

Neutrality in Europe – Between Law and Politics: The Experiences of Austria, Finland and Sweden

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Abstract

This article looks beyond a single country and compares the recent policies of neutrality in Austria, Finland and Sweden. All three joined the European Union in 1995. Whereas Finland and Sweden then began to describe their foreign policy status as “non-alignment”, attempts of the center-right government in Austria failed in this regard, thus maintaining Austria’s “permanent neutrality”. In Finland and Sweden, center-right parties even started to advocate NATO membership. In contrast, from 2004 on, all Austrian political parties rejected membership. After the military invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, public opinion and most of the political parties in Finland and Sweden opted, without much delay, for NATO membership, but not Austria’s public and politicians. The article examines some of the reasons for the policy divergences of these three countries.

I. Introductory Remarks

Recently, a number of publications have dealt with Austria’s (permanent) neutrality. Most of the writings have concentrated on the legal aspects and its influence on Austria’s scope in handling its international affairs, including its policy in the European Union (EU). The domestic debates among the political parties on neutrality have been mostly neglected. The ramifications of the changes in the international system, the end of the Cold War and the developing crises have only been discussed, if at all, in connection with Austria’s EU membership. The reasons behind Sweden’s and Finland’s abandonment of neutrality/non-alignment, after 200 years in the case of Sweden or after some 70 years in the case of Finland, compared to the maintaining of neutrality by Austria have practically never been analyzed.

The 15 articles in Vol. 53 (2024) of the *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* on the “State and the Future of Austrian Neutrality” are a case in point. Only one contribution, by Austria’s former foreign minister, Ursula Plassnik, notes the lack of debate in Austria on the two Nordic countries joining NATO in 2023 resp. 2024.¹ Among the 14 remaining researchers, one lonely voice calls for a further exploration of the domestic and international factors which led to the abandonment by Finland and Sweden of their non-aligned status.² In their 187 pages long book on the (possible) future of Austria’s neutrality, a retired Austrian diplomat (Franz Cede) and a specialist in international law (Ralph Janik) deal with the “tedious NATO question” only in one paragraph. According to the authors, Sweden and Finland undertook “a radical review of their non-alignment” – but they do not even mention the outcome of this assessment, namely NATO membership.³

II. Historical Background

The (permanently) neutral countries in Europe have had a long tradition of informal cooperation, during the Cold War, beginning already in the late 1950s. Important examples were, besides the coordinated approaches to European integration, the collaboration in supporting the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) and its successor, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Here the neutrals were organized in the N+N Group (together with non-aligned Yugoslavia).

When Austria applied for membership in the European Community (EC; later EU) in 1989, it took some time until Sweden (in 1991) and Finland (in 1992) followed suit. Switzerland did submit an application in

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- 1 Ursula Plassnik, *Jenseits der Neutralität*, in: Martin Senn/Elisabeth Röhrlich (eds.), *Zustand und Zukunft der österreichischen Neutralität: Eine Auseinandersetzung*, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft/Austrian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 53, Special issue 2024 (<http://oezp.at/>).
 - 2 Marion Foster, *Die österreichische Neutralität zwischen Strategie und Identität*, in: Martin Senn/Elisabeth Röhrlich (eds.), *Zustand und Zukunft der österreichischen Neutralität: Eine Auseinandersetzung*, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft/Austrian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 53, Special issue 2024 (<http://oezp.at/>), 7.
 - 3 Franz Cede/Ralph Janik, *Auslaufmodell Neutralität? Geschichte und Gegenwart eines österreichischen Mythos*, Innsbruck: Michael Wagner Verlag, 2025, 164, 182.

May 1992, but it suspended it after a negative referendum on the participation in the European Economic Area, which was intended to be the first step towards membership. There was already a slight difference in the application letters of the three neutrals. Whereas Austria included, at the request of the Social Democrats, a reference to its (permanent) neutrality, Sweden's and Finland's applications lacked this reference. In 1995, Austria, Finland and Sweden became members of the EU. During the negotiations on EU accession, Austria, Finland and Sweden promised in a Joint Declaration that they will "be ready and able to participate fully and actively in the [EU's] Common Foreign and Security Policy [CFSP]" and "their legal framework [...] will be compatible with the 'acquis'" in this area. In implementing this pledge, Austria introduced Article 23f (now 23j) in its Federal Constitution. It supersedes the constitutional Neutrality Law from 1955 in the EU context. Since Finnish and Swedish neutrality was not based on laws, legal adjustments were not required. Instead, Finland and Sweden started to eliminate references to neutrality and replaced it with "non-alignment" (*alliansfrihet* in the Swedish case).

In 1994, Finland and Sweden joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program, Austria followed, after some reluctance by the Social Democrats, in 1995. It allowed non-NATO members to participate in military cooperation, in particular in crisis management; the partners set their own cooperation priorities.

Austria's newly independent neighbors to the East started to discuss EU and NATO membership in the mid-1990s. Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland were invited to join NATO at its Madrid summit (8/9 July 1997). On 12 March 1999, the three countries became members of NATO. The new coalition government of the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) announced in their March 1996 Coalition Agreement that the parties will aim at a "comprehensive participation in Europe's security structures". In this context, the "government will comprehensively examine all evolving security *options*, including full membership in WEU".⁴ Membership in WEU (a military alliance) would have ended neutrality. The lengthy debates among the parties about the *Optionenbericht* finally turned around membership in NATO (WEU was a never

4 This part is based on Heinrich Schneider, Der sicherheitspolitische „Optionenbericht“ der österreichischen Bundesregierung: ein Dokument, das es nicht gibt – und ein Lehrstück politischen Scheiterns, in: Informationen zur Sicherheitspolitik Nr. 16 (März 1999) [https://www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/01_seo_02_soo.pdf]. Emphasis here and all translations from German and Swedish are by Paul Luif.

a fully established alliance of only European states). In view of the NATO activities of Austria's neighbors, the leader of the ÖVP parliamentary group, Andreas Khol, declared in early 1998 that Austria's "NATO membership will come as sure as night follows day [literally: will come like the amen in a prayer]". From the SPÖ side, the Speaker of the National Council Heinz Fischer and leader of the SPÖ parliamentary group hotly opposed any "NATO option" in the proposed text.

Researchers from the left warned that Austria would have to radically increase its defense budget as a NATO member.⁵ Austria was spending, compared to other states, very little on military defense (see Figure 1 in the Annex). Warnings about Austria being viewed by other countries as a "free rider" were not heeded.⁶

The governing parties could not find an agreement on the *Optionenbericht*. The FPÖ, the largest opposition party under Jörg Haider, strongly supported NATO membership, the Greens were against it. A public opinion poll from February 1998 showed that 65 percent of Austrians were opposing NATO, however 57 percent believed that in the final instance Austria would become NATO member and only 21 percent thought Austria will never join the alliance (Der Standard, 16 March 1998). The rejection of the NATO option by the Social Democrats in 1998, even though the ÖVP and FPÖ would have accepted it, turned out to be an important "critical juncture" of Austria's foreign policy.

After EU accession, Finnish politicians started to discuss NATO membership. Two parties in the Finnish parliament officially supported membership: the center right National Coalition Party (*Kokoomus*) and the Swedish People's Party (the party of the Swedish-speaking minority, *Svenska folkpartiet*). The official line of the government was a "NATO option": No immediate need for NATO membership but Finnish foreign policy kept open the option of joining if the security situation changed.⁷

5 Heinz Gärtner/Johann Pucher, *Kostenschätzung einer österreichischen NATO-Mitgliedschaft*, Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik, Laxenburg 1997 (= Arbeitspapier AP 17), 8.

6 See e.g. Paul Luij *Der Wandel der österreichischen Neutralität. Ist Österreich ein sicherheitspolitischer „Trittbrettfahrer“?* 2., ergänzte Version. Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik Laxenburg, April 1998 (= Arbeitspapier, AP 18).

7 Minna Ålander, *Finland wants to use the "NATO option"*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Berlin, Point of View, 27.04.2022 [<https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/finland-wants-to-use-the-nato-option>].

After the Social Democrats returned to power in Sweden, September 1994, the now biggest opposition party, the conservative Moderate Party (*Moderaterna*) agreed to a Commission which should “list and value the different security policies which are available” for Sweden; NATO was not mentioned. Members of the (classical) Liberals (until 2015 *Folkpartiet liberalerna*) wanted NATO membership put on the table, likewise an editorial of the liberal newspaper *Expressen*. The Moderate Party stressed more the importance of EU membership, while the Social Democrats strongly opposed Sweden joining NATO. Thus, there was no Commission report. Yet when NATO invited the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to join NATO in 1997, the Social Democrat government published a report with rather positive references to NATO. In 1998, the conservative leader Carl Bildt was open to debate NATO membership after 2000. But when Tarja Halonen, Social Democrat and a strong opponent NATO membership, became Finnish president in 2000, winds changed also in Sweden and the push for NATO membership abated. Furthermore, the Military Intelligence and Security Service (*Must*) of the Swedish Armed Forces stated in its 2003 Report that the “danger of an armed conflict can be excluded in the foreseeable future”.⁸ Sweden reduced its military expenditures, whereas Finland maintained more or less its high level of spending on defense. Austria’s military budget (as percentage of gross domestic product) was always lower than Sweden’s or Finland’s and had declined even more after the end of the Cold War, as Figure 1 (Annex) shows.

In Austria, the ÖVP-FPÖ government (2000-2007) again tried to abolish “neutrality” or at least reduce its impact on foreign policy.⁹ Chancellor Wolfgang Schäussel attempted to frame the issue historically in a speech at the Austrian national day (26 October 2001):

The old templates – be it Mozart balls, Lipizzaners or neutrality – cannot grasp the complex reality of the early 21st century.

8 See Maggie Strömberg/Torbjörn Nilsson, *Högt över havet. Så övergav Sverige alliansfriheten*, Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2024, 264-266.

9 The following two paragraphs are taken from Paul Luif, „Die alten Schablonen [...] ob das Mozartkugeln, Lipizzaner oder die Neutralität sind — greifen in der komplexen Wirklichkeit des beginnenden 21. Jahrhunderts nicht mehr.“ Die Diskussion über die Neutralität, in: Robert Kriechbaumer/Franz Schausberger (eds.), *Die umstrittene Wende. Österreich 2000-2006*, Wien-Köln-Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2013, 551-584, here 567-569.

Again the Speaker of the National Council, Heinz Fischer (later President of the Republic 2004-2016) immediately requested “deference” for neutrality which was part of the Federal Constitution. The speaker of the Greens, Alexander Van der Bellen (Austria’s President after Fischer) spoke about “an obligation for active neutrality”. Austria’s by far biggest newspaper (read at that time by about 40 percent of Austrians every day), *Kronen Zeitung*, wrote the next day on page one about a “major scandal” concerning Schüssel’s speech.

During the Iraq crisis in spring 2003, the Austrian government “discovered” neutrality again. It blocked the transit of US troops through Austria because the UN Security Council had not authorized US military intervention in Iraq. Benita Ferrero-Waldner, foreign minister from February 2000 till October 2004 under Schüssel, had supported Austria’s NATO membership. But during her presidency election campaign in early 2004 she started to oppose Austria joining NATO. The reason being that public opinion polls had shown that her opponent, Heinz Fischer, clearly had a huge advantage by supporting neutrality; Fischer got elected. In October 2004, the Conservatives abandoned their quest for NATO membership. The “new” FPÖ without Haider began to favor neutrality. Since then, no Austrian party has officially supported NATO membership.¹⁰

In 2009, Finland and Sweden began to participate in the „NATO Strategic Airlift Capability“ at the Pápa Air Base in Hungary. Although the site of this Base in Western Hungary is quite close to the Austrian border, Austria has not joined in this activity (on the participation/cooperation of the three countries with NATO see Table 1 in the Annex).

With the Lisbon Treaty (in force since December 2009), a mutual military assistance clause (similar to, but actually with stronger wording than Article 5 of the Washington Treaty) became part of the Treaty on European Union (Article 42(7)). The “Irish clause” in this Article allows Member States to maintain their “specific character of the security and defence policy”. Finland was initially hesitant about the introduction of this assistance clause, but later adopted a positive view.¹¹

Article 42(7) never played an important role in the discussion on security and defense in Finland and Sweden. The EU was not seen as a primary

10 A minor exception is the small NEOS party, where some members want Austria to join NATO.

11 Matti Pesu/Tuomas Iso Markku, Finland as a Nato ally. First insights into Finnish alliance policy (Finnish Foreign Policy Paper 9), Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, December 2022, 10.

security provider. In contrast, Austrian critics of neutrality argued that Austria's foreign policy status had lost its credibility with EU membership. Thus NATO membership, which was opposed by a large majority of the population, was not essential to end neutrality, it was full participation in the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy.

Tensions in the North increased. On 29 March 2013, Russian long-range bombers and fighter jets in the Baltic unexpectedly began simulated attacks on Stockholm and military targets in southern Sweden. The Swedish air force was unable to react to the Russian provocation.¹²

So it was probably no surprise that a separation in NATO policies of Austria on the one hand and Finland and Sweden before long emerged. After Russia's annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Eastern Ukraine in early 2014, NATO answered this challenge at the Wales Summit in September 2014. One element of the response was the Partnership Interoperability Initiative. In its context, five countries were selected as "Enhanced Opportunities Partners", among them Finland and Sweden (together with Australia, Georgia, Jordan and later Ukraine). The partners were not only cooperating with NATO in Afghanistan, the Balkans and Libya (as in the framework of Partnership for Peace), the Initiative also included coordination of defense with NATO on its European territory, it was thus linked to territorial defense.¹³

Austria belatedly joined the Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes (ITPP) of NATO in 2021. According to the Austrian Security Strategy, ITTP gives the appropriate basis to expand political dialogue and deepen military cooperation. Austria wants to exhaust the possibilities of cooperating with NATO in the fields of conflict prevention, crisis management, and cooperative security in the interest of strengthening the interoperability of the military capacities. But there is no reference to cooperation in territorial defense.¹⁴

Austrian foreign policy actually moved in another direction. It was very much involved in initiating and generating the "Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons" (TPNW). In contrast to the Non-Proliferation Treaty

12 Christian Nuenlist, *The Struggle for Sweden's Defence Policy*, CSS [ETH Zurich] Analysis in Security Policy No. 138, July 2013, 1.

13 Axel Wernhoff, *Från partnerskap till medlem – perspektiv från Natodelegationen*, in: Ingvar Mattson (red.) *Sverige in NATO*, Stockholm: Dialogos, 2025, 69-89, here 71.

14 Austrian Security Strategy 2024, Austrian Federal Chancellery, Vienna, September 2024, 9.

(NPT, in force since 1970) which aims at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, the TPNW seeks to abolish all nuclear weapons. A number of Austrian diplomats were involved in this endeavor which followed the established tradition of Austria's "active neutrality".¹⁵ Finally, a Conference, organized by the UN, adopted the Treaty by a vote of 122 States in favor, with one vote against and one abstention on 7 July 2017. It entered into force on 22 January 2021; until February 2024, 93 countries had signed the TPNW, but mostly from the Global South.¹⁶ Besides Austria, only four other European countries have ratified the TPNW: the Holy See, Ireland, Malta and San Marino; no NATO country.

The debate on the TPNW had also repercussions in Sweden. Margot Wallström, then foreign minister from the Social Democrats (2014-2019), wanted her country to sign and ratify the Treaty. She was strongly opposed by the defense minister, Peter Hultqvist, also a Social Democrat. Wallström's effort failed and she stepped down in September 2019.¹⁷ It seems that many Austrian diplomats (a number of them close to the SPÖ), even under a conservative foreign minister, still adhered to the active neutrality policy approach of Chancellor Bruno Kreisky (1970-1983). Whereas in Sweden, a new generation of politicians had already gone beyond the foreign policy conceptions of Prime Minister Olof Palme (1969-1976 and 1982-1986).

III. Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, February 2022

A. Austria

Shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer (ÖVP) in early March 2022 asserted that "Austria was neutral, is neutral and will also remain neutral". Neutrality "has served Austria well". He thus quickly ended a debate on neutrality which was started by some

15 Alexander Kmentt, Abrüstungs-, Rüstungskontroll- und Nichtverbreitungspolitik, in: Martin Senn, Franz Eder, Markus Kornprobst (eds.) *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2022, 323-344, here 336.

16 See <https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear/tpnw/> and <https://treaties.unoda.org/t/tpnw/participants>, accessed Feb. 15, 2024.

17 Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 150, argue that Wallström had to resign when she lost this controversy with Hultqvist.

members of his party.¹⁸ The support for neutrality noticeably increased in Austria after Russia's invasion. Whereas in February 2019 56 percent of Austrians regarded neutrality as "personally very important", the importance of neutrality for Austrians rose to 70 percent in March 2022.¹⁹ It has remained on this level in the following years. No party touched this subject any longer. When Veit Dengler, a founding member of the NEOS party and the party's foreign policy spokesperson, supported NATO membership in a newspaper interview in November 2025, he immediately lost his position and was appointed as spokesperson for research.²⁰

B. Finland

After 2014, Finland, besides being a NATO Opportunities Partner, also developed a diverse set of bilateral, trilateral and minilateral partnerships with Sweden and important NATO allies, like the United States, Norway and the United Kingdom. All these partnerships were linked to territorial defense. Finland started to see itself as a part of NATO's defense system in Europe. The "policy of non-alignment gave way to a new policy of alignment".²¹ However, public opinion polls showed Finns still opposing NATO membership. In December 2021, 51 per cent of Finns were against NATO membership, merely 24 per cent were in favor. But with the invasion of Russia in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, public opinion started to change dramatically. In a new poll from 28 February a majority of Finns already supported joining NATO. In mid-April, 68 percent of Finns viewed military alignment positively and by early May, support for NATO membership exceeded 75 per cent and stayed roughly at that level.²² This change in public attitudes were influenced by an intensive debate in Finnish media

18 Nehammer: Österreich bleibt neutral, Diskussion beendet, in: Die Presse, 8.3.2022 [<https://www.diepresse.com/6108512/nehammer-oesterreich-bleibt-neutral-diskussion-beendet>].

19 See Exxpress, 18.5.2022 [[exxpress.at/klarere-auftrag-fuer-nehammer-und-vdb-oesterreicher-fuer-erhalt-der-neutralitaet](https://www.exxpress.at/klarere-auftrag-fuer-nehammer-und-vdb-oesterreicher-fuer-erhalt-der-neutralitaet)].

20 Christian Ultsch, Veit Denglers kurze Karriere als außenpolitischer Neos-Sprecher, Die Presse, 25.11.2025 [<https://www.diepresse.com/20345748/nato-beitritt-gefordert-warum-veit-dengler-nicht-mehr-aussenpolitischer>]. NEOS are the smallest member in the government coalition with ÖVP and SPÖ, in office since February 2025.

21 Matti Pesu/Tuomas Iso-Markku, Insufficiency of informal alignment: why did Finland choose formal NATO membership?, in: *International Affairs*, Vol. 100: 2 (March 2024) 569-588, here 576, quote from 577.

22 The results of the polls are taken from Pesu/Iso-Markku (2024), 578.

on NATO accession and among the political parties which had begun already in December 2021. Russia's aggressive actions in Georgia, Syria and in Ukraine 2014 had been a factor in the turnaround. In addition, the tradition of neutrality and non-alignment during the Cold War came under increased scrutiny. "Finlandization" was not only regarded accommodation of Finnish foreign policy to Soviet interests, but also seen as domestic self-censorship in the media, parties and in education.²³

As already mentioned, at the beginning of the NATO debate in Finland only two of the eight parties in Parliament were for NATO membership. During a meeting of Finnish and Swedish government leaders in Helsinki, 3 March 2022, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin notified her Swedish counterpart, Magdalena Anderson, that opinion in Finland was quickly changing, also among the Finnish Social Democrats (both prime ministers being Social Democrats). For Marin, Article 42(7) of the EU Treaty would not be sufficient as a security guarantee.²⁴

Prime Minister Sanna Marin in fact belonged to the left wing of the Finnish Social Democrats.²⁵ But she was also young, age 34 when she took office in December 2019. She was much more internationally oriented than her counterparts in Sweden. Participating in the European Council meetings of the EU in Brussels, she realized that in security and defense questions she, as a ("neutral") Finn, was an outsider, had "no place on the table". Nevertheless, in January 2022, Marin asserted that Finland would not become member of NATO "under her watch". This would actually have been an abandonment of the Finnish "NATO option", her many critics argued. 24 February 2022, the massive attack by Russia on Ukraine, did change everything. The following weekend Sanna Marin and the Social Democratic leadership aimed at applying for NATO membership by 1 April. Finland's "NATO option" did not leave a chance; when not now, then on what occasion?²⁶

The problem was how to convince Marin's party and the other parties in the coalition government. In the Green League, a lively debate on NA-

23 Pesu/Iso-Markku (2024), 579.

24 Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 59.

25 This and the subsequent paragraphs follow the analysis of Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 63-65.

26 Tomas Ries wrote already in 1999 about Finnish NATO ambitions: "the danger is that it may always be too early until it is too late"; see his paper on Finland and NATO, Department for Strategic and Defence Studies. National Defence College, Helsinki, Finland, November 1999, last sentence.

TO had already developed; but the Left Alliance was definitely against membership. This left the Center Party, formerly the staunchest defender of neutrality/non-alignment. Annika Saarikko, the leader of the Party and Deputy Prime Minister finally decided to support Marin's position. Both ladies agreed to convince their parties' rank and file in a coordinated manner.²⁷ Marin also talked with the opposition leader of the NATO friendly National Coalition Party. Even the populist Finns Party now supported NATO membership.

In Finland, foreign policy is decided by the government and the president together. So on 2 March 2022, President Sauli Niinistö (formerly member of the National Coalition Party) summoned a meeting of all party leaders, parliamentary group leaders and speakers of Parliament. It was decided that Parliament should request a report from the government about the changes of the security environment of Finland. The process towards Finnish NATO membership had started.²⁸ The Report of 13 April did not explicitly recommend Finnish NATO membership, it implicitly deemed all other options insufficient.²⁹ There was a widely shared perception of a "deterrence deficit". Finland's existing security arrangements in relation to Russia were simply insufficient. Thus NATO membership was seen as the only viable way of enhancing Finland's security.³⁰ The Social Democrats, who previously had opposed NATO membership, held an extraordinary council meeting on 14 May 2022 and approved now, at the instigation of Sanna Marin, NATO membership. So the Finnish Prime Minister could on 16 May 2022 present the Report on Finland's Accession to NATO to Parliament.³¹ The next day, the Parliament approved the Report with a 188 yes and 8 no votes (3 member absent).³² On 17 May 2022, President Sauli Niinistö, who previously had been, at least in public, more cautious about NATO membership, communicated Finland's intention to apply for NATO membership, Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs Pekka Haavisto (Green

27 Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 66.

28 Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 68.

29 See Government of Finland, Government report on changes in the security environment, Helsinki: Prime Minister's Office, 13 April 2022.

30 Pesu/Iso-Markku (2024), 583.

31 Report on Finland's Accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Helsinki: Finnish Government, 15 May 2022.

32 A good compilation of the Finnish NATO process can be found in in the article of the Library of Congress, Finland: Parliament Votes to Join NATO, 17.5.2022 [<https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2022-05-17/finland-parliament-votes-to-join-nato/>]; on the vote see. <https://perma.cc/623V-9JQ7>.

League) signing a letter to that effect. The Finnish letter was delivered to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, together with Sweden's letter of application, on 18 May 2022. There were problems with Turkey, but Finland succeeded to become full NATO member on 4 April 2023, leaving Sweden behind.

After becoming the new Finnish president on 1 March 2024, Alexander Stubb (National Coalition Party's candidate) shortly afterwards explained the security status of Finland in an interview:

I have never felt safer as a Finn. We have three locks that our defense is based on. The first lock is our national defense. The second lock is NATO and the EU, and of course, Sweden as well. The third lock is our DCA treaty, which is a defense treaty with the USA.³³

According to the Values and Attitudes Survey from October 2025, two-thirds of Finns viewed the alliance positively, while only 10 percent expressed negative views. Support for NATO was highest among the conservative National Coalition Party (90 percent) and Green League (79 percent) voters and slightly less among Social Democratic Party (73 percent), Center Party (71 percent) and Finns Party (69 percent) supporters. The lowest support was among Left Alliance voters (44 percent).³⁴

C. Sweden

Sweden already had a rather close, but covert relationship with NATO during the Cold War, cooperating in particular with and through Norway.³⁵ Swedish researchers had a long tradition of discussing NATO. A recent example, before February 2022, was the article by Katherine Kjellström Elgin and Anna Wieslander, where the authors examined NATO's partnerships with Sweden and Finland as key examples of the possibilities of building

33 Interview in SVT Aktuellt, 16 April 2024, quoted from Lars-Erik Lundin, Building solidarity peer pressure within NATO and the EU, in: The Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences. Proceedings and Journal, No. 2/2024, 47.

34 Data according to an EVA survey, quoted from the article Half of Finns fear wider war but still trust NATO, Helsinki Times, 4 November 2025 [<https://www.helsinkitimes.fi/finland/finland-news/domestic/28173-half-of-finns-fear-wider-war-but-still-trust-na-to.html>].

35 See the extensive analysis by Mikael Holmström, Den dolda alliansen – Sveriges hemliga NATO-förbindelser. Stockholm: Bokförlaget Atlantis, 2011.

partnerships around converging interests.³⁶ For several years, Swedish officials in the foreign ministry had in vain pushed for a “NATO option”, similar to Finland.³⁷

The first reaction of the Swedish government (a minority government by the Social Democrats) to the Russian invasion in Ukraine came from Foreign Minister Peter Hultqvist. He wanted a deepened military cooperation of Sweden with Finland, perhaps even forming a military alliance.³⁸ But this kind of “minor” mutual military assistance would have ended Swedish neutrality/nonalignment after 200 years. Magdalena Andersson, prime minister since November 2021, presented a plan on 8 March 2022, a day after the Hultqvist proposal: Sweden should rearm (aiming at a defense budget of 2 percent of GDP, cf. Figure 1 of the Annex) as well as strengthen the trilateral cooperation with Finland and the United States. A “push to join NATO would destabilize northern Europe”.³⁹ The leader of the conservative Moderates pushed for NATO membership. It soon became clear that Finland would send an application.

Nonetheless, in the background, a push for NATO membership had quietly been building up. During the last 10 years (after Crimea 2014) joining NATO had become self-evident among important specialists of Swedish security policy. On the editorial pages of the newspapers one could find more positive than negative articles about NATO. Almost all experts commenting the Russian aggression in Ukraine supported NATO membership.⁴⁰

Among the political parties, the Liberals were early on pushing for joining NATO. In a survey from December 2020, the conservative *Moderaterna*, the Center Party and the Christian Democrats all supported NATO membership. The Social Democrats, the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats, the Left Party and the Green Party still opted for Swedish non-alignment.⁴¹ But the Sweden Democrats, the third largest party in

36 Katherine Kjellström Elgin/Anna Wieslander, Making NATO’s Partnerships More Strategic: Sweden and Finland as Partner Models for Development, in: Jason Blessing et al. (eds.) *NATO 2030 Towards a New Strategic Concept and Beyond*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021, 109-130.

37 Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 82.

38 Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 80.

39 Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 91/92. The authors took the quote from the Financial Times.

40 Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 196.

41 SVT Nyheter, Lista: Så står partierna i Nato-frågan [<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/lista-sa-har-star-partierna-i-nato-fragan>].

Parliament after the 2018 elections, soon changed their position. Already on 26 February 2022, a prominent member of the party wrote on Twitter:

It is now time to think about a NATO membership application – together with Finland. To stand firm against the 21st century Hitler is of overriding importance.⁴²

Like in the old days when they dominated Swedish politics, the decisive choice had to be made by the Social Democrats, still Sweden's largest party. Their room of maneuver had continuously decreased. It was clear, in contacts with Sanna Marin, that Finland would apply for NATO membership; thus a bilateral alliance Sweden-Finland was not feasible. The Moderate leader, Ulf Kristersson, indicated that his party would use the NATO question in the coming election campaign for the Swedish Parliament.⁴³ Maintaining military non-alignment would also be costly. Research showed that Sweden would have to increase its military spending from about 1 percent of GDP to 5 to 6 percent to successfully defend Sweden against a military attack.⁴⁴

Public opinion started to change dramatically. Whereas in January 2022 35 percent of Swedes and only 19 percent of Social Democratic sympathizers wanted Sweden to join NATO, in mid-April, the percentages were 46 and 34 respectively; at the end of April 2022, 51 percent both of the general public and of the Social Democratic sympathizers wanted Sweden to join NATO.⁴⁵

Finally, the National Board (*partistyrelsen*) of the Social Democrats met on Sunday, 15 May 2022, to officially decide on Sweden's NATO membership application. At six o'clock in the afternoon, Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson declared in front of the media:

We Social Democrats believe that it is the best for Sweden and for the security of the people of Sweden that we join NATO. This is not a decision that one takes lightly, but we must deal with the realities as they

42 Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 294, a Twitter from Björn Söder.

43 Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 158.

44 Oscar Stenström, *Sveriges medlemskapsförhandlingar*, in: Ingvar Mattson (red.), *Sverige in NATO*, Stockholm: Dialogos, 2025, 45-68, here 49. See also Figure 1 in the Annex.

45 Ulf Bjereld/Henrik Oscarsson, *Jordskred i Svensk Nato-opinion efter Rysslands invasion av Ukraina*, in: Ulrika Andersson et al. (red.), *Ovisshetens tid*. Göteborg: SOM-institutet, Göteborgs universitet, 2023, 141-154, here 145, opinion polls by Kantar Public (Sifo). See also Figure 2 in the Annex.

actually look like, and when reality changes we must take the appropriate decision.⁴⁶

On Monday, 16 May 2022, the Swedish Parliament voted for Sweden's NATO membership application. After the Finnish Parliament did the same on 17 May, Finland and Sweden submitted together their membership application in Brussels.⁴⁷ The Swedish Riksdag then voted on joining NATO on 22 March 2023, with 269 yes, 37 no votes. The no votes came from the Left Party and the Green Party, 43 members were absent.⁴⁸

After some troubles with Turkey, concerning Swedish support for “terrorists” and a spat with Hungary, Sweden finally became member of the NATO alliance on 7 March 2024. Thus ended 200 years of Swedish neutrality/*alliansfrihet*.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Why did Finland and Sweden become NATO members, but not Austria?

If geography would be the main reason for joining/not joining NATO, then in 1997/98, when Austria's neighbors in Central Europe became NATO members, Austria would have joined NATO as well.

One element already mentioned that distinguished Austria from the other two countries was the change of generations, in particular in the Social Democratic Party of Finland. For younger politicians, the experiences during the Cold War had not much significance any more. The Finnish drive for membership left the Swedish Social Democrats with little choice. With only a slight exaggeration one could say that Sanna Marin, the lady from *Vogue*, “pushed Sweden over the cliff”.⁴⁹

It seems that the media in Finland and Sweden were much more open to discuss NATO membership than Austrian media. In particular, there does not exist a newspaper like *Kronen Zeitung*, still read by a large number

46 Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 212.

47 Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 213.

48 Matti Wiberg, Keep calm and join NATO. Finland's and Sweden's road to the military-political alliance, Bonn: Center for European Integration Studies, 2023 (ZEI Discussion Paper 280), 35.

49 I take this from Strömberg/Nilsson (2024), 402.

of Austrians, which uncompromisingly supports neutrality.⁵⁰ Therefore, it should be no surprise that the support of “neutrality”, whatever it means,⁵¹ is so high. With a much larger range of views in the media, attitudes in Finland and Sweden could change more easily.

Neutrality is an important part of Austrian identity – this is what most politicians and researchers in Austria claim. How then can the idea of Sweden as a neutral country so quickly disappear after 200 years? A Swedish study explains that a state’s self can be conceptualized in terms of layered identity constructions. In Sweden military non-alignment was not presented as an end in itself, but “as essential for enabling Sweden to maintain other, arguably more deeply ingrained, identity constructs”. The authors list here e.g. Sweden as a contributor to peace and security as well as the special relationship with Finland.⁵² In the Austrian case, e.g. a “Central European identity” would be helpful, but this has been neglected, especially after the end of the Cold War. Thus a country in the center of Europe, which has, after Germany the highest number of neighboring states in Europe, does not have a close partnership with any of its neighbors. All of them, with the exception of Switzerland and Liechtenstein, are now members of NATO.

And this leads to one of the flaws in the research on Austrian neutrality. Practically none of the numerous scholars, be it political scientists or specialists in international law, discusses the opportunity costs of neutrality. It could be an interesting topic for research.

50 The *Kronen Zeitung* had a huge headline on 26 October 2025, Austria’s national day, warning all Austrians: Austria’s “neutrality is not to be shaken” [An der Neutralität ist nicht zu rütteln].

51 Rita Phillips, Fast alle halten Neutralität hoch, aber nur wenige wissen, was sie bedeutet, Forschungskommunikation, Universität Klagenfurt, 18. September 2024 [<https://www.aau.at/blog/fast-alle-halten-neutralitaet-hoch-aber-nur-wenige-wissen-was-sie-bedeutet/>].

52 Elvira Hjertström/Linus Hagström, Changing identity to remain oneself: ontological security and the Swedish decision on joining NATO, in: *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 28, 2025, 29–54, here 39.

Annex

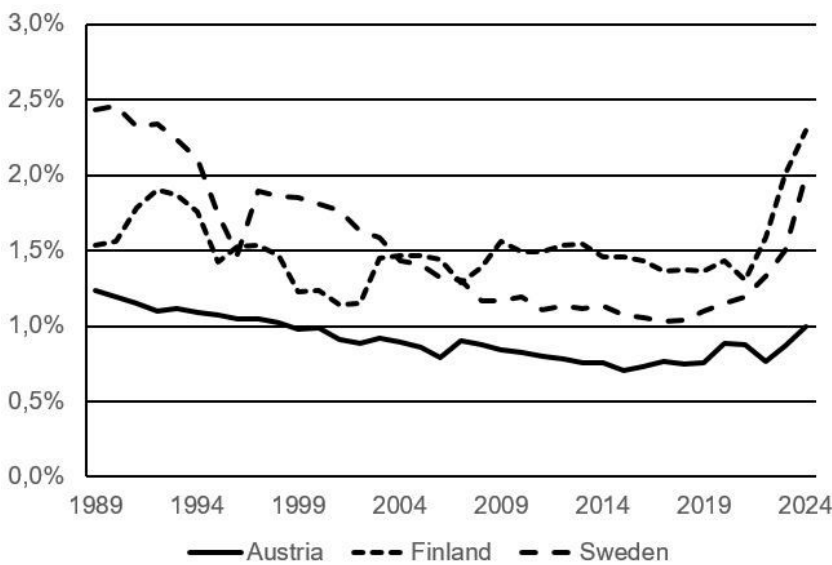
Table 1:

Participation/Cooperation with NATO: Austria, Finland, Sweden

	Austria	Finland	Sweden
Partnership for Peace	1995	1994	1994
“NATO Strategic Airlift Capability” at the Pápa Air Base in Hungary	–	2009	2009
International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Afghanistan, UN-mandated, NATO-led, 2002-2014 (troops, data for 2011)	3	156	500
Enhanced Opportunities Partner (NATO Summit Wales 2014)	–	2014	2014
Host Nation Support Agreement with NATO	–	2014/2016	2014/2016
Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP)	2021	–	–
NATO Membership	–	2023	2024

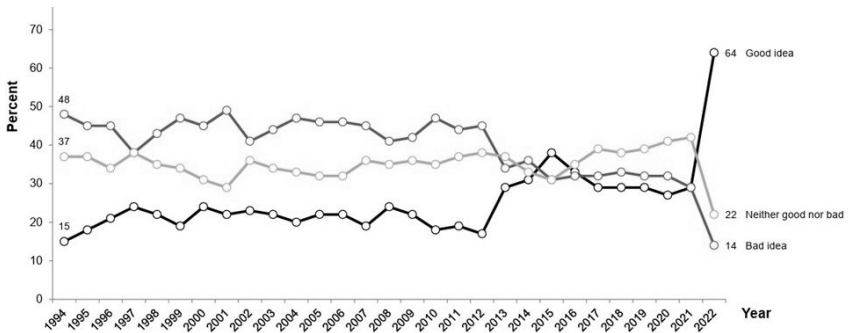
Source for ISAF: Andrew Cottey, *The European Neutrals and NATO: Ambiguous Partnership*, in: *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol.34, No.3, 2013, 446–472, here 460.

Figure 1:
Military expenditure by country as percentage of gross domestic product, 1989-2024 (© SIPRI 2024)



Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database [<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>].
Graph by Paul Luif.

Figure 2

Public Opinion on Swedish Membership in NATO

Notes: Question: “What is your opinion on the following proposal?” 1994–2021: “Sweden should apply for membership in NATO”, 2022: “Sweden should become a member of NATO”. Five response alternatives to the question asked: “Very good proposal; Fairly good proposal; Neither good, nor bad proposal; Fairly bad proposal; Very bad proposal”. The results show percent answering “Very/fairly good” or “Very/fairly bad” among respondents who answered the question.

Source: SOM Institute, Swedish Trends 1986–2024, University of Gothenburg 2024, 68. Data from The National SOM Survey 1994–2022 [<https://www.gu.se/sites/default/files/2025-04/Swedish%20trends%201986-2024.pdf>].

