 to 2020 generated a result of 309 articles mentioning the group Nordic Youth, 3,532 articles mentioning NRM, and 6,364 articles mentioning SD. Out of the search results, I selected articles which clearly narrated an attack or several attacks (verbal, symbolic, or physical) on LGBTQ symbols or space(s) conducted by NY, NRM, or SD members. Then the number of articles was reduced by excluding duplicates, and prioritising articles in which LGBTQ attacks were the central events described, which resulted in 320 articles.

The reading, theoretical coding, and interpretation of the articles drew from critical discourse analysis, aiming to critically examine power relations, through using texts and lingual analysis as the entry point (Fairclough 2017). Codes were found by focusing on texts' vocabulary, imagery, or use of pronouns such as "we", "us", and "they" or "them", that imply (national) unity (Fairclough 2015:143, 191), in- or out-group construction (van Dijk 1984), as well as gender and sexuality (asking if a text spoke for, about, or through LGBTQ subjects, for example—and in that case which LGBTQ subjects it spoke for, about, or through). Initially, codes were organised descriptively into categories (inspired by Rose 2001), such as the type, place, and time for LGBTQ events, people, or symbols narrated in an article, as well as the identities and descriptions of far-right disturbers, opposers, or attackers. Descriptive categories also included the subjects, processes, or objects represented: (i) in images; (ii) in titles; (iii) in interviews; (iv) in debate and opinion pieces; (v) as threats; (vi) as being under threat; and (vii) as resistance. The codes were then categorised theoretically, by grouping and interpreting reoccurring patterns as *discourses*, being "ways of representing reality" (Fairclough 2017:15).

Markers of nationality in Scandinavia are often reproduced and altered through what Koefoed and Simonsen (2007:312) refer to as "narrative strategies of nationalisms", which all signify the nation. They argue that different, contesting nationalisms (ways of conceptualising and defining the nation) are part of a larger ambiguous construction of nationhood, stating that "nationalism has many voices and consequently should be treated as a plurality" (Koefoed and Simonsen 2007:328). The plurality, however, does not mean all representations hold equal influence—as different groups struggle to gain the power to define the nation (Billig 1995). A crucial part of this struggle is fought in media articles that respond to the claims of Swedishness made by SD, NRM, and NY. In the remaining sections I show how these responses reconstruct four major discourses that

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underpin a wider homonationalist discourse: (i) the rainbow flag; (ii) the abstraction of anti-LGBTQ attacks as being attacks on the nation; (iii) international competition (and comparison); and (iv) the foreign connotations applied to Swedish neo-Nazis. These intertwined discourses are together variations of one and the same larger homonationalist concept: LGBTQ-friendliness as signifying national modernity and superiority, according to which anti-LGBTQ-friendliness is represented as an attack not only on LGBTQ people but the nation-state.

The Rainbow Flag as a National Flag

In the opposing narratives of gender/sexuality in the Swedish nation, different actors focus on rainbow flags as an arena of discursive struggle. In one corner of the symbolic and concrete battlefield are the neo-Nazis, who steal, vandalise, and burn them. In another section not too far away are SD, who use their seats in local (municipal) and state parliaments to advocate against public organisations and authorities hoisting the rainbow flag. In other corners we have those who get their flags stolen or vandalised, people setting up new flags, or people who comment on the thefts, vandalisms, or policies against public rainbow flag-hoisting. Then we of course also have people acting on behalf of state organisations, such as the military who have used rainbow flags for their narratives about themselves and Sweden (Strand and Kehl 2019).

In most news reports about nationalist anti-LGBTQ events, images describing them consist of an array of generic pictures of rainbow flags (re-occurring photos often purchased from the same news bureau). Photos in news articles convey ideological messages (Hall 2021), including the repetition of published stock photos of rainbow flags. The images frequently portrayed large rainbow flags hoisted on traditional flag poles—stationary objects otherwise manufactured for Swedish flags—against blue sky backgrounds. Their composition was only made possible through the material structures of traditional nationalism, as the poles from which the rainbow flag waves were designed to hold national flags. In this way, the images of rainbow flags reproduce a "banal" Swedish homonationalism. The banality lies in the nation being unspoken (Billig 1995), in this case through supplementing the more overtly national symbols of Swedish flags, with rainbow flags.

The uses of the rainbow flag therefore further add to the banality of Swedish nationalism, as even an international flag used globally, designed by an artist in the USA, has been taken to represent the Swedish nation. The subtext of the rainbow flag representing Swedishness is in most cases expressed visually, communicated in pictures of rainbow flags blowing in the wind against the blue sky, or as in some cases, being placed next to Swedish flags which further suggests their symbolic interchangeability. The parallels between the Swedish flag and the rainbow flag reinforces the already established discourse of Sweden as a morally exceptional nation, since the rainbow flag lacks some of the racist and neo-Nazi connotations tied to the Swedish flag. Unlike the rainbow flag, the Swedish flag has been embraced and frequently used by neo-Nazis and used for expressing racist views over the years (Molina 2011). Ironically then, if subscribing to

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Swedish nationality as defined foremostly by equality as the source of national pride, the rainbow flag may signal this more efficiently than the Swedish flag, symbolising modern, enlightened acceptance of sexual minorities, or even "diversity" in general. This does not mean that the flags themselves have agency, in the sense that the flags are objects which inherently define any nationality and determine their own symbolic meaning. Instead, it confirms the opposite: that flags as objects become national symbols through the repeated social actions of narrating, placing, hoisting, and waving rainbow flags in ways that make them representative of the nation.

Yet, the rainbow flag has not become a fully banal representation of Swedish nationality, as its capacity to represent Swedishness is questioned by far-right and neo-Nazi nationalists. The fact that the rainbow flag more frequently appears in the same spaces where the Swedish national flags would otherwise be, is exactly what for example SD politicians explicitly oppose (Berg 2020; Ohlsson 2019). When they argue, or (if holding enough seats in local parliaments) decide, against hoisting rainbow flags outside public buildings, it generates massive reactions and responses arguing against them. One such case was the decision to ban rainbow flags on public flag poles in the small town of Sölvesborg in 2019, made by SD in collaboration with politicians from other conservative parties. Following the decision were several news reports, debate articles, and even a large demonstration held in celebration of the rainbow flag (Sandström 2019). In the reactions, responses verbalised the previously unspoken assumptions of rainbow flags representing Sweden and Swedishness:

> Precisely because it signals an open, democratic, and inclusive society, the rainbow flag is worth hoisting with happiness and pride. More than gladly next to the Swedish one. (Journalist, editorial in the LGBTQ paper *QX* [Voss 2019])

> When municipalities hoist the pride flag or when our national [military] defence walks in the pride festival I feel joy and pride over Sweden. Over my Sweden, the free and freedom-loving Sweden. Pride that our [military] defence welcome and protect the citizens of the nation—all Swedes. (Journalist, editorial in the liberal, local newspaper *Blekinge Läns Tidning* [Gustafsson 2019])

The responses in editorials and debate articles indicate views on the Swedish flag and the rainbow flag as both being sources of national pride, thus confirming SD's terms of the rainbow flag de facto representing the nation. As SD and neo-Nazi groups aim their efforts against rainbow flags, they reinforce and bring forth an underlying tendency to debate not the lives and rights of LGBTQ people, but their symbolic role in Swedish nationalism as either insiders or outsiders. In response to SD's opposition to rainbow flags, various debate article writers and interviewees in news articles reassure readers of how rainbow flags in many ways represent Swedish nationality. By including LGBTQ people symbolically in the nation, the political order signified or legitimised (see Paasi 2021:19), is the Swedish state in its current form, being for example democratic or free. These chains of events show that rather than merely putting homonationalism in question, nationalist anti-LGBTQ activity provides opportunities for homonationalist discourse to be verbalised in

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response. In these verbalisations, the mentioned controversies of the Swedish flag and its racist connotations are downplayed which indicates that using the rainbow flag as a stand-in for the Swedish flag can serve to destigmatise the latter. Homonationalist expressions thus enable a nationalist pride free from connotations to—and even as opposed to—the "bad" nationalists.

Concrete Targets, Abstract Victims

Far from all anti-LGBTQ activity was directed to flags. Especially the neo-Nazi groups also targeted specific people and spaces, such as LGBTQ venues and Pride parades, in their activism (Linander et al. 2022). Even those attacks were however frequently visually represented with the same rainbow flag stock photos in news reports and debates. Despite these very tangible struggles against LGBTQ people, news and debate representation frequently centred on the symbolic aspects, framing the issues as struggles over the meanings of the nation, rather than struggles over actual spaces: meeting venues, public spaces, and festivals that were threatened or attacked by neo-Nazis. The rainbow flag is in these instances a discursive concept representing not only sexual diversity, but the *symbolic role* of sexual diversity for the nation, which ignores or obscures actual LGBTQ subjectivities in favour of having them signify "gender exceptional Swedishness" (Strand and Kehl 2019:308).

Even when the flag is not the object "under attack", it is nonetheless used to represent the people and spaces targeted. The rainbow flag is repeatedly used to signify any kind of verbal or physical attack on any kind of LGBTQ person, group, or place. Through this repertoire, rainbow flags are used to represent concrete spaces (made from LGBTQ experiences) as abstract symbols (rainbow flags). What is then considered being under threat are not only LGBTQ people (or other targets of neo-Nazi attacks for that matter), but also their symbolic role in Swedish nationalism, implied through flag images (see Meyer 2020, for related critique on responses to the Orlando shooting in 2016).

Rainbow flags are taken to represent not only an LGBTQ community, but a wider (incorporating non-LGBTQ people), yet narrower, Swedish national community is possible through assuming and actively affirming that they both signal the same "values". This leads to responses towards SD's opposition to rainbow flags emphasising how the rainbow flag is not an LGBTQ symbol, but instead "stands for peace, everybody's equal value, freedom, and diversity. It is not only LGBTQ which is the reference [of the rainbow flag]" (Sjöberg 2016, quoting a social-democratic politician commenting on a new municipal flag policy). Such statements are aligned with what Laskar et al. (2016:197) have identified as values connected with the rainbow flag which affirms ideas about Sweden, being "coded as progressive and pro-diversity, and contrasted with its binary Otherness, defined by a closed society, intolerance, prejudice, inequality, discriminating and oppressive norms towards sexual minorities". Attacks on LGBTQ people, events, and places are constructed as threatening abstract national "values", an abstraction signalled by having the rainbow flag signifying morality and enlightenment rather than only or primarily LGBTQ struggles.

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Anti-LGBTQ activism coming from neo-Nazis was also narrated as a threat against the Swedish nation in several other verbal statements, including the following:

> Should my future children grow up in a country where Nazis who want to establish a race biological institute received permission to debate and spread information? Where people with other skin colour than white and other [sexual] orientation than hetero are forced to crouch, to bend down for the fear? Am I dreaming a nightmare? (Local chairperson of an LGBTQ organisation, debate article in local liberal newspaper *Norran* [Wikman 2017])

The debate article is one example among many texts that focuses on how racist and heterosexist threats from neo-Nazis translate into a threat against the future of the nation. While acknowledging that such a future would hold more problems for people already targeted by neo-Nazis (racialised as non-white and/or non-heterosexual), this is expressed through a nationalist framework: problems are defined by "growing up in a country", a future Sweden which looks a different way than contemporary Sweden. Temporality is key in these narratives, as it is also foundational for homonationalist discourse in general, where national sexual exceptionalism is expressed as temporal progress—being "ahead" of other nations on a journey towards equality (Rao 2020). In the quote, past Sweden haunts future Sweden through expressing fear over (re-)establishing a race biological institute—a state research institute that was active from 1935 to1960 (Ericsson 2021).

Sweden as a nation is temporally defined in many of the analysed texts as *being* a country free of racism and heterosexism but having *been* and risking *becoming* a racist and heterosexist nation. As such, LGBTQ rights (sometimes together with rights of racialised minorities, such as in the quote above) signifies the meaning and character of the nation, in narrating contemporary heterosexism and racism as both past and future problems. The visibility of neo-Nazis in public spaces and the growing influence of a nationalist political party are considered threats to Swedish modernity, by narrating far-right politics and activism as attempts to "turn back the clock" (see Hedh 2018 [social democratic debate article]; Saweståhl et al. 2016 [conservative debate article]). In all these reactions, the contemporary homonationalist character of Sweden is emphasised in fearing how it may be lost, taken away from "us". Contemporary nationalist anti-LGBTQ politics and activism is thus not only seen as an immediate threat towards people, but as a more abstract threat of the nation losing its homonational status.

Internal and External "Homophobic Others"

So far, I have shown how representations of nationalist anti-LGBTQ events have been drawn upon in narratives about the Swedish nation in the discourses about "us". The ideas about any national community are also set up in relation to "them" (Paasi 2021)—the Others to the Swedish homonational nation-state. In previous research on European and Swedish homonationalism, these "Others" have been identified as Russian (Agius and Edenborg 2019; Strand and

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Kehl 2019), Eastern European (Kulpa 2014), Muslim (Bracke 2012), or African (Jungar and Peltonen 2017). The case of domestic, nationalist anti-LGBTQ events could potentially complicate the picture, as the "homophobic Others" in these cases are evidently white—and politicise that whiteness through racist or neo-Nazi organising. As such, they could be represented as anomalies, as "internal Others", to whom all racism, heterosexism, and homophobia within the nation are ascribed, leaving the main population of the nation free of guilt (Eriksson 2008; Jansson 2017; Meyer 2020; Pred 1997).

While nationalist anti-LGBTQ politicians and activists certainly were represented in the analysed news media articles as anomalies and as unsuccessful in embracing "Swedish values", their actions are not only taken to signal "internal" homophobia. Rather, texts about them are loaded with descriptions of external "Others", who are mentioned alongside SD, NRM, and NY. Despite the whiteness and Swedishness of the perpetrators, several non-white, non-Swedish "Others" appear in texts about nationalist anti-LGBTQ politics and activism, as authors frequently bring up homophobia "in other countries" or likening neo-Nazis to Islamist terrorists. Nationalist anti-LGBTQ activists and politicians are therefore not only represented as "internal Others", but instead assumedly connected to "external Others".

One way in which the external homophobic Other appears, is in in debate and editorial articles that reinforce the homonationalist discourse by making international comparisons. Commenting upon SD's aversion towards rainbow flags, the editor of one of Sweden's largest newspapers argues that: "They who actively take down the Pride flag and speak derogatorily of homosexuals do so with an intention. We do not have to travel far from Sweden to understand where that intention leads" (Editor of the liberal, national newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* [Wolodarski 2019]). The editor frames contemporary anti-LGBTQ politics as dangerous because it may lead to Sweden becoming like "Other" countries, literally, as no specific countries or even regions are mentioned by name. Due to the mentioning of geographic proximity ("we do not have to travel far"), it could be either Russia or Eastern European countries which are referred to in Wolodarski's (2019) warning, which have elsewhere been identified as core representations of homophobic countries (Agius and Edenborg 2019; Kulpa 2014). As the text coincides in time with the establishment of "LGBT-free zones" in Poland (Żuk et al. 2021), that could be the place "not far" which Wolodarski refers to.

The fear of Sweden changing from moral to immoral—thus already having become more like "Other" countries—was also expressed in texts where authors state that "I do no longer recognise my Sweden" (Ohlson Wallin 2016) or that "people ask themselves the question of where Sweden is headed" (Lindhagen 2019). Temporality is here used to express an originally good nation which is or has already been transformed for the worse. Several other editorial and debate article writers, particularly (but far from restrictedly) in liberal newspapers and by liberal authors, articulate homonationalist narratives through either ending or introducing their texts about SD, NRM, or NY with statements about homophobia in "Other countries". Among these were the following quotes:

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> In Sweden love is allowed and welcomed. Women love women and men love men. But out in the world 72 countries still have a total ban on homosexuality. (Journalist and author, in politically independent newspaper *Metro* [Alfredsson 2018])

> In comparison with many other countries, one could say that Sweden is an exemplary country when it comes to LGBTQ rights. But it is far from flawless. (Letter to the editor, in the liberal, local newspaper *Kristianstadsbladet* [Bertilsson 2016])

While the quotes and similar statements (see Björklund et al. 2018; Rùzsa-Pál 2018) to some extent express a global, rather than national, solidarity, the mentioning of global oppression serves the purpose of praising Swedish progressiveness. Thus, global inequality is used to reinforce the assumption of Swedish equality (see also Jungar and Peltonen 2017), even when the concrete anti-LGBTQ events commented upon include not only white Swedes, but are carried out in the name of the white Swedish nation.

The "Other countries" which Sweden is compared to are seldom defined and could therefore vary between texts. Neither is it certain that the writers behind the texts even had specific countries in mind when writing. In previous research, some specific homophobic "Others" contrasting Swedish sexual exceptionalism have been identified. Studies of Swedish security politics argue that Russia is (even prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine) considered the main "Other" that threatens Swedish values of gender equality and LGBTQ inclusion (Agius and Edenborg 2019; Strand and Kehl 2019). Yet, references to "many other countries" (Bertilsson 2016), and the "72 countries" that "still have a total ban on homosexuality" (Alfredsson 2018), imply a wider set of imagined Others, including African and Asian countries with anti-sodomy laws. By these connotations, representations of the homophobic Other as a potential person *within* Sweden (such as a neo-Nazi or an SD politician) draw upon and reproduce racist preconceptions of non-white, homophobic Others, through describing homophobia as a Southern or Eastern problem (see Kehl 2018).

The idea of *real* anti-LGBTQ sentiment and action as a foreign phenomenon thus persisted in representations of nationalist anti-LGBTQ activity. Media texts and images reproduce a Swedish homonationalist discourse by repeatedly reminding the reader of Swedish moral exceptionality in geographical comparison. The statements are possible because comparisons between nation-states are commonplace, crucial parts of the homonationalist discourse. For a nation to be "LGBTQ-friendly" other nations need to be "LGBTQ-unfriendly". Such comparisons are not unique to Swedish homonationalism but are connected to the global discourse of national comparability between LGBTQ-liveability (see Browne et al. 2021). Swedish homonationalism praising the country as LGBTQ-friendly (even when describing anti-LGBTQ activity), relies on a global structure of nation-states. It is only through that structure that nation-states act and are comprehended as separate entities in comparison and competition with each other generally (Goswami 2002) and regarding LGBTQ rights specifically (Ammaturo and Slootmaeckers 2020; Rao 2020).

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The Neo-Nazi as a Jihadist

Underlying racist definitions of homophobic "Others" threatening Sweden become more evident when considering how particularly neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQ activists (from NRM and NY) are represented in the media. Media discourses of neo-Nazis have already been critiqued for reproducing narrow understanding of racism in Sweden. By reacting to racism only when it comes from Neo-Nazis, the racist societal structure undergirding the whole nation-state is ignored. Racism is seen only when coming from "someone else, somewhere else", typically being the small-town neo-Nazi (Pred 1997). The contemporary news texts affirm that neo-Nazis are not legitimately part of the national community, as they threaten the Swedish sexual exceptionalism. They are frequently represented as criminals or even terrorists threatening the Swedish social order (examples occur in Backlöf 2017; Karlsten 2017; Malmgren et al. 2016; Wiberg 2016).

In a piece by the well-known author Jonas Gardell, the "un-Swedishness" of neo-Nazis was expressed not only as an issue of criminality, but as an issue of integration (into the Swedish nation):

> We must take a bigger approach in the integration debate—integration applies to all of us, everyone who lives within the country's borders. One of the first steps is to officially define domestic right-wing extremist terrorism in the same way as Islamist terrorism—as precisely terrorism. (Debate article published in the liberal national newspaper *Expressen* [Gardell 2017])

The neo-Nazis' distance from Swedish values is emphasised through likening them with Islamist terrorists, a comparison appearing in other debate pieces too. The association was made both in social democratic and conservative texts:

> In the editorial pages, we have previously argued for Nazi violence to be seen as terrorism, as well as collaboration with terrorist organisations ought to be penal. From such a starting point, the legal judgement ought to consider it unthinkable to permit the Islamic State [Daesh] as the Nordic Resistance Movement a bookstand on the streets of Visby [during *the Almedal week*, a large political forum]. (Editorial published in conservative national newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* [Lifvendahl 2018])

> The analogy with Islamists or IS [Daesh] is not far-fetched. But the idea of having the murder cult IS demonstrating on Swedish streets is unthinkable. The idea of marching Nazis should be just as unreasonable. (Debate article by journalist, published in social-democratic national newspaper *Aftonbladet* [Sima 2018])

Like the earlier description of "Other countries", the quotes above are from texts that initially provide concrete examples of neo-Nazi statements or threats directed towards LGBTQ people but move on to mention other actors who they argue need to be policed or integrated into the Swedish nation: Islamist terrorists (a common conflation; see also Federley 2018; Holm and Olsson 2016; Österberg 2019). What then distinguishes these discourses from earlier work on neo-Nazism's role in Swedish nationalism (as studied by Pred 1997), are the connotations to Islamism. According to the analysed texts, the foreignness of Islamists is a given, and therefore used to emphasise the foreignness of neo-Nazis. Already

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existing ideas of Islamists as foreign threats are applied to signal that neo-Nazis are, despite their nationality and whiteness, not like "us"—they are like "them"—meaning the Islamists. Close critical readings of discourses in debate and editorial articles responding to neo-Nazi anti-LGBTQ threats show that not only are the neo-Nazis considered "internal Others", but through conflating them with global terrorist acts, they are represented as closer to the external Others, such as Daesh.

Neo-Nazis manifesting racist and heterosexist violence in the Swedish public sphere does therefore not lead to any of the texts critiquing nationalism. Instead, they argue that neo-Nazis, like the Islamist Others, need to be controlled by the state police or, according to Gardell (and others; see Zelaya 2019), need to be educated to align with proper Swedish values. More than affirming the neo-Nazis as anomalies to Swedish nationality, as "enemies within" or "internal Others", the texts conflate them with external Others, to emphasise their distance to Swedish values. When they do so they simultaneously build support for policies of harsher policing and "integration". These concern not only the individuals they actually describe, the neo-Nazis, but all people living in Sweden who could be deemed failing to live up to "national values", which more often than not are migrant and racial minorities (Lentin 2008:490).

Since nationalist boundaries between "us" and "them" are always changing according to their contexts (Paasi 2021), the tendency to represent both neo-Nazi and far-right anti-LGBTQ activity as dangerous due to resembling "Other countries" or "Other terrorists" likely follow wider discursive shifts. One of them is the homonationalist discourse, according to which sexual exceptionalism of the nation is taken for granted to the extent that even conflicting evidence of domestic organised racist homophobia and transphobia are represented as evidence of foreign hostility. Another discourse is here combined with the homonationalist discourse, namely the increase of previously marginal racist narratives in public discourse (Krzyżanowski et al. 2021), reflecting the stricter regulation of migration in Sweden (Scarpa and Schierup 2018). We see this not least in how justifications of harsher policing and "assimilation" of neo-Nazis re-articulate wishes for harsher policing of Islamists and the "assimilation" of racial minorities.

Conclusion

The discursive chains of homonationalist responses to nationalist anti-LGBTQ politics and activism show an empirical manifestation of how "we might think of homonationalism and authoritarianism here as often operating in a tandem formation that is only seemingly contradictory" (Puar 2022:3). More than being "seemingly contradictory", nationalist anti-LGBTQ action and homonationalist discourses are mutually reinforcing each other through struggling against one another. Swedish sexual exceptionalism is so common-sensical, that it is reproduced even when describing domestic events contradicting its validity. In news media responses to nationalist anti-LGBTQ activity, a homonationalist discourse was reproduced through four different discourses: (i) defining the rainbow flag (opposed by SD or NRM) as a representation of Swedish values; (ii) thus defining attacks on rainbow flags and LGBTQ people as attacks on the Swedish nation; (iii)

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comparing Sweden to other countries; and (iv) likening neo-Nazis to Islamists. Through all these discourses, the wider homonationalist discourse is reproduced in reaction to nationalist anti-LGBTQ actions and activism. The struggle to define the nation (and its legitimate voices) is here carried out with LGBTQ people represented as abstract symbols at its centre, which suggests geographers researching contemporary nationalism and the far-right ought to keep taking articulations of gender and sexuality seriously.

Opposing ideological representations of LGBTQ people, events, and symbols, are made mostly for onlookers rather than creators and participants. Whether they praise or hate the visibility of LGBTQ spaces and symbols, they define and discursively utilise those spaces and symbols for what they do to represent the nation. It may be self-evident that outspokenly nationalist organisations, such as the Sweden Democrats, Nordic Youth, and the Nordic Resistance Movement, claim to represent and speak for the Swedish nation. They make these claims by defining national space as foundationally heteronormative through political decisions (when in power), or through activism targeting LGBTQ people, symbols, and events (through extra-parliamentary action). But while those groups struggle intensively to represent the nation, they are themselves at the same time represented as enemies to the nation by other actors, such as politicians, NGO workers, journalists, and others with access to speak through news and debate articles in Swedish media.

The analysis of struggles over defining one specific nation brings light to two important issues for geographers as well as for scholars researching nationalism and sexuality. Firstly, there is a need to emphasise homonationalism and sexual exceptionalism through a non-nationalist approach. By that, I mean that we need to research the struggles over defining nationality and avoid reproducing simplistic narratives about a nation in its entirety being or not being complicit with homonationalism. Homonationalism is never a solid nationalist trait—or a stage for countries to enter or not enter. Rather, nations are always subjected to ongoing struggles over what and whom they are for and what interests they should serve (Hart 2020; Paasi 2021). Secondly, the analysis shows how, unlike racialised minorities in the West (especially Muslims), white homophobes who threaten and oppose LGBTQ people are not considered outsiders to the nation, despite opposing homonational ideals. Because of this, their exterior position to Swedish national values needs to be emphasised with added connotations to Others. While the groups' claims to represent Swedishness are repeatedly questioned in debate and opinion pieces, the invalidity of those claims is repeatedly reinforced by likening them to "exterior" (Islamist) terrorists and foreign state oppression (in "Other countries").

Thus, while the far right should of course not remain unopposed, there are clear limits and risks that come with using (homo)national identity as a means for opposition. In practice, it has also proven inefficient in diminishing the influence of far-right politics. During Sweden's last election in September 2022, TV viewers following the public service streaming could see how members of the liberal party celebratory waved rainbow flags, to some months later entering a government based on an agreement with SD. In 2018, the former minister of state Stefan Löfvén said that "we are all in agreement that SD are homophobes"

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(Vanhainen 2018). If that is still true, it has not been considered an issue for the Swedish citizens voting for them, or for politicians who now govern with their support, which suggests that there are clear limits to how efficient homonationalist discourse is for fighting nationalist anti-LGBTQ politics and activism, as well as the far right or neo-Nazism more generally.

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