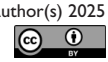
Check for updates

Article

Cooperation and Conflict
2025, Vol. 60(4) 675–701
© The Author(s) 2025

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/00108367251377600
journals.sagepub.com/home/cac

Securitization in the security community: Cooperation and conflict in the Nordic in relation to the Covid-19 crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Roxanna Sjöstedt and Erik Noreen

Abstract

At the height of the Cold War, American political scientist Karl Deutsch labeled the Nordic a Security Community due to its "sense of community" in the form of shared practices, interdependency, and peaceful expectations. However, this characterization ended abruptly in 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic struck, which instead triggered securitization processes and extraordinary measures, replacing regionalism with nationalism. In contrast, when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, the Nordic stood united. The joint Finnish-Swedish application to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was accompanied by security guarantees, and joint defense statements symbolized a revived security community, overcoming past mistrust and differences. These contrasting responses to external threats highlight the varying dynamics of the Nordic security community under external stress. This article argues that securitization theory—particularly when addressing the interplay between the so-called functional and securitizing actors—offers insight into these dynamics. We concur with the claim that even the so-called mature pluralistic security communities are not static or fully consolidated; instead, they are susceptible to internal tensions that can disrupt established norms of cooperation. Nonetheless, such disruptions do not necessarily signal the collapse of the security community. Rather, these communities can recover and reestablish foundations of trust, collaboration, and shared identity over time.

Keywords

military security, pandemics, securitization, security communities, the Nordic states

Corresponding author:
Roxanna Sjöstedt, Lund University, 221 00 Lund, Sweden.
Email: roxanna.sjostedt@svet.lu.se

Introduction

In 1957, at the height of the Cold War and amid tensions of potential nuclear conflict and superpower rivalry, American political scientist Karl Deutsch launched the concept of the so-called security communities as an alternative view of international relations compared to the predominant realist disposition of the time. Driven by the intention of contributing "to the study of possible ways in which men someday might abolish War" (Deutsch et al., 1957, 18), Deutsch and associates sought in their seminal book to explore the conditions for, or causes of, peace by examining how peaceful relations between states had developed and settled. Importantly, a security community is grounded in shared norms and mutual expectations rather than being the product of treaties and institutionalized integration. While it can overlap with formal organizational arrangements such as alliances, charters, or supranational institutions, it does not depend on them.

Deutsch proposed different types of security communities, with a key distinction being between *amalgamated* and *pluralistic* forms. An *amalgamated* security community arises when two or more, previously independent, entities merge into a single political unit governed by a shared authority. One historical example of such an arrangement is the Swedish–Norwegian union (1814–1905). This union is widely seen as a failed amalgamated security community. The Norwegians felt coerced, and support for dissolution grew. Sweden opposed this and threatened war, leading both sides to mobilize troops along the lengthy Swedish–Norwegian border. Despite tensions, the crisis ended peacefully and after negotiations the union was dissolved in 1905.

In contrast, a *pluralistic* security community involves independent states maintaining their sovereignty while forming a strong mutual bond. Deutsch regarded the pluralistic security community as the "more promising approach to the elimination of war" (Deutsch et al., 1957, 45), given its relative ease of achievement and sustainability compared to amalgamated arrangements. For a pluralistic security community to endure, an essential norm must be agreed upon: the prioritization of peace among its members. In addition, such communities rely on extensive networks for communication, informal interactions, mutual social learning, and the cultivation of similar political cultures to foster a shared sense of identity and cohesion.

According to Deutsch, the Nordic constituted one of the most prominent examples of a pluralistic security community. This assessment was rooted in the region's transformation from a historically conflict-ridden area—apart from the failed union mentioned above it was particularly marked by past rivalries between Sweden and Denmark—to one characterized by enduring peaceful relations, shared norms, and a common identity. Over the years, the Nordic has continued to be a solid example of a pluralistic security community. Despite lacking bodies of supranational authorities, and despite internal differences regarding, for example, European Union (EU) and (until recently) North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership, the Nordic states have nonetheless developed different fora for dialogue and cooperation. Notably, the Nordic Passport Union ensured freedom of mobility within the region over 30 years before the establishment of the Schengen Convention. Nordic collaboration extends across multiple areas, ranging from the health sector, "by utilising mutual knowledge and experiences" (Nordisk Ministerråd 2017: 75), to joint military training exercises. In short, and as stated

by the main Nordic interstate forum for cooperation, the Nordic Council of Ministers: "The Nordic cooperation is one of the most comprehensive forms of regional cooperation in the world" (Nordisk Ministerråd 2017: 2, authors' translation).

However, also the most developed form of a pluralistic security community can experience tensions and friction, and we believe the Nordic one is a particularly illustrative case in this regard. Focusing on security community dynamics in the Nordic as a case in point, this article will zoom in on how two different external threats—the Covid-19 pandemic and the geopolitical tensions arisen from Russia's invasion of Ukraine—were framed, communicated, and managed. Conflicting pandemic strategies significantly strained Nordic unity and resulted in that Norway, Finland, and Denmark often stood in opposition to Sweden (Bengtsson and Brommesson, 2024). After more than 60 years, border controls were reinstated, effectively putting an end to Nordic mobility. Russia's full-scale invasion of neighboring Ukraine on 24 February 2022 represented a blatant violation of sovereignty and international law and small states, including those in the Nordic region due to their geographical proximity, felt particularly vulnerable. The Russian aggression prompted significant security measures such as a joint Finnish–Swedish application to NATO, which was supported by other Nordic states and accompanied by security guarantees during the transition. Images of Nordic defense ministers standing in solidarity and issuing joint statements of mutual defense symbolized a revived security community, overcoming past mistrust and differences.

We argue that these processes and dynamics in a pluralistic security community are inherently political and shaped by the securitization of political decision-makers along with their interactions with so-called functional actors. Thus, this article claims that securitization theory can offer some insights into exploring intra-community interactions. In doing so, the article departs from a set of premises regarding international security and interaction. First, it aligns with Buzan's (1991) assumptions of a broadened security agenda in which threats to different sectors (military, political, societal, economic, environmental) all constitute national security, lack hierarchical ordering among them, and often intersect. Second, and as claimed by securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998), threats to either of these sectors should not be seen as deterministically given but both the threat image and its management strategy are constructed through the interactions of various actors in a securitization process. Third, we believe that paying attention to the interplay between the so-called functional and securitizing actors in securitization can help us to understand security community dynamics. As will be further developed in the following section, securitizing actors most often correspond to the political elite in charge of security decision-making. Functional actors are here defined as actors external to the political sphere but who nonetheless play roles in the threat construction (cf. Floyd, 2018, 2021). In this article, we focus on policy professionals as the main functional actors.

The remainder of this article explores how the theoretical logics of security communities and securitization theory interplay in addressing threat management and cooperation within a pluralistic security community, with a particular focus on the role of actors' security communication. These theoretical insights are examined empirically through an analysis of how different security discourses—encompassing both securitizing and

functional actors—unfolded in the Nordic context during the Covid-19 pandemic and in response to the Russian aggression.

Security communities and securitization: distinct yet interconnected perspectives on security

Despite sharing similar views regarding the social construction of security, determined by intersubjective understandings of shared norms, discourses, and identity, the research on security communities and securitization has had surprisingly little interaction. Although securitization mainly focuses on the processes of security decision-making, while research on security communities mainly concerns interstate security relations, important synergies can be found between these two areas of study, linking them in a form of a two-level game.

The formation and fragmentation of security communities

After its introduction in the late 1950s (Deutsch et al., 1957), there was tepid scholarly interest in the concept of security communities until the end of the Cold War. The constructivist turn in International Relations, coupled with changes in the global order, revived interest in the idea of security communities based on shared values, norms, and identities, rather than power politics or national interests. Subsequent scholarship has refined and expanded upon Deutsch's original ideas, of which the work of Adler and Barnett has become the most prominent (for further discussion on the security community concept and its application to Nordic and EU security community constellations, see, for example, Adler, 2008; Adler and Barnett, 1998a; Bremberg, 2015; Ditrych and Kucera, 2023). Of particular importance is the theorizing on the development of security communities, and their transcending from an initial nascent stage of increased interaction to the ascendant phase of shared norms, and finally to a mature setting of a collective identity and institutionalized cooperation (Adler and Barnett, 1998a, 1998b).

Building on these assumptions, subsequent studies have explored aspects that previously have been overlooked, for example, how the security community concept can be applied to different empirical contexts (Acharya, 2009), and that there is a spectrum ranging from liberal democratic security communities such as the Nordic region (Wæver, 1998) to non-liberal authoritarian ones in, for example, Southeast Asia (e.g. Raymond, 2025). In addition, studies have increasingly paid attention to the importance of institutionalized and everyday practices (Adler and Pouliot, 2011). A core assumption shared by most contemporary works is that as security communities mature, their members internalize peaceful expectations vis-à-vis one another to the extent that these expectations become implicit. The focus then shifts to managing external threats, with the development of norms, shared threat definitions, common security discourses, and multilateral cooperation mechanisms (Pouliot, 2007).

However, it should be noted that also relatively mature security communities are dynamic, and the security community research stemming from Adler and Barnett's (1998a) study has faced notable criticism. Critics argue that the causal model—tracing a

linear evolution from a less developed to a fully mature community grounded in liberal values and trust—oversimplifies the complex dynamics at play. Moreover, it largely overlooks the crucial roles that identity and power play in shaping a security community (Mattern, 2000; Williams and Neumann, 2000). Of relevance to this article is the critique of portraying the development of a Transatlantic security community as a straightforward, inevitable trajectory. Cox (2005) has challenged the notion that the Transatlantic region unquestionably progressed toward a security community. This view clearly deviated from the dominant discourse at the time, as post–Cold War Transatlantic relations—especially through NATO—were widely regarded as a textbook example of a functioning security community.

In a similar vein, it is argued that a security community grounded in liberal norms and values is neither fixed nor fully realized (Hellmann et al., 2017). Highlighting the relevance of securitization theory, it is argued that this is partly due to the varying levels of securitization within such communities. When the notion of a security community is viewed through the lens of securitization theory's inherent dynamism, it becomes clear that such communities should not be understood as static or fully formed entities. This introduces a level of complexity, demonstrating that the evolution of security communities is, in fact, far from linear or predictable (Hellmann et al., 2017: 308–311). Prior studies have tried to identify mechanisms that challenge the foundations of a security community, and which might lead to setbacks in intracommunal relations. Alkopher and Blanc (2017), for example, argue that the securitization of immigration has triggered a security dilemma dynamic among the members of the European security community. This has eroded trust, diminished a sense of shared identity, and prompted a shift from multilateral approaches to unilateral measures, such as surveillance and border controls. Such actions undermine core principles, like the freedom of movement within the Schengen area, thereby weakening the idea of a European security community.[1]

Building on these insights, we would argue that even the most complete pluralistic security community, such as the Nordic region, can experience tensions that undermine the stability of the community. However, we agree with Pouliot, who, opposed to Cox, argues that divergent political opinions and conflicting views do not necessarily put a full stop to the community's subsequent development and dynamics (Pouliot, 2006). Agreeing that securitization processes affect these dynamics, we also argue that paying attention to the interactions of securitizing and functional actors can shed light on how securitization sometimes can be a unifying force against external threats, while at other times undermining shared norms and common identity.

Securitizing and functional actors in securitization

The study of threats and the security measures to handle them is one cornerstone of the field of International Relations. Traditionally, the structural explanations prominent in,

[1]Interestingly, more recent studies in public policy examining EU resilience during the health and security crises constituted by Covid-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrate a much greater resilience and cohesiveness compared to the migration crisis of 2015. This holds true for both the political cooperation and public opinion (Nicoli et al., 2024; Nicoli and Zeitlin 2024).

for example, defensive neorealism have dominated the field, emphasizing military threats from antagonistic actors. Such explanations can still be of relevance when explaining threat management.

For example, the reaction of many small states, among them the Nordic, to Russian aggression in the past decade aligns with the assumptions of alliance research, which suggests that cooperation is almost a given in the face of military threats, as small states seek to balance against a more powerful adversary (cf Keohane, 1969). However, given their focus on military threats and deterministic view on the responses these threats elicit, neorealist theories have less explanatory power when examining other issues on the security agenda, such as environmental issues or epidemics. Other structuralist IR theories, while being broader in scope, also fall short in terms of bringing agency back in or taking domestic politics, people, and processes into account.

Instead, and since the end of the 1990s, securitization theory has steadily established itself as a dominant approach within critical security studies and in the analysis of foreign and security decision-making. Building on Buzan's (1991) broadened security agenda, securitization moves beyond traditional realist views on security. In contrast, according to securitization theory virtually anything or anyone can be framed as a threat, thereby eliciting security responses (Sjöstedt, 2020; Sjöstedt, 2024). In addition, it emphasizes that threats arise from intersubjective constructions by actors, rather than being intrinsic to the anarchic international system. The core focus of securitization theory is thus the process by which actors construct, communicate, and accept issues as existential threats and how these issues are moved onto the security agenda (Buzan et al., 1998).

This actor-centered focus distinguishes securitization theory from other constructivist approaches in international relations, which—like their realist counterparts—often adopt a structuralist perspective. Securitization differs, however, also from other types of actor-based frameworks of international relations that aim to explain international interaction, such as liberal intergovernmentalism. While liberal intergovernmentalism has been the go-to theory when analyzing, for example, interactions within the EU, an entity that sometimes is analyzed as a security community, it inherently depends on a rationalist ontology, arguing that international cooperation "can best be understood as a series of rational choices made by national leaders" (Moravcsik, 1998: 18). In addition, as its assumptions rest on the premise of a rational identification of state preferences, it is less applicable under conditions that "violate its assumptions about preferences, bargaining, and credible commitments" (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2009: 76). Securitization, on the other hand, helps to detangle the often-mysterious processes of threat construction and how these can result in far from rational outcomes that impact the foreign and security policies of states.

Two sets of actors typically feature in the securitization framework. The securitizing actor initiates securitization by issuing a "securitizing move"—constructing an issue as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures. In practice, the move also often includes suggested threat management measures (Schotthöfer, 2024). The securitizing actor must possess sufficient platform, power, and authority to credibly convey the threat narrative and policy suggestions. The securitizing move is directed toward an audience, which can be a wide range of actors—from the political elite to the general public—and

plays a decisive role in determining whether the securitization is successful (Hayes, 2016). Securitization succeeds when there is alignment between the two regarding the threat construction and the issue is then moved out of the realm of ordinary politics and into the domain of security.

However, some research highlights the limitations of this dyadic framework of the securitizing actor–audience interaction. As Floyd (2018) points out, securitizing actors and their moves do not operate in isolation but are influenced by a broader constellation of actors. Similarly, external actors can shape how the audience perceives and responds to a securitization move. This article incorporates and refines the concept of *functional actors*, first introduced by Buzan et al. (1998) and further developed by Floyd (2018, 2021), to better understand how securitization can affect security community dynamics. Making some reconceptualization and adjustments of the concept as developed by Floyd, functional actors are here defined as securitizing *requesters* or *preemptors*, that is, actors who try to instigate or prevent the initiation of a securitizing move, conducting "rhetorical moves aimed at persuading others (usually more powerful actors) to securitise, but that are not in and of themselves successful securitization" (Floyd, 2018: 44). Functional actors can also be actors that either *veto* or *endorse* a securitizing move. Like the requesters/preemptors, these actors lack the powers to conduct a securitization on their own. However, their timing distinguishes the two roles: requesters and preemptors act before securitization begins, whereas veto/endorsing actors react to existing securitizing moves.

Although a wide array of people could constitute functional actors, this article focuses on so-called "policy professionals" (Garsten et al., 2015). Policy professionals include, for example, epistemic communities, and policy or bureaucratic experts. They contribute by either promoting or actively discouraging securitization efforts on issues related to their expertise. Their interventions shape the preconditions for securitization and influence whether the process progresses. Relevant functional actors in this study include national health experts and high-ranking military commanders, who play pivotal roles in shaping threat perceptions and framing responses.

In sum, by connecting two research areas—security communities and securitization—this article argues that the unpacking of securitization processes and identifying key actors better shows how threats are constructed and framed which in turn sheds light on the dynamics of security communities and how their interactions ultimately become highly political. The theoretical logics will now be illustrated by the securitization of Covid-19 and Russia in the context of the Nordic security community. Focusing on the first year of the pandemic and the dynamics leading up to the joint Finnish–Swedish NATO application, this article utilizes a broad range of text material such as newspaper articles, government and research reports, published email correspondence, monographs, biographies, and prior research findings. This material helps to highlight how the security framing and communication of different actors affected both internal threat framing and intra-community relations.

A killer corona virus: the Nordic under threat

In December 2019, medical authorities in Wuhan, China, identified the emergence of a new corona virus. It was soon discovered that this variant transmitted from human to

human, affected the respiratory system, and caused flu-like illness which in some cases included severe breathing difficulties. In mid-March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic (PAHO, 2020).

Pandemics are a recurring phenomenon, and the WHO has established Health Emergencies Programs (WHE) to guide states in managing major outbreaks of communicable diseases. The Nordic countries also have well-developed routines—both for healthcare cooperation in general and pandemic management. For instance, during the 2009 A(H1N1)—known as the Swine Flu—pandemic, the Nordic states collaborated on efforts such as supplying hospital beds in specialized extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) units for critically ill patients (Sjöstedt, 2011). The Nordic epidemiologists are part of a long-standing shared epistemic community, having worked together for years, meeting regularly, and have been "managing various health crises" (Tegnell and Härgestam, 2023: 25, authors' translation).

In February 2020, this network of policy professionals once again convened at a meeting held by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) in Solna, a municipality in the greater Stockholm region. During a coffee break, the five Nordic state epidemiologists—Frode Forland (Norway), Mika Salminen (Finland), Kåre Mølbak (Denmark), Þórólfur Guðnason (Iceland), and Anders Tegnell (Sweden)—discussed the emerging pandemic. Tegnell proposed the idea of a coordinated Nordic strategy to address the unfolding crisis, particularly focusing on managing the large influx of citizens returning from vacations in the European Alps. While the others were cautiously open to the idea, it soon became evident that pandemic management would be handled differently within the Nordic security community (Tegnell and Härgestam, 2023).

Different paths of securitization in the Nordic

The securitization and management strategies varied significantly across the Nordic states. In Iceland, the strategy was led by chief epidemiologist Þórólfur Guðnason and grounded in medical expertise (Christensen et al., 2023). The approach prioritized mass testing and tracing infection chains, facilitated by Iceland's small population of approximately 340,000. Owing to this, the Government followed the strategy of the policy professionals and abstained from securitization accompanied by extraordinary measures such as lockdowns. The broad majority coalition, ranging from the conservative Independence Party to the socialist Left Greens, effectively diminished the role of veto actors against the chosen strategy (Christensen et al., 2023). Although clearly being a top-down approach, the general public also accepted the measures and trust in the authorities remained high (Haug, 2024). The Icelandic path was, however, facilitated by the country's size and relative territorial isolation.

Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, along with his cabinet, decided early on that Sweden's pandemic response would be determined by the authorities and the government kept a fairly low profile throughout the pandemic.[2] Instead, functional actors such as the state epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, and the Swedish Public Health Agency

[2]In late 2020, the government took some measures that deviated from the FHM's recommendations, but they turned out to be short-lived (Tegnell and Härgestam, 2023).

(FHM), were in charge of the pandemic management (Tenfeldt, 2020). Unable to follow Iceland's comprehensive test and trace approach due to demographic, geographic, and size factors, the Swedish functional actors selected a straightforward and established strategy that was believed to foster wide-ranging and long-term compliance. Focused on voluntary adherence to recommendations, the Swedish model stated: stay home when sick, protect vulnerable groups, avoid large gatherings, and maintain good hand hygiene (Tegnell, 2021).

A decade earlier, Tegnell had co-authored an article in *The Lancet* which concluded that school closures resulted in more harm than benefit. Furthermore, closing schools for younger children would force parents to stay home with them, potentially disrupting important societal sectors if workers could not attend their jobs (Tegnell and Härgestam, 2023). Therefore, as no scientific evidence demonstrated that children were the drivers of infection, Swedish schools up to 10th grade stayed open, while high schools and universities fluctuated between campus and online teaching. In sum, the policy professionals served as securitization preemptors. Established routines rather extraordinary measures guided the strategy.

Although there were veto actors criticizing the Swedish strategy (cf. 22 forskare, 2020), the Swedish audience, that is, the general public, largely supported and adhered to the authorities' recommendations (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, 2021). Opinion polls conducted by various polling institutions demonstrate that Swedish public throughout the pandemic generally had high trust in the main authorities managing the pandemic, here being health professionals and the Public Health Agency. As regards the Swedish strategy as a whole, the public tended to be more positive during its first phase, although trust in both institutions and the government continued to be higher compared to pre-pandemic times (Johansson et al., 2023; Wennö, 2021).

In the remaining three Nordic countries, the political leadership securitized the threat and selected extraordinary measures to handle it. Denmark chose early on to implement a hard lockdown and one of the strictest quarantines in Europe (Hassing Nielsen, 2021). Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen spearheaded the securitization process, firmly believing that Covid-19 could be controlled with decisive action. On March 14, Denmark, as one of the first countries, closed its borders, barring entry to all non-citizens except for essential reasons (Statens Serum Institut, 2022). When questioned about whether border closures were driven by politics or science, the PM responded decisively:

> neither the government nor the authorities are in a position to rely solely on evidence when confronting a new disease that spreads and evolves in ways the authorities could not foresee /. . ./ And I therefore wish to state very, very clearly that if we were to wait for evidence-based knowledge before taking action on Corona, we would inevitably be too late. (Kragh, 2021: 111, authors' translation)

Functional actors had thus a less prominent role in Denmark than in Sweden. State epidemiologist Kåre Mølbak, Director of the Medicinal Research Agency, worked within a limited mandate focused on laboratory tasks, avoiding direct political engagement (Kragh, 2021; Tegnell and Härgestam, 2023). Normally, political advising on health matters was assigned to the Director of the Danish Health Authority, Søren Brostrøm, whose

mandate is to oversee the entire Danish healthcare system (Kragh, 2021). Echoing his Swedish colleagues, Brostrøm emphasized that, from a health perspective, closing day-care centers and schools was unjustifiable since children were not the primary drivers of infection (Kragh, 2021: 90).

Brostrøm thus played the dual roles of securitization preemptor and veto actor. Kåre Mølbak's stance aligned more with the government's, revealing in an interview that he was "pretty excited" about the government's decision to implement a strict lockdown (Legarth et al., 2020). This prompted the Prime Minister's Office to direct its inquiries to the Medicinal Research Agency rather than the Danish Health Authority, effectively "favoring Mølbak as a key advisor over Brostrøm" (Byskov Svendsen, 2021). The Danish public accepted the government's securitizing move and—with the exception of a few months in the fall of 2020 when the so-called "mink scandal" erupted[3]—public support steadily was around 75% (Johansson et al., 2023)

Also in Finland Prime Minister Sanna Marin took charge of the securitization process and closed schools and Finland's borders. Mika Salminen, Director of the Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), held a stronger position than his Danish counterparts. Nevertheless, his role was overshadowed by the "hierarchical, top-down leadership" of political decision-makers (Christensen et al., 2023: 665). Despite regularly participating in meetings with the government throughout the Covid-19 crisis, Salminen served as veto actor toward some of the emergency measures that followed the government's securitization. He argued that the closing of schools was "unnecessary and even harmful" for the psychological well-being of young people (Sirén, 2023, authors' translation). The issue of school closures and other restrictive measures engaged also other veto actors, and 10 specialists in infectious disease wrote an open letter, strongly criticizing the government's policy:

> The Covid epidemic is spreading throughout Finland; one can get infected just about anywhere. Even if schools were to close, the spread of infection would not be curbed. Even if the entire country of Finland were to shut down, even if a lockdown were imposed, the coronavirus would wait for contacts to resume. (Lindström, 2022b)

Despite these forms of interactions of veto actors, the Finnish audience, that is, the public, largely approved of and adhered to the government's Covid-19 securitization (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2022).

In Norway, Prime Minister Erna Solberg took from the beginning command of the securitization and the Norwegian strategy that followed. To ensure all was aboard she communicated directly with the audience, that is, the Norwegian public, via social media (Arora et al., 2022). This security communication was accompanied by extraordinary measures similar to those in Denmark and Finland. This meant the closing of schools, sports, cultural activities, and bars, while there were limitations on restaurants and public transport. The border was closed on March 16, banning non-residents from entering

[3]The Danish government took on November 4 the controversial decision that the entire Danish mink population—17 million animals—had to be culled due to concerns that mink could transmit COVID-19 to humans.

Norway and a few days later also residents were prohibited to visit their weekend homes if these were located outside the municipalities of permanent residence.

Norwegian state epidemiologist Frode Forland appeared initially satisfied with the government's strategy and declared that the Norwegian lockdown and school closures "would prevent a second pandemic wave." He also endorsed the strong political directive, claiming that Covid-19 "was not a health crisis, but an international societal crisis" (Alvarez, 2020, authors' translation). His successor as of 2022, Preben Aavitsland, was more cautious in his evaluation of the Norwegian strategy:

> I believe many of the measures were effective in curbing the spread of the virus. However, that is not the main issue. The key is to strike the right balance between benefits, costs, and side effects. While closing schools and daycare centers may have contributed to slowing the virus's spread, the associated costs and side effects were substantial. (Bergstedt, 2023, authors' translation)

The policy pursued by the Norwegian authorities nevertheless received the highest level of public trust in all of the Nordic states (Johansson et al., 2023).

A disharmonious security community

Summing up the processes occurring in the Nordic countries during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, it becomes apparent that as political and security communication in the form of securitization unfolded, different management strategies followed. However, these internal dynamics had consequences not only for how each Nordic state managed the pandemic but on intra-security community relations as well. The Nordic has well-developed cooperation procedures with regard to public health and at the above-mentioned February 2020 meeting, the other state epidemiologists regrettably had to turn down Anders Tegnell's proposition of a common Nordic strategy as the pandemic was becoming a "political issue" (Tegnell and Härgestam, 2023). This turned out to negatively impact the Nordic security community, as the politicians dropped the shared norms and expectations on behalf of individual approaches driven by national identity.

Apart from critique of Sweden's outlier strategy by Norwegian state epidemiologist Frode Forland, the policy professionals were mostly in agreement. Tegnell claims in his memoirs that "the atmosphere" between the five state epidemiologists "was always good" (Tegnell and Härgestam, 2023: 219, authors' translation) and that they continued to interact and share knowledge throughout the pandemic. This has been echoed by others as well. Mika Salminen admitted in retrospect that he at times became "somewhat scared" watching Tegnell's pandemic strategies but agreed that lockdowns have never been part of the WHO's pandemic plans and that "Sweden followed the model they always have pursued in pandemic management" (Sirén, 2023, authors' translation). Preben Aavitsland mentions that he reflected extensively on why Sweden faced such strong criticism, particularly from epidemiologists outside the Nordic:

> I think this might be because everyone was unsure about the correct response to the pandemic. Yet almost everyone quickly decided on long, hard lockdowns, following the example of Italy, which was in turn inspired by communist authoritarian China /. . ./ Sweden became the

> contrasting outlier they did not want. Sweden undermined their mantra about not having a choice /. . ./ They masked their own insecurities by attacking Sweden. (Bergstedt, 2023, authors' translation)

Although there was mostly alignment among the functional actors, there was less so among the securitizing actors of the political sphere. When Prime Minister Löfven informed his fellow Social Democrat and Danish counterpart Mette Frederiksen in a telephone conversation in March 2020 that the Swedish strategy was to be run by the Public Health Agency, Frederiksen became slightly disconcerted and it quickly became obvious that she would take a radically different route compared to the neighbors across the narrow Øresund strait and not pursue any common strategy (Kragh, 2021).

The border closures in particular put the Nordic security community under strain and led to harsh criticisms from a wide array of actors. The functional actors, believing in following established procedures, based their criticism on science. When asked whether he had recommended the Danish border closures, the answer from Director of the Danish Health Authority, Søren Brostrøm was straightforward:

> Border closures /. . ./have not been part of our toolkit /. . ./ this is a political decision. As are the other measures. (Kragh, 2021: 109, authors' translation)

Swedish state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell was blunter, calling the Danish border closures "a completely meaningless measure" (Forsberg, 2020, authors' translation). The securitizing actors of Norway, Denmark, and Finland, nonetheless, held on to the strategy of shutting out non-nationals and thereby securitizing external identities.

Especially, the Swedes felt bullied for being barred from the rest of the Nordic. In order to secure Finland and stop the virus, a riot fence was put up in twin cities Haparanda and Torneå on the northern Swedish–Finnish border in March 2020 to prevent cross-border passings (Ek, 2020). This created discomfort and distress on the Swedish side as people are used to freely roam the area and live and work independently of nation lines. Sven Tornberg, the mayor of Haparanda stated,

> I understand the frustration. It is very emotional for us who have lived here and not having a border and then this happens. Not even during the War the border was closed this way /. . ./ The mistrust that has emerged will take years to repair. (Ek, 2020: authors' translation)

As Swedish boarders were open for most of 2020, Finns could, however, cross the border to Sweden which caused additional anger. As one person with dual Finnish–Swedish citizenship (and thus being able to freely cross the border) put it, "everyone is really mad about this. Why can they come here and shop snus[4] and beer while we are stopped at the border? It should be the same for them" (Ek, 2020: authors' translation).

Also many Danes took advantage of their neighbor's more lenient Covid-19 management and traveled to the region of Skåne in southern Sweden for "vacationing, shopping, and partying" (Grosshög, 2020, authors' translation). Car queues across the Øresund

[4]Swedish moist smokeless tobacco.

Bridge stretched for kilometers and lasted hours. This led to outrage among Swedish politicians, who criticized the lack of reciprocity. Swedish parliamentarian Niels Paarup-Petersen, himself of Danish descent, labeled the phenomenon "the Danish hypocrisy."

> They do not give a damn that a bunch of Danes travel to Sweden and do things they cannot do at home. But if someone from Skåne would come to Copenhagen, well then, they believe all Danes will die. This is not evidence-based, this is pure hypocrisy /. . ./ (Grosshög, 2020, authors' translation)

The closed border between Norway and Sweden also called a stir, particularly as approximately 6000 Swedes daily crossed the border for work. Reports on the bullying of Swedes began to surface. For example, Swedish construction workers in Norway had to wear special vests and had separate changing rooms, canteens, and living quarters, leading an outraged Swedish parliamentarian to state that

> No other comparisons intended, but this becomes the yellow Star of David of our time—or apartheid, if you will. (Goskör, 2020, authors' translation)

Both Prime Minister Löfven and Labor Minister Eva Nordmark were reported to be highly irritated with their Norwegian counterparts for not solving the situation (Staff Writer, 2021). PM Solberg, however, saw the border closure as mainly a Swedish problem:

> Swedish parliamentarians have been very angry and said that we must cooperate. Then Sweden must consider whether it is prepared to cooperate. Because it was four Nordic countries that handled the pandemic and the refugee crisis in the same manner. It was one country that handled the refugee crisis and the pandemic somewhat differently and that was Sweden /. . ./ When there are five countries, and four countries behave in the same way and one does not. Then the fifth must consider: Could we have done something differently (Manell, 2022, authors' translation)?

Still, not everyone agreed on Sweden's culpability and worried more about the effects of the border closures on the Nordic security community. Danish parliamentarian Bertel Haarder, chair of the Nordic Border Barrier Council at the Nordic Council of Ministers, warned against the spread of nationalism, stating that "what the Swedes have gone through, especially in relation to Norway and Denmark is unacceptable. This has been a matter of discrimination" (Goskör, 2020, authors' translation). The boarders and discrimination led Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde to expressed her concerns in relation to the long-established bonds and cooperation of the Nordic community:

> In several regions, people have been cooperating since the 1950s, but suddenly, rivalry and tensions have emerged among communities where borders once seemed irrelevant. I genuinely worry about how this shift might affect our collaboration. /. . ./ The uncertainty, coupled with what has felt like a national competition over the virus, raises concerns about how long it will take for these wounds to heal. (Olsson, 2020, authors' translation)

To sum up, this overview of developments within the Nordic security community during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic reveals that the emergence of a virus from China significantly destabilized what had previously been considered a mature and stable regional security and cooperation arrangement. Strains appeared on multiple levels. First, there were varying degrees of incongruence between securitizing and functional actors in Denmark, Finland, and Norway with political leaders ultimately disregarding the perspectives of policy professionals, instead initiating securitization processes along with extraordinary measures. Second, this had adverse effects on the security community, as border closures became central to the management repertoire, displacing shared norms and a collective Nordic identity with rising nationalism. Third, the processes that unfolded clearly demonstrate that both domestic security politics and how this is communicated are central to the cohesion of security communities.

An invasion at the heart of Europe: the resurfacing of military threats from antagonistic actors

Russian tanks crossing the Ukrainian border in the early hours of 24 February 2022, sent shockwaves through Europe and brought military security concerns back to the forefront of political priorities. This awareness extended even to regions like the Nordic, where the prospect of external military threats from hostile actors rarely tops the security agenda. The prevailing sense of insecurity was underscored by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyj, stating that "this step could be the beginning of a big war on the European continent" (Zelenskyj, 2022).

In response to this external threat, the governments of the Nordic countries acted in unison, and the lingering concerns about unhealed wounds that Foreign Minister Linde had expressed a year-and-a-half earlier seemed to have dissipated. This time, there was no infighting among Nordic political leaders, nor were there disagreements between securitizing and functional actors on the best path forward. The security community had regained its cohesion.

Securitization among allies

During the second major external crisis in 2 years, two principal actors took center stage in the security community's securitization efforts. As non-aligned states, Finland and Sweden were particularly vulnerable to the threat of Russian aggression and emerged as key players, initiating securitizing moves alongside extraordinary measures to safeguard their national security. On the night of the invasion, Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde declared that Sweden was facing "the most serious security policy situation since the Second World War," while Defense Minister Peter Hultqvist asserted that "the Swedish Armed Forces are prepared to act individually and together with others if our interests and our country are threatened" (Jönsson, 2022, authors' translation). Across the Baltic Sea Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin and President Sauli Niinistö held a joint press conference, with Niinistö reassuring the Finnish public that the government had a strategy to address the threat:

> Here in Finland, we are in close contact with all our partners. I myself spoke to Sweden's Prime Minister this very morning. It is very understandable that many Finns now feel fear. However, I would like to emphasize that Finland is not currently under threat. But the situation has certainly affected us and will continue to do so. We have always carefully prepared for different scenarios, even if we have not made an issue out of it. (Republikens President, 2022, authors' translation)

Finland's preparation for various scenarios comes as no surprise, given its complex history and extensive shared border with the Soviet Union/Russia. It is widely acknowledged that Finland's actions have historically played a pivotal role also in shaping Swedish security policy assessments. Finland's delicate post-World War II relationship with the Soviet Union is often cited as a key factor guiding Sweden's decision in the late 1940s to refrain from joining NATO or participating in a westward-oriented Scandinavian defense alliance (Noreen, 1994). After the failure to establish such an alliance, Norway and Denmark—later followed by Iceland—opted to join NATO, influenced by their World War II experiences.

This decision can be seen, to some extent, as an early Cold War securitizing move by these three states in response to their perception of a Soviet military threat. Sweden, however, chose a different path, focusing on its official policy of neutrality. Finland adopted a similar stance, though its neutrality occurred parallel to a "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance" (FCMA) with the Soviet Union. The political-military dynamic in Finland was highly sensitive, as the treaty necessitated military consultations with its neighboring superpower (Forsberg, 2018). Meanwhile, functional actors like Sweden's military leadership quietly pursued military-technical cooperation with the United Kingdom, the United States, and the three Nordic NATO members. This security cooperation between functional actors was covertly sanctioned by the Swedish government, a pattern that persisted throughout much of the Cold War (Noreen & Sjöstedt, 2024; Holmström, 2023).

The end of the Cold War brought an end to this delicate dynamic, reducing the prominence of the Russian threat on the security agenda and prompting both Finland and Sweden to actively pursue stronger ties with NATO (Migliorati, 2024). However, a tentative re-securitization of Russia began in all of the Nordic states after Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, gained traction with the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, and fully solidified with Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This shift led to a steady strengthening of defense cooperation in the Nordic. In addition to various bilateral agreements, defense collaborations such as the Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEFCO) were established to include all Nordic countries. Sweden and Finland also expanded their security arrangements with major NATO members, including the United States and the United Kingdom (for detailed accounts on Finland and Sweden's defense cooperations 1991–2018 see Weinstock, 2020: 13–27; also Bredesen, 2020: 2–3; Brommesson et al., 2025: 137-138; Lundqvist, 2022, 90).

The re-securitization of Russia thus took place across the Nordic region, but the most extraordinary measures occurred in Sweden and Finland, particularly through their abandonment of the long-standing non-alignment policies. Notably, from February 2022

onward, Finland took the lead in the process toward NATO membership, outpacing Sweden. Several factors explain Finland's sudden emergence as a frontrunner in this context. While preemptors toward NATO membership existed in Finland, the opposition was not deeply entrenched (Forsberg, 2024, 287; also Brommesson et al., 2025; Christiansson, 2023; Glassner and Fuchshuber, 2023; Savolainen, 2024). In Sweden, by contrast, resistance was more deeply rooted, particularly within the Social Democratic Party, where various factions of preemptors opposed the securitization and the extraordinary measures (Savolainen, 2024, 95; Strömberg and Nilsson, 2024, 163).

Historical factors also played a significant role. The unprovoked and large-scale Russian invasion drew parallels to the Winter War of 1939, a traumatic event deeply embedded in Finland's collective memory (e.g. Arter, 2023). This World War II analogy, however, did not carry the same resonance for the Swedish people. In addition, the shift in public opinion toward Finnish NATO membership was dramatic: support surged from 28% in January 2022 to 62% by March, and over 75% in May (Migliorati, 2024). President Sauli Niinistö, highly attuned to public sentiment, was resolute in not pursuing NATO membership against the will of the Finnish people. Instead, the results of several opinion polls conducted in February and March became a driving force for initiating Finland's NATO accession process (Forsberg, 2024: 292–293). In essence, the audience for potential securitizing moves effectively became a requester of securitization.

In Sweden, a noticeable shift in public opinion also occurred after the Russian invasion, though it was less dramatic than in Finland. By March, support for NATO membership among the Swedish public peaked at 49% (Sjöström, 2022). While the Swedish public did not play the same active role as its Finnish counterparts in driving the securitization process, it clearly accepted the securitizing move that Russian aggression posed a significant threat and that joining NATO was a necessary measure to address it.

Despite the shifting dynamics, the Swedish government continued to uphold the "Hultqvist doctrine," by itself a preemptive strategy that involved extensive cooperation with NATO without formally pursuing membership (Wieslander, 2022). This policy remained in effect until early April. As an alternative approach to addressing the securitization of the Russian threat, cooperation with Finland became particularly significant for the Swedish Defense Minister, serving as an alternative to NATO membership. Hultqvist and Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson's visit to Helsinki on March 4 marked the start of a series of meetings between the Finnish and Swedish governments. During this initial meeting, Hultqvist presented proposals for deeper Finnish–Swedish defense collaboration to his Finnish counterpart, Antti Kaikkonen. Hultqvist later described the meeting in almost euphoric terms:

> I felt that we came very close to each other. When we discussed, I felt as if national borders somehow disappeared. It became a common project. (Strömberg and Nilsson, 2024: 81–84, authors' translation)

Somewhat more reluctantly Kaikkonen wrote in his diary:

> I got the impression that he [Hultqvist] was willing to promote almost anything in terms of defense, except Swedish and Finnish NATO membership. (Strömberg and Nilsson, 2024: 80–81, authors' translation)

Hultqvist remained confident that he and his Finnish counterpart shared a common understanding. He later informed fellow Social Democrats in Stockholm that Finland had also laid the groundwork for a Swedish–Finnish defense alliance (Strömberg and Nilsson, 2024: 80–81).

However, during several weeks in March, decision-makers in Stockholm and Helsinki pursued divergent approaches to security policy coordination. Hultqvist steadfastly promoted a Swedish–Finnish defense alliance. In addition, within the Social Democratic movement, there was strong opposition to abandoning non-alignment. Former Swedish Prime Ministers Göran Persson and Stefan Löfven served as securitization preemptors, emphasizing that Swedish NATO membership was not appropriate at the time (Strömberg and Nilsson, 2024: 153–155).

Meanwhile, skepticism toward Hultqvist's defense alliance plan grew in Finland (Savolainen, 2024: 94). Finnish ministers, including the PM, increasingly viewed NATO membership—preferably in tandem with Sweden—as the best means of ensuring Finland's security against its aggressive eastern neighbor. In addition, the once-cautious President and Supreme Commander Sauli Niinistö began openly supporting Finnish NATO membership, bolstered by strong public approval (Savolainen, 2024: 93). Thus, in Finland's securitization process, NATO membership emerged as the extraordinary measure deemed necessary:

> [. . .] the whole process in public followed the bottom-up model: The President and the Prime Minister first announced their own positions publicly in May when everything was practically already set for the government to present the proposal to the parliament [. . .] but everybody seemed to understand the direction already in late February or early March. (Forsberg, 2024: 297)

While public opinion was a significant driving force, other functional actors also played a role as securitization requesters. Foreign policy elites—including civil servants, military officials, security policy experts, and prominent media representatives—had supported Finnish NATO membership since the early 2000s (Forsberg, 2024: 287).

Although the Swedish government continued to explore alternatives to NATO, voices within the broader political elite advocated for membership. Among the most vocal was Ulf Kristersson, leader of the center-right Conservative Party, who strongly pushed for Sweden to join NATO as quickly as possible (Stangvik, 2023; Strömberg and Nilsson, 2024: 129–134). In addition, functional actors such as military policy professionals acted as securitization requesters. General Micael Bydén, Supreme Commander of the Swedish Armed Forces, typically reserved in expressing opinions on sensitive issues, highlighted the significant costs of maintaining Sweden's defense outside the alliance (Strömberg and Nilsson, 2024: 168). In an interview in early March, Bydén was unusually candid, warning that the threat to Sweden's national security had escalated dramatically within a

week. He urged the public to recognize the changed global landscape, stating, "This is harsh, tough, and rough, but this is the current situation," before elaborating further:

> At the moment we see no worrying military movements along our borders. But we are cautious. We leave nothing out /. . ./ Our sensors are on and the cooperation channels between the Swedish Armed Forces and its foreign partners are smoking hot. (Staff Writer, 2022b: authors' translation)

Bydén also assessed that a Russian retaliation against Sweden's NATO application was "likely," noting that the Armed Forces had not yet received the necessary funding for expansion, which he described as "a risk" (Staff Writer, 2022b).

Bydén's predecessor Owe Wiktorin, was even more outspoken and stated in an opinion piece:

> Apply together with Finland as soon as possible for NATO membership. Within the framework of membership, we can then plan, together with Finland and other alliance friends, for a joint defense of Scandinavia. This would significantly enhance military capacity compared to more isolated actions. Moreover, the most important consequence of membership should be added: we gain access to the military security guarantee provided by Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. We are no longer alone. (Wiktorin, 2022, authors' translation)

More surprisingly, former Foreign Minister Margot Wallström and former Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson—both prominent Social Democrats and long-standing proponents of non-alignment—began advocating for Sweden to join NATO alongside Finland (Dahlgren, 2024: 515; Strömberg and Nilsson, 2024: 149). This shift highlighted the emergence of a diverse group of securitization requesters during the process that marked the end of 200 years of non-alignment.

Faced with a growing number of securitization requests, ministers from the governing Social Democratic Party began to recognize the need for a radically revised security policy. This shift prompted Prime Minister Andersson to declare that "nothing should be ruled out" regarding Swedish NATO membership (Dahlgren, 2024: 525; Stangvik, 2023: 44;). Hultqvist, who had long championed the idea of a Swedish-Finnish defense alliance, ultimately abandoned this stance in favor of NATO membership—reportedly making this decision at precisely 8:15 AM on April 11 during a meeting at the Ministry of Defense (Dahlgren, 2024: 531). The exact moment the PM decided to support NATO membership remains unclear.

Andersson later disclosed that Hultqvist's shift in stance, combined with several discussions with Sanna Marin, played a key role in shaping her change of perspective (Dahlgren, 2024: 531–534; Strömberg and Nilsson, 2024: 166–167). Given the evolving security landscape, Sweden concluded it needed to join NATO alongside Finland, as NATO had become the sole reliable guarantor of security for the Nordic countries (Strömberg and Nilsson, 2024: 174–175).

After that, only formalities remained. The Swedish Social Democrats dutifully initiated an internal discussion, during which critical grassroots members, feeling sidelined, acted as veto players, and accused the party leadership of pre-determining the strategy. Unlike Finland's process, Sweden's securitization was claimed to be largely top-down

driven (Stangvik, 2023: 45).[5] In the second week of May, events progressed rapidly in the final stages of the securitization process. On May 16, the Swedish government formally decided to apply for NATO membership, a move backed by a strong parliamentary majority (Wahlgren, 2022). Simultaneously, the Finnish government made the same decision, also with parliamentary approval (Östling and West, 2022). The applications were jointly submitted to NATO during President Niinistö's visit to Sweden. The week culminated in Niinistö and Prime Minister Andersson traveling to Washington, where they received a warm reception from US President Joe Biden, who expressed strong support for the joint application (Lindström, 2022a).

The security community restored

While Iceland, Denmark, and Norway played less prominent roles during these intense months in which Finland and Sweden led the securitization, they stepped forth at a joint press conference of all the Nordic Prime Ministers on 16 May 2022. The support for Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership bids was unequivocal, with the Nordic NATO members offering security guarantees to Finland and Sweden during the application process. Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre described the applications as "a milestone for Nordic cooperation" (Staff Writer, 2022a, authors' translation) and pledged that Norway would do everything possible to expedite the ratification of Sweden and Finland as NATO members. He also emphasized that the NORDEFCO would be further strengthened.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen also commented on the security guarantee pledge:

> Finland's and Sweden's security is a mutual concern. If either Finland or Sweden were to face aggression on their territories before becoming NATO members, we will support them with all available means /. . ./ We believe that the opportunities for enhanced Nordic cooperation are growing. (Staff Writer, 2022a, authors' translation)

Other political leaders quickly followed suit and emphasized the unity of the Nordic. Former Norwegian PM Erna Solberg, once so critical of the Swedish pandemic strategy, now highlighted the Nordic security community:

> I mean, both a Swedish and a Finnish NATO-membership will strengthen NATO in the north. I believe it is good for Norway. I believe it is good for Sweden and Finland. (Manell, 2022: authors' translation)

[5]Hans Dahlgren, a former minister in the EU who was active in the Social Democratic discussions about a possible NATO membership, disagrees with the claim that these discussions were top-down. However, he is not entirely clear about this in his memoirs: "They claimed that the party's leadership had already decided that the party would give up its military non-alignment. It could certainly not be ruled out that this would eventually happen, but my feeling was that the party had not reached that point at this time (Dahlgren, 2024, 538)."

Guðni Jóhannesson, historian and president of Iceland 2016–2024, also stressed the Nordic aspect in the addition of two new NATO members. Stressing that Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership constituted one of the biggest changes in the history of the alliance, he emphasized that the whole Nordic was a member of a defense alliance

> It is easy for us to discuss NATO and military issues with each other but also political and cultural issues /. . ./ Regardless if it concerns security culture or international politics Iceland supports a common Nordic position every time it is possible. (Antell, 2024, authors' translation)

When the Nordic Council convened in Helsinki later the same year to celebrate 70 years of the Council, the sense of unity continued. Attended by a large amount of Nordic parliament members and ministers, the Nordic security community was praised. Gahr Støre stressed again that it would be a historical moment when all five Nordic states were members of NATO, and Katrin Jakobsdóttir, Prime Minister of Iceland stated that

> A NATO with Finland and Sweden will change the cooperation between the Nordic states, bringing them closer. (TT-Ritzau, 2022, authors' translation)

Nordic strained relations 2 years earlier were now forgotten; instead, Nordic unity was emphasized, as declared by Finnish PM Sanna Marin:

> We are united in the resistance against Russia /. . ./ Today a united Nordic voice is more important than ever. (TT-Ritzau, 2022, authors' translation)

To summarize the dramatic events following the onset of the war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022—which culminated in a joint Finnish–Swedish NATO membership application firmly supported by the other Nordic states—a noteworthy pattern emerges in the interaction between decision-makers and functional actors. This latter group, comprising security policy experts and military leaders, had acted as securitization requesters even prior to the invasion. However, rather than pushing for overt action, they engaged in covert collaboration with NATO, maintaining strategic discretion rather than requesting public securitization.

This collaborative dynamic between functional and securitizing actors proved essential for sustaining effective strategies during periods of heightened tension, including the Cold War and Russia's antagonistic behavior in the early 21st century. This interplay was notably consistent in both Finland and Sweden. Equally significant was the broad support both governments received from their parliaments, media, and public opinion when they made the pivotal decision to abandon non-alignment and seek NATO membership. In essence, the securitization efforts enjoyed robust backing across all actors.

Conclusion

The point of departure of this article was to explore the dynamics of pluralistic security communities. We have suggested that the relationship between securitization processes and security communities plays a key role, and as securitization is inherently political,

this aspect, along with the security communication of actors play an important part in understanding security communities. Specifically, we have argued that the interaction between functional and securitizing actors sheds light on these dynamics, as the former represent expertise and consistency while the latter represent the political.

This theoretical logic was illustrated by two empirical examples of securitization processes in relation to two external threats. The Covid-19 pandemic highlights a scenario where the Nordic security community was destabilized. Although both functional and securitizing actors recognized the threat Covid-19 posed, the extraordinary measures varied across states. Functional actors across the Nordic largely agreed on the scientific principles of infectious disease management. Yet, variations in their mandates led to inconsistent strategies among the Nordic states as political elites took control and implemented extraordinary measures such as border closures. Thus, their efforts to advocate such measures clashed with the established norms of regional collaboration, which highlights that the dynamics of securitization have direct implications for the stability of security communities.

In contrast, the response to the Russian threat, and Finland and Sweden's decision to join NATO, represents a markedly different securitization process. Here securitizing and functional actors reached a consensus on both threat construction and extraordinary measures. This alignment fostered cooperation among Nordic states at both functional and securitizing levels. Such mutual understanding and coordination between these actor groups form the foundation of a cohesive and well-functioning security community. It also demonstrates that securitization can contribute to collective and cooperative measures.

Our findings support the growing body of research that challenges the assumed linear progression of security communities. We concur with the claim that even the so-called mature pluralistic security communities are not static or fully consolidated; instead, they are susceptible to internal tensions that can disrupt established norms of cooperation. Nonetheless, such disruptions do not necessarily signal the collapse of the security community. Rather, these communities can recover and reestablish foundations of trust, collaboration, and shared identity over time. The setbacks experienced by the Nordic security community during the Covid-19 pandemic also expose a fundamental vulnerability of pluralistic security communities. While these communities are generally viewed as the most resilient and are often favored over amalgamated models, their structure –comprising sovereign and independent states—makes them susceptible to the kind of fragmentation witnessed during the pandemic. In this case, securitizing actions by political leaders led to the framing of threats and the implementation of extraordinary measures that elevated nationalism and national identity over regional unity. Similar dynamics were evident in the EU during the 2015 migration crisis and more recently within the Transatlantic relationship. In both instances, nationalist impulses disrupted the cohesion of otherwise celebrated pluralistic security communities, as national identities took precedence over shared, collective ones.

However, this does not suggest that pluralistic security communities are incapable of recovery, nor does it imply that amalgamation is the only viable alternative. Rather, it underscores the idea that political tensions and periodic crises may be intrinsic to the

functioning of such communities. In fact, this very dynamism can be interpreted as a sign of political vitality—indicating an ongoing negotiation of norms, identities, and cooperation rather than a breakdown of unity.

ORCID iDs

Roxanna Sjöstedt https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2646-7891
Erik Noreen https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1097-9633

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This article was funded by Formas, Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development, research grant FR-2020/0008.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

22 forskare (2020) Folkhälsomyndigheten har misslyckats—nu måste politikerna gripa in. *Dagens Nyheter*, 24 April. Available at: https://www.dn.se/debatt/folkhalsomyndigheten-har-misslyckats-nu-maste-politikerna-gripa-in/

Acharya A (2009) *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN And the Problem of Regional Order*. Routledge.

Adler E (2008) The spread of security communities: Communities of practice, self-restraint, and NATO's Post–Cold War Transformation. *European Journal of International Relations* 14(2): 195–230.

Adler E and Barnett M (1998a) A framework for the study of security communities. *Cambridge Studies in International Relations* 62(1): 29–66.

Adler E and Barnett MN (1998b) *Security Communities*. Cambridge University Press.

Adler E and Pouliot V (2011) International practices. *International Theory* 3(1): 1–36.

Alkopher TD and Blanc E (2017) Schengen area shaken: The impact of immigration-related threat perceptions on the European security community. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 20(3): 511–542.

Alvarez V (2020) Så tänkte Norge när pandemin bröt ut. *Life Science Sweden*, 10 September. Available at: https://www.lifesciencesweden.se/article/view/738941/sa_tankte_norge_nar_pandemin_brot_ut

Antell G (2024) Finland och Sverige har förändrat Nato i grunden. *Yle*, May. Availbale at: https://yle.fi/a/7-10057796#:~:text=Islands%20president%20Gu%C3%B0ni%20J%C3%B3hannesson:%20%E2%80%9DFinland%20och%20Sverige,avg%C3%A5ende%20president%20Gu%C3%B0ni%20J%C3%B3hannesson%20till%20Svenska%20Yle

Arora S, Debesay J and Eslen-Ziya H (2022) Persuasive narrative during the COVID-19 pandemic: Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg's posts on Facebook. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 9(1): 35.

Arter D (2023) From Finlandisation and post-Finlandisation to the end of Finlandisation? Finland's road to a NATO application. *European Security* 32(2): 171–189.

Bengtsson R and Brommesson D (2024) Trusting neighbours? Public perceptions on civil defence cooperation across the Nordics *Cooperation and Conflict*. Epub ahead of print 7 December 2024. https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367241299800.

Bergstedt T (2023) Dolde osäkerhet genom att skälla ut Sverige. *Svenska Dagbladet*, 14 March. Available at: https://www.svd.se/a/VPdx9W/norges-tegnell-kritiker-dolde-osakerhet-genom-att-skalla-ut-sverige

Bredesen MG (2020) The shifting boundaries of Nordic Defence Cooperation. NUPI research paper. Available at: https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/handle/11250/2652349?locale-attribute=en

Bremberg N (2015) The European Union as security community-building institution: Venues, networks and co-operative security practices. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 53(3): 674–692.

Brommesson D, Ekengren AM and Michalski A (2025) *Sweden's Grand Strategy: Predicaments of a Small Liberal State in a Hostile World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Buzan B (1991) *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security in the Post-Cold War Era*. 2nd ed. Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Buzan B, Waever O and de Wilde J (1998) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Byskov Svendsen A (2021) Corona-magtkamp: Sådan blev Broström kørt ud på et sidespor af Mette Frederiksens højre hånd. *DR*. Available at: https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/corona-magtkamp-saadan-blev-brostroem-koert-ud-paa-et-sidespor-af-mette-frederiksens

Christensen T, Jensen MD, Kluth M, et al. (2023) The Nordic governments' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic: A comparative study of variation in governance arrangements and regulatory instruments. *Regulation & Governance* 17(3): 658–676.

Christiansson M (2023) A new Northern Flank: Sweden and Finland in NATO. *International Relations* 11(5): 225–232.

Cox M (2005) Beyond the west: Terrors in Transatlantia. *European Journal of International Relations* 11(2): 203–233.

Dahlgren H (2024) *I fem statsministrars tjänst*. Albert Bonniers Förlag.

Deutsch KW, Burrell SA, Kann RA, et al. (1957) *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*. Princeton University Press.

Ditrych O and Kucera T (2023) Defence cooperation and change: How defence industry integration fostered development of the European security community. *Cooperation and Conflict* 58(1): 129–152.

Ek T (2020) Svenskarna har stoppats vid finska gränsen: i fyra månader. *Aftonbladet*, 23 July. Available at: https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/aw5GE4/svenskarna-har-stoppats-vid-finska-gransen–i-fyra-manader

Floyd R (2018) Parallels with the hate speech debate: The pros and cons of criminalising harmful securitising requests. *Review of International Studies* 44(1): 43–63.

Floyd R (2021) Securitisation and the function of functional actors. *Critical Studies on Security* 9(2): 81–97.

Forsberg T (2018) Finland and NATO: Strategic choices and identity conceptions. In: Cottey A (ed.) *The European Neutrals and NATO: Non-alignment, Partnership, Membership?* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Forsberg O (2020) Tegnell om danskbeslut: "Fullständigt meningslös åtgärd." *Aftonbladet*, March 13. Available at: https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/9vdeo9/tegnell-om-danskbeslut-fullstandigt-meningslos-atgard

Forsberg T (2024) Bottom-up foreign policy? Finland, NATO and public opinion. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 47(3): 283–307.

Garsten C, Rothstein B and Svallfors S (2015) *Makt utan mandat: de policyprofessionella i svensk politik*. Dialogos Förlag.

Glassner S and Fuchshuber A (2023) Between NATO and non-alignment. *Journal of International Affairs* 75(2): 45–66.

Goskör J (2020) Pandemikollaps för nordiskt samarbete. *Svenska Dagbladet*, 21 December. Available at: https://www.svd.se/a/7KPE68/pandemikollaps-for-nordiskt-samarbete

Grosshög H (2020) Danskar semestrar i Skåne: svenskar portade i Danmark. *Dagens Nyheter*, 25 May. Available at: https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/danskar-semestrar-i-skane-svenskar-portade-i-danmark/

Hassing Nielsen J (2021) Dronningegambit: Magtcentralisering, hård lockdown–og en bekymret befolkning, der dog bakkede op. *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift* 123(5). Available at: https://journals.lub.lu.se/st/article/view/23305

Haug AV (2024) *Crisis Management, Governance and COVID-19: Pandemic Policy and Local Government in the Nordic Countries*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Hayes J (2016) Identity, authority, and the British war in Iraq. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12(3): 334–353.

Hellmann G, Herborth B, Schlag G, et al. (2017) The West: A securitising community? *Journal of International Relations and Development* 20: 301–330.

Holmström M (2023) *Den dolda alliansen: Sveriges hemliga NATO-förbindelser*. Natur & Kultur.

Johansson B, Sohlberg J and Esaiasson P (2023) Institutional trust and crisis management in high-trust societies: Rallies around the Nordic flags during the COVID-19 pandemic. In: Johansson B, Ihlen Ø, Lindholm J, et al. (eds) *Communicating a Pandemic: Crisis Management and COVID-19 in the Nordic Countries*. Nordicom, pp. 285–301.

Jönsson N (2022) Magdalena Andersson: Ett nytt och mörkt kapitel i Europas historia. *Sveriges Television*, 24 February. Available at: https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/magdalena-andersson-ett-nytt-och-morkt-kapitel-i-europas-historia

Keohane RO (1969) Lilliputians' dilemmas: Small states in international politics. *International Organization* 23(2): 291–310.

Kestilä-Kekkonen E, Koivula A and Tiihonen A (2022) When trust is not enough: A longitudinal analysis of political trust and political competence during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland. *European Political Science Review* 14(3): 424–440.

Kragh AS (2021) *Det første år*. Politikens Forlag.

Legarth Schmidt A and Rasmussen LI (2020) »Man skal handle, før man synes, det er nødvendigt«: Kåre Mølbak var ikke enig i Sundhedsstyrelsens forbehold, da Danmark blev lukket ned. *Politiken*, 8 June. Available at: https://politiken.dk/danmark/sundhed/art7815467/K%C3%A5re-M%C3%B8lbak-var-ikke-enig-i-Sundhedsstyrelsens-forbehold-da-Danmark-blev-lukket-ned

Lindström A (2022a) Magdalena Andersson möter Joe Biden i Vita huset. *Sveriges Television*, 19 May. Available at: https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/magdalena-andersson-moter-joe-biden-i-vita-huset

Lindström A (2022b) Därför föreslår ministeriet distansundervisning för skolor. *Borgåbladet*, 7 January. Available at: https://www.bbl.fi/2022-01-07/darfor-foreslar-ministeriet-distansundervisning-for-skolor/

Lundqvist S (2022) A convincing Finnish move: Implications for state identity of persuading Sweden to jointly bid for NATO membership. *Studia Europejskie* 26(4): 73–110.

Manell J (2022) Erna Solberg om svenskt Nato-medlemskap—"Bra för hela regionen." *Altinget*, 20 May. Available at: https://www.altinget.se/sakerhet/artikel/erna-solberg-om-svenskt-nato-medlemskap-bra-for-hela-regionen

Mattern JB (2000) Taking identity seriously. *Cooperation and Conflict* 35(3): 299–308.

Migliorati M (2024) New Nordic pathways? Explaining Nordic countries' defence policy choices in the wake of the Ukrainian war. *Journal of European Public Policy* 31(10): 3249–3274.

Moravcsik A (1998) *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*. Cornell University Press.

Moravcsik A and Schimmelfennig F (2009) Liberal intergovernmentalism. In: Wiener A and Diez T (eds) *European Integration Theory*. Oxford University Press, pp. 67–87.

Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap (2021) Allmänhetens syn på råd och rekommendationer med anledning av coronapandemin. Publ nr. MSB1811. https://www.msb.se/sv/publikationer/allmanhetens-syn-pa-rad-och-rekommendationer-med-anledning-av-corona-pandemin--samanfattning/

Nicoli F and Zeitlin J (2024)) Introduction: Escaping the politics trap? EU integration pathways beyond the polycrisis. *Journal of European Public Policy* 31(10): 3011–3035.

Nicoli F, van der Duin D, Beetsma R, et al. (2024)) Closer during crises? European identity during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. *Journal of European Public Policy* 31(10): 3066–3092.

Nordisk Ministerråd (2017) Nordisk samarbejde på social- og sundhedsområdet Samarbejdsprogram 2017–2020. Edited by Nordisk ministerråd . København.

Noreen E (1994) *Brobygge Eller Blockbildning? De Norska Och Svenska Utrikesledningarnas Säkerhetspolitiska Föreställningar 1945-1948*. Carlsson.

Noreen E and Sjöstedt R (2024) The military transformation of Sweden's international engagement. In: Desta NH (ed.) *Neutrality post-1989* . Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, pp. 22–35.

Olsson H (2020) Ann Linde om Nordens gränser: Orolig för hur länge såren finns kvar. *Dagens Nyheter*, 14 June. Available at: https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/ann-linde-om-nordens-granser-orolig-for-hur-lange-saren-finns-kvar/

Östling B and West P (2022) På tisdag blev det klart: Riksdagen vill ansöka om Natomedlemskap för Finland. *YLE*, 20 May. Available at: https://yle.fi/a/7-10016587

PAHO (2020) WHO declares Public Health Emergency on novel coronavirus. Available at: https://www.paho.org/en/news/30-1-2020-who-declares-public-health-emergency-novel-coronavirus (accessed 15 December 2022).

Pouliot V (2006) The alive and well transatlantic security community: A theoretical reply to Michael Cox. *European Journal of International Relations* 12(1): 119–127.

Pouliot V (2007) Pacification without collective identification: Russia and the transatlantic security community in the post-Cold War era. *Journal of Peace Research* 44(5): 605–622.

Raymond GV (2025) An authoritarian security community in mainland Southeast Asia: Regional dynamics in an actor-centred theory of transnational authoritarianism. *Democratization* 32: 1286–1307.

Republikens President (2022) President Niinistö: Finland fördömer skarpt Rysslands åtgärder och krigföring. Available at: https://www.presidentti.fi/niinisto/sv/nyhet/president-niinisto-finland-fordomer-skarpt-rysslands-atgarder-och-krigforing/index.html

Savolainen A (2024) Mechanisms of threat: How Finland and Sweden abandoned non-alignment. *Comparative Strategy* 43(2): 87–103.

Schotthöfer A (2024) Individuals in securitization: Explaining US presidents' choice to (de) securitize North Korea. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 20(3): orae011.

Sirén B (2023) Tre år sedan pandemin började: Hade Tegnell rätt hela tiden? *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 11 March. Available at: https://www.hbl.fi/2023-03-11/tre-ar-sedan-pandemin-borjade-hade-tegnell-ratt-hela-tiden/

Sjöstedt R (2011) How does a threat become salient? The case of swine flu in Sweden. In: Opperman K and Viehrig H (eds) *Issue Salience in International Politics*. Routledge Advances in International Relations and Global Politics. Milton Park: Routledge.

Sjöstedt R (2020) Assessing securitization theory: Theoretical discussions and empirical developments. In: Butler MJ (ed.) *Securitization Revisited: Contemporary Applications and Insights*. Routledge, pp. 28–46.

Sjöström T (2022) Majoritet för Nato. *Novus*, 10 May. Available at: https://novus.se/egnaundersokningar-arkiv/majoritet-for-nato/

Sjöstedt R (2024) Foreign Policy Analysis and Securitization. In: Kaarbo J and Thies CG (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 172–188.

Staff Writer (2021) Regeringen sur på Norge över gränspendlare. *Kristianstadsbladet*, 23 February. Available at: https://www.kristianstadsbladet.se/2021-02-23/regeringen-sur-pa-norge-over-granspendlare/

Staff Writer (2022a) Nordengrannar lovar att stödja Sverige och Finland fram till Natomedlemskapen gått igenom. *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 16 May. Available at: https://www.hbl.fi/2022-05-16/nordengrannar-lovar-att-stodja-sverige-och-finland-fram-till-natomedlemskapen-gatt-igenom/

Staff Writer (2022b) ÖB: Hotet mot Sverige har ökat. *Aftonbladet*, 1 March. Available at: https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/XqBogn/ob-hotet-mot-sverige-har-okat

Stangvik PK (2023) Sweden's road to NATO: A case study of systemic, regional, and domestic drivers of Sweden's NATO bid. Master Thesis, Universitetet i Oslo, Olso.

Statens Serum Institut (2022) Tidslinje for COVID-19. Available at: www.ssi.dk/-/media/arkiv/subsites/covid19/presse/tidslinje-over-covid-19/covid-19-tidslinje-for-2020-2022-lang-version–version-1–april-2022.pdf (accessed 24 January 2024).

Strömberg M and Nilsson T (2024) *Högt över havet: så övergav Sverige alliansfriheten*. Albert Bonniers Förlag.

Tegnell A (2021)) The Swedish public health response to COVID-19. *Apmis* 129(7): 320–323.

Tegnell A and Härgestam F (2023) *Tankar efter en pandemi: och lärdomarna inför nästa*. Natur & Kultur.

Tenfeldt T (2020) Sverige har mycket att lära av länder med mindre resurser. *Läkartidningen*, 24 February. Available at: https://lakartidningen.se/aktuellt/nyheter/2020/02/sverige-har-mycket-att-lara-av-lander-med-mindre-resursersverige-har-mycket-att-lara-av-lander-med-mindre-resurser/

TT-Ritzau (2022) Norden väntar på Sverige och Finland i Nato. *Aftonbladet*, 1 November. Available at: https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/y6EmdA/norden-vantar-pa-sverige-och-finland-i-nato

Wæver O (1998) Insecurity, security, and asecurity in the West European non-war community. In: Adler E and Barnett M (eds) *Security Communities*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 69–118.

Wahlgren J (2022) Sverige ansöker om Natomedlemskap. *Sveriges Television*, May. Available at: https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/sverige-ansoker-om-natomedlemskap

Weinstock NF (2020) *Et endret nordisk balansepunkt? Endringer i Sveriges og Finlands forsvarssamarbeid og forsvarstenkning etter 2014*. Master's Thesis, Oslo University, Oslo.

Wennö J (2021) *Allmänhetens tillit, tankar och beteende under coronapandemin*. Stockholm: Kantar Sifo.

Wieslander A (2022) "The Hultqvist doctrine": Swedish security and defence policy after the Russian annexation of Crimea. *Defence Studies* 22(1): 35–59.

Wiktorin O (2022) Förre ÖB: Gå med i Nato ihop med Finland. *Svenska Dagbladet*, 20 March. Available at: https://www.svd.se/a/V9BpG3/forre-ob-owe-wiktorin-ga-med-i-nato-ihop-med-finland

Williams MC and Neumann I (2000) From alliance to security community: NATO, Russia, and the power of identity. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29(2): 357–387.

Zelenskyj V (2022) We will defend ourselves. *YouTube*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prfaWHQoxVg

Author biographies

Roxanna Sjöstedt is Associate Professor of Political Science at Lund University. Her research interests include international security, total defense, military intervention, securitization, foreign policy, and non-military threats such as pandemics. She has published on these topics in journals such as *Cooperation and Conflict*, *European Journal of International Security*, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *Security Studies*, and *International Studies Review*.

Erik Noreen, Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies, Uppsala University, researches on Nordic security, the Nordic balance, security communities, military intervention, and threat politics. He has published on these topics in journals such as *Cooperation and Conflict*, *European Journal of International Security*, *Journal of Peace Research*, and *International Relations*.