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CONTRASTING RESPONSES: SWEDEN'S POLITICS AND SOCIETY DURING RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE IN 2014 AND 2022

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Російсько-українська війна широко висвітлювалась шведськими засобами масової інформації і у 2014 р., і у 2022 р. Частота коментування і спосіб подачі інформації формують громадське сприйняття, впливають на політичний дискурс і сприяють випрацюванню державної політики. Виходячи з цих міркувань, автор використав якісний контент-аналіз і теорію фреймінгу для вивчення того, як шведські газети висвітлювали війну в Україні. Метою статті є проаналізувати часові зміни медіа-наративів і трансформування шведських політичних стратегій між 2014 і 2022 роками як реакції на російсько-українську війну. У статті розглядаються наступні питання: як шведські газети у 2022 р. висвітлювали війну в Україні порівняно з 2014 р.; чи можна виявити упередження на користь або проти певних сторін конфлікту, і як вони змінювалися. Аналіз ґрунтується на статтях, опублікованих у 2014 р. та 2022 р., урядових пропозиціях і особистих свідченнях шведських добровольців. Результати свідчать про значну сталість у медійних підходах: більшість статей у обох періодах зосереджувалися на геополітичному протистоянні між Росією та Заходом, а не на внутрішніх подіях в Україні. Аналіз також показує, що як у 2014, так і у 2022 роках медіа висвітлювали події здебільшого з підтримкою української сторони.

Найразючіша відмінність між двома періодами – у висвітленні участі шведських добровольців. У 2014 р. шведських комбатантів, які приєднувалися до українських сил, часто представляли як радикалів або потенційних неонацистських терористів, тоді як у 2022 р. їх вже зображували як героїв. Крім того, у 2022 р. помітнішими стали нові теми, зокрема, міграція, економічні наслідки та енергетична криза, що відображає ширші політичні та суспільні занепокоєння. Ці зміни у медіанаративах збігаються з помітними трансформаціями у політичній реакції Швеції на події російсько-української війни, що підкреслює еволюцію стратегічного підходу як у політиці, так і в суспільному дискурсі.

Ключові слова: російсько-українська війна, шведські засоби масової інформації, шведські добровольці, суспільний дискурс, державна політика.

Introduction. The long war in Donbass will forever be overshadowed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, understanding the latter is impossible without recognizing the significance of the former. The initial conflict in Ukraine marked a critical turning point in European geopolitics, exposing vulnerabilities in international response mechanisms and the complexities of modern warfare. Yet, the limited acknowledgment and understanding of these earlier events reveal significant gaps in how Western nations perceive and react to such conflicts.

Mass media serve as the primary source of information on modern conflicts for the general public, including in Sweden. This may explain why the initial response to Ukraine's crisis in 2014 was relatively muted. Given the media's role in shaping public opinion and influencing policy decisions, it is crucial to examine how news narratives are constructed and which aspects are emphasized. These framings have direct implications for Swedish defense policy and public perception, which in turn shape the country's broader security landscape.

Much has changed since 2014. Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, framed by President Vladimir Putin as an effort to "de-Nazify Ukraine," shocked the West. While the invasion itself had long been anticipated, the poor planning and execution of the attack were unexpected. This reaction stands in stark contrast to the disjointed and unprepared response in 2014, raising important questions about how Sweden's engagement with the conflict evolved over time.

This article examines these contrasts by analyzing how Swedish media, policymakers, and public discourse responded to the conflict in 2014 and how these responses evolved by 2022. The analysis explores the narratives surrounding Swedish volunteers in Ukraine, the political framing of their actions, and the broader sociopolitical context in Sweden during these periods.

Background. On 21 November 2013, Ukraine halted negotiations with the EU on a cooperation agreement, prompting demonstrators to gather in Kyiv¹. In January 2014, the regime loyalist Berkut riot police had just opened fire on the large crowd of protesters occupying Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or Independence Square, in

¹ Salihu, D., "Segrarna i Ukraina", *Expressen*, published: 23.02.2014, p. 10.

central Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine². The number of dead and injured was unclear, but the bloody asphalt hinted that it would be significant. Prior to this, the protests had been taking place since November 30 and had been triggered further by President Yanukovych's decision to now fully abandon closer ties with the West in favor of an alliance with Russia³. The protests, which initially began as small gatherings, rapidly grew as they faced increasing repression. What started with hundreds soon escalated to thousands and eventually tens of thousands. Ukraine's government fell on 28 January 2014, and Prime Minister Mykola Azarov resigned. Less than a month later, foreign ministers from the EU held talks with both Yanukovych and the opposition. This led to an agreement between the president and the opposition that limited the president's power and stipulated that new elections would be held. However, the demonstrators were not satisfied and demanded Yanukovych's resignation⁴.

There had always been violence, but it escalated dramatically when the president's guard switched from water cannons and rubber bullets to the use of Kalashnikovs and sniper rifles. Though many lives were lost, Yanukovych ultimately fled the country, and it seemed as though the crisis had come to an end. Free and democratic elections were decided to be held in May that very same year⁵. However, this apparent calm was deceptive. The events in Ukraine were only beginning to unfold.

Because only days after these events, Crimea happened. Crimea's geography and milder weather had made it a popular vacation spot since the Soviet era – it also made it an ideal location for a naval base, and the Russian Federation's Black Sea Fleet was based out of the Crimean port city of Sevastopol. Following Yanukovych's escape, images of Crimea began to surface in the news, showing developments that hinted at an alarming shift. Reports emerged that "mysterious soldiers" had swiftly begun to assert control over the peninsula⁶. These soldiers bore no insignia or nationality designations, making it easy for Russian authorities to claim they were "local self-defense forces" formed in response to the unstable political situation. However, their advanced equipment – such as Pecheneg machine guns and GM-94 grenade launchers – and their movements in standard-issue Russian uniforms clearly identified them as Russian military personnel. The Western media hesitated to directly challenge these claims, creating confusion and leaving Russia ample room to exploit the narrative⁷. This hesitation, coupled with Russia's outright denials, allowed the situation to escalate unchecked.

The events in Crimea and the subsequent conflict in eastern Ukraine laid the groundwork for understanding the Donbass war in the east in 2014 and the larger invasion in 2022. These early developments reveal how geopolitical opportunism, propaganda, and muted international responses can shape the trajectory of a conflict⁸. Pro-Russian groups in eastern Ukraine began forming pro-Russian militias, demanding independence from Ukraine. Violence escalated in the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk as militia groups stormed government buildings. In response, the newly formed Ukrainian government decided to use military force to combat the militias. However, Ukraine's military was in such poor condition that the government issued a decree inviting both national and international volunteers to fight for Ukraine's independence and establish their own pro-Ukrainian militias⁹. A civil war broke out.

In 2021, however, the conflict saw significant developments as Russia mobilized a large number of military units along the Ukrainian border, sparking widespread international discourse, as an invasion of Ukraine was considered unlikely. On 24 February 2022, the conflict escalated dramatically when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Intense fighting continues in Ukraine, and at present, the front line has largely stagnated¹⁰.

² Nevéus, I., "Demonstranter fruktar fler döda i kravaller", *Dagens Nyheter*, published: 23.01.2014, p. 8.

³ Hansson, W., "Därför utbröt krisen i Ukraina", *Aftonbladet*, published: 07.03.2014, Available Online: <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article18498129.ab>.

⁴ Salihu, D., "Segrarna i Ukraina", *Expressen*, published: 23.02.2014, p. 10.

⁵ Hansson, W., "Därför utbröt krisen i Ukraina", *Aftonbladet*, published: 07.03.2014, Available Online: <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article18498129.ab>.

⁶ Wood, E. A., Pomeranz, W. E., Merry, E. W., Trudoliubov, M. (2015), *Roots of Russia's War in Ukraine*, Columbia University Press. pp. 6–12.

⁷ *ibid.* pp. 13–18.

⁸ Nygren, G., Hök, J. (2016), *Ukraina och informationskriget: Journalistik mellan ideal och självcensur*, MSB rapport MSB1005. p. 12.

⁹ Nygren, G., Hök, J. (2016), *Ukraina och informationskriget: Journalistik mellan ideal och självcensur*, MSB rapport MSB1005. p. 13–18.

¹⁰ Visual Journalism Team (2023), "Ukraine in Maps: Tracking the War with Russia", *BBC*, 20.12.2023, Available Online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60506682> (Accessed 29.01.2025).

Previous Research & Research Overview. A relevant topic for this study is the broader issue of war in relation to media coverage throughout history, as the research aims to clarify how conflicts are framed in the media. Beyond reporting on Ukraine, there is a substantial body of research examining media framings of war in other historical conflicts, exploring the relationship between war and the media. Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin address this topic in their 2010 book, aiming to equip readers with tools and methods for interpreting the connection between war and media while also providing an overview of how this relationship has evolved across different conflicts¹¹. Hoskins and O'Loughlin's central argument is that as reporting on wars and conflicts becomes increasingly prevalent, it is more important than ever to establish reliable methods for clearly interpreting the framings presented in these publications¹².

Howard Palmer's book on media coverage of the 2003 Iraq War also addresses this topic. Palmer argues that the focus on media is essential, as news coverage plays an integral role in shaping public opinion on the crisis. He found that journalists observing the conflict from an external perspective gained a clearer and broader understanding of what was actually happening. Palmer also highlights the critical tension between a state's government and the media, emphasizing the importance of journalistic integrity, which he argues was challenged in the debate over weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, as the British government sought to influence reporting¹³.

Both of these works demonstrate a clear connection between newspaper framings, public opinion development, and political decision-making in different countries. The case of Britain and weapons of mass destruction in Iraq illustrates a deliberate effort to control media narratives, showing that those who shape these narratives have an easier time rallying public support for a specific agenda. This is particularly relevant when considering how Swedish volunteers in Ukraine were portrayed in 2014 as Nazi terrorists. At the time, Sweden was grappling with the issue of individuals with Muslim backgrounds traveling to Syria to volunteer for ISIS. To facilitate public discourse and avoid a debate on racism, Swedish volunteers in Ukraine were incorporated into this broader narrative – strategically shaping public opinion and controlling the prevailing discourse. A study by Sophie Lechler and Claes H. de Vreese, published in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* in 2012, analyzes whether the framing of news media influences readers and how this, in turn, impacts public opinion formation¹⁴. Lechler and de Vreese's study is clearly valuable in this context for understanding how mass media sought to influence and shape public opinion – not so much regarding Ukraine itself, but rather in relation to Swedish domestic politics.

Theory. The theoretical foundation of this article is based on the idea that while bias is often explicit in editorials and opinion pieces, where a newspaper's political stance is openly conveyed, tendentious opinion can also be present in news reporting. However, in news texts, opinions and perspectives are expressed in a more subtle manner. To determine a newspaper's underlying standpoint, one must examine its selection of news, how these stories are structured, and which sources are used and given prominence. This selection process shapes the newspaper's worldview. Media professor Martin Conboy at the University of Sheffield argues that it is through this process that newspapers persuade their readers of their perspective. In different social and political contexts, certain aspects of history are prioritized while specific "heroes" are chosen. Narratives do not merely describe the world; they shape our perception of it. In accordance with Conboy's theory of news rhetoric and bias, this article therefore builds on the idea that our perception of "heroes" and "villains" is ultimately shaped by the narrative journalists and politicians choose to construct¹⁵. This article builds on Conboy's theory of media rhetoric and bias while also recognizing how framing theory, as outlined by Entman, plays a role in the selective emphasis of certain narratives over others.

Method. This article employs a qualitative content analysis to examine Sweden's responses to the conflict in Ukraine during two distinct periods: 2014 and 2022. By analyzing Swedish media articles and government reports, the study identifies shifts in narratives, focusing on how Swedish volunteers in Ukraine were portrayed and how their actions were framed. The qualitative approach emphasizes the role of media narratives in shaping public perception and government policies, providing insights into the intersection of politics, society, and conflict.

¹¹ Hoskins, A., O'Loughlin, B. (2010), *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War*, Cambridge Polity. pp. 1–3.

¹² *ibid.* pp. 191–192.

¹³ Tumber, H., Palmer, J. (2004), *Media at War: The Iraq Crisis*, London: SAGE.

¹⁴ Lechler, S., de Vreese, C. H. (2012), "News Framing and Public Opinion: A Mediation Analysis of Framing Effects on Political Attitudes", *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 89.2.

¹⁵ Conboy, M. (2007), *The Language of the News*, London: Routledge, pp. 13, 74.

For this article, the primary focus has been on selecting some of Sweden's largest daily newspapers that produced their own content and had correspondents on-site during the Ukraine crisis — *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen*, and *Svenska Dagbladet*. To complement this selection with a different type of media, the Swedish television news programs *Aktuellt* and *Rapport* have also been used as a primary source. Relevant articles were identified through searches in the Mediearkivet (Retriever) database.

In addition, this article also relies on primary sources in the form of government propositions, which are central to analyzing Sweden's security policy development. Propositions represent the government's formal proposals to parliament and provide an authentic insight into decision-making processes. They reflect the government's perspective on national and international events and serve as key documents for understanding political priorities.

Additionally, firsthand accounts from Swedish volunteers enrich the analysis, offering a deeper understanding of their experiences, motivations, and challenges. These interviews shed light on how volunteers perceived their roles and how they were received by Swedish authorities and media upon returning home. The study situates these narratives within the broader sociopolitical context of Sweden, exploring how domestic politics and public sentiment influenced the framing of the conflict.

While the article primarily employs qualitative content analysis of media narratives, it also incorporates elements of political discourse analysis to examine how government policies and public discussions evolved in response to media portrayals of the conflict. By comparing these findings across the two periods, the article seeks to uncover patterns and shifts in Sweden's response, offering a nuanced perspective on the evolving dynamics of international conflict and domestic policymaking. It must be noted that, given more time, a deeper analysis of the material could have been conducted. However, the priority was instead to provide a broad selection of sources rather than an in-depth examination, largely due to time constraints.

Results. Media Narratives in 2014. A study on media coverage of the 2014 events was conducted by Finnish researchers Markus Ojala and Mervi Pantti in 2017. Their analysis examines four newspapers from different countries, including Sweden. In their report, they highlight that “*Ukrainian actors, including political leaders, demonstrators, police, volunteer militias, and military servicemen, were mostly presented in a positive manner and their perspectives were identified with when they were considered pro-European*”¹⁶.

This observation holds true upon closer examination of the coverage. For instance, in *Aftonbladet*'s article “*Nu ryter han till mot Ukrainas president*”, written by Pär Karlsson on 29 November, it becomes evident how strongly Sweden's then-Foreign Minister Carl Bildt disapproved of Ukraine's decision to decline signing a trade agreement with the EU. Bildt is given the opportunity to clearly express his own views on the situation and Ukraine's chosen course of action, without any opposing perspectives being presented¹⁷. This pro-EU stance can also be observed in other media, such as in the article “*Bara i EU kan vi vara ett fritt land*”, written by Wolfgang Hansson on 3 December 2013. In the article, readers are taken behind the barricades in the square, following *Aftonbladet*'s reporter and photographer as they meet the demonstrators. The demonstrators express their desire for Ukraine to move closer to the EU and for Yanukovich to step down due to his refusal to sign the EU agreement. The journalist describes this moment as “*decisive*” for Ukraine and states that Yanukovich “*turned his back on the EU*”. These word choices construct the image that moving toward the EU is the right path for Ukraine and that this decision is of great significance. The article exclusively features demonstrators, all of whom present a negative view of Yanukovich, while no Ukrainians who sympathize with him are given a voice¹⁸. *Aftonbladet* continues this narrative in another opinion piece by popular historian and columnist Herman Lindqvist, who draws parallels to historical Russian wars against Sweden and the Swedish concept of “*rysskräcken*” (fear of Russia)¹⁹. *Dagens Nyheter* makes a more serious attempt to contextualize the conflict (5 September), describing Putin's vision as “*a Russia resembling the Soviet Union*.” The analysis presents Putin's ideology as fundamentally different from Western values²⁰.

At the turn of the year, as the situation in Kyiv worsened, *Aftonbladet* published another article titled “*Beredda på att dö*”, written by Erik Melin and Karin Östman on 23 January. The reporter on-site primarily

¹⁶ Ojala, M., Pantti, M. (2017), “*Naturalizing the New Cold War: The Geopolitics of Framing the Ukrainian Conflict in Four European Newspapers*”, *Global Media and Communication*.

¹⁷ Karlsson, P., “*Nu ryter han till mot Ukrainas president*”, *Aftonbladet*, published: 29.11.2013, p. 16.

¹⁸ Hansson, W., “*Bara i EU kan vi vara ett fritt land*”, *Aftonbladet*, published: 03.12.2013, p. 10.

¹⁹ Nygren, G., Hök, J. (2016), *Ukraina och informationskriget: Journalistik mellan ideal och självzensur*, p. 177.

²⁰ Ibid.

interviews demonstrators, whose names, ages, and professions are often provided. A medic at the square is also quoted, as well as Vitali Klitschko. Throughout the text, it is repeatedly emphasized that the demonstrators seek a new president and a “new future.” One protester states, “I do not want a criminal president.” Klitschko is interviewed and declares, “Tomorrow, we move forward together. If I take a bullet to the forehead, then so be it—but in an honest, fair, and courageous way.” His statement remains unchallenged. The demonstrators are consistently portrayed as both victims and heroes.

Other researchers in Sweden who have examined media coverage of Ukraine in 2014 include Jöran Nygren and Gunnar Hök in their 2016 study *Ukraina och informationskriget*. According to Nygren and Hök, the downing of MH17 was the single most prominent topic. International politics, particularly the aftermath of the downing and subsequent sanctions, also received significant coverage, whereas the conflict in Ukraine itself was given less attention. The expressed support was strongly in favor of Ukraine—or at least against Russia²¹. On 18 July, the Swedish television news program *Rapport* aired a segment on the political consequences of the plane crash that had occurred the previous day. The central figure was Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who stated that “terrorists” had shot down the aircraft, a perspective that was maintained throughout the entire segment²².

One might perceive that news coverage during the initial stages was entirely pro-Ukrainian, but this could be misleading, as the situation is far more complex and multifaceted. Putin had the opportunity to express his view on what was going on in Ukraine. In *Dagens Nyheter* on 30 August, he states that the Ukrainian military is shelling civilian residential areas—an act that reminds him of World War II, “when fascists surrounded cities such as Leningrad”²³. This theme of Ukrainian “fascists” would become increasingly recurrent throughout the year. The Russian narrative got through in the Swedish discussion, but probably not like the Russians had intended because it was merely in internal affairs this was discussed in a larger extent.

Descriptions of Azov volunteers in Swedish media became more and more frequent, with Diamant’s article in *Expressen*, titled “The Swedes Who Fight in Ukraine” (*Svenskarna som strider för Ukraina*), published on December 10²⁴, is among the most well-known and widely discussed. These reports often emphasized connections to right-wing extremism, ignoring the broader context of Ukraine’s struggle for sovereignty and democracy. Already in the lead paragraph, a middle-aged man named David is conflated with Nazis. The lead briefly mentions that David longs to return to Ukraine, including a short quote from him. However, immediately below, it states: “*Expressen* can reveal that several Swedish Nazis have traveled to Ukraine.” The problem is that further down in the main text, it becomes clear that David is not a Nazi at all but identifies as a liberal²⁵. The subtext of the lead, intertwined with David’s quote, thus significantly misleads the reader. This portrayal was most likely also exacerbated by the political climate in Sweden, where the rise of nationalist parties like the Sweden Democrats fueled media efforts to link far-right ideologies to the Azov Battalion and also the panic about that so many immigrants in Sweden had travelled to Syria to join ISIS. This was something brought up also by *SVT News* which in an article connected one volunteer from Sweden to being a member of a “Nazi militia” in Ukraine and that this has been “overshadowed” by “reporting too much” of “Swedes” fighting for the Islamic State²⁶. If we continue with SVT, their news broadcast on January 30, 2015, featured a report aired early that year. Terrorism researcher Hans Brun stated on *Aktuellt* that the presence of Swedes fighting in Ukraine was contributing to an increased terrorist threat in Sweden. According to Brun, the danger was particularly acute for Jewish groups in Sweden when these individuals returned from Ukraine²⁷.

Consequently, all Swedes who joined Azov were automatically categorized within the narrative of “Nazis” and right-wing extremists, regardless of their individual motivations or actions.

Volunteer Experiences. The personal experiences of Swedish volunteers provide a compelling lens through which to view how individuals were received and treated by Swedish authorities and media during

²¹ Nygren, G., Hök, J. (2016), *Ukraina och informationskriget: Journalistik mellan ideal och självcensur*, p. 166.

²² *SVT Rapport*, broadcast: 18.07.2014, Sveriges Television.

²³ Nygren, G., Hök, J. (2016), *Ukraina och informationskriget: Journalistik mellan ideal och självcensur*, p. 175.

²⁴ Diamant, S., “*Svenskarna som strider i Ukraina*”, *Expressen*, published: 10.12.2014, Available Online: <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/svenskarna-som-strider-i-ukraina/>.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Jönsson, E., “*Carolus från Sundsvall strider i Ukraina*”, *SVT Nyheter*, published: 30.01.2015, Available Online: <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/carolus-fran-sundsvall-strider-i-ukraina>.

²⁷ SVT, *Aktuellt*, 30.01.2015, Interview with Hans Brun, Available Online: [smdb.kb.se] (Accessed 01.02.2025).

the early stages of the conflict. One such account is that of Carolus, who, upon returning to Sweden, was met by the Swedish Security Service in Stockholm. The encounter, characterized by a mix of naivety and a lack of contextual understanding on the part of the authorities, illustrates the challenges volunteers faced in navigating perceptions of their actions. As Carolus himself recounts in his own book, *“When I then returned to Sweden, I had to be met by the Swedish Security Service in Stockholm. They came in the form of two young men, one playing “good cop” asking the questions based on a form, with the “bad cop” reading my body language and taking notes”*²⁸. In an interview that also serves as source material for this article, Carolus states that as of 2024, he has yet to receive any redress—neither for his treatment by the Swedish Security Service at the time nor for how the media portrayed him. He continues to strongly assert that he is not a National Socialist, a position he had already expressed in multiple interviews²⁹ as early as 2015. He feels that the way he was treated has made it difficult for him to find employment in his home country and that no redress has yet been granted. He states that opportunities within the Swedish military are particularly closed to him due to his involvement in Ukraine’s defense in 2014³⁰.

This experience underscores a broader theme: the disconnect between Swedish institutional responses and the realities faced by those on the ground in Ukraine. Such encounters reveal the suspicion and skepticism volunteers often met, driven in part by media narratives that framed them as extremists rather than individuals acting out of solidarity or conviction. This framing also created lasting challenges for volunteers, shaping their public image and personal experiences in Sweden long after their return.

Political Statements and Official Perspectives. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Swedish government issued a bill titled **“2014/15:109”**. A central focus of the bill was the emphasis on the need to strengthen Sweden’s defense capability³¹. It should be noted that for a long period before this, Sweden had been cutting back on its defense since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Sweden’s former prime minister had even declared that the country’s military defense was “a special interest”³². But now, it was a new time and a new era in Swedish politics.

The bill repeatedly emphasizes the importance of enhancing the operational capabilities of combat units and establishing a military presence on Gotland, a strategically significant area in the Baltic Sea region³³. On the other hand, the bill also contains several elements reflecting a focus on international liberalism, particularly in its emphasis on international cooperation and multilateral defense initiatives. The bill states that *“Bilateral and multilateral defense and security policy cooperation, particularly within the Nordic region, also enhances security in our part of the world, with cooperation with Finland being highlighted as particularly significant.”* The government’s commitment to strengthening ties with neighboring countries and cooperating within the framework of the EU and NATO illustrates a liberal conviction that security is a collective responsibility and that Sweden takes a step away from its neutrality here very clearly into the western alliance³⁴.

Another particularly interesting aspect of the bill is its formulation of the well-known solidarity declaration, in which Sweden asserts that it will not *“remain passive if a disaster or an attack were to affect another EU member state or a Nordic country”*³⁵. However, the statement does not specify what “not remaining passive” actually entails.

Media Narratives in 2022. Since 2022, the war has entered an entirely new phase—an invasion phase in which Russia has been fully transparent about its intentions. As a consequence of the full-scale war, Sweden has joined NATO and placed its security policy bets on a successful Ukrainian defense. More on this will be discussed in the next chapter. Sweden is now providing extensive support to Ukraine, imposing sanctions on Russian entities, and aligning itself with Western unity. In doing so, Sweden has abandoned its more than 200-year-long policy of non-alignment. Naturally, this has been widely covered in the media. Swedish

²⁸ Löfroos, C. (2022), *The Foreigner Group*, Harrisburg: Antelope Hill.

²⁹ e.g. Winiarski, M. (2015), *Swedish Carolus on Why He Fights in Ukraine: Wanted to Help / Svenske Carolus om varför han strider i Ukraina: Ville hjälpa till*, *Dagens Nyheter*, Available Online: <http://dn.se/nyheter/varlden/svenske-carolus-om-varfor-han-strider-i-ukraina-ville-hjalpa-till/>.

³⁰ Carolus Löfroos, interview by Carl-Mikael A. Teglund, 25.01.2025.

³¹ Regeringens proposition 2014/15:109 (2014), Stockholm: Regeringen, p. 1.

³² Stenberg, E. (2013), *Dagens Nyheter*, Available Online: <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/reinfeldt-forsvaret-ar-ett-sarintresse/>

³³ Regeringens proposition 2014/15:109 (2014), Stockholm: Regeringen, p. 1.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 8.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 21.

media initially reported on the war in an intensely dramatic manner. On February 25, 2022, the day after the large-scale invasion began, *Aftonbladet* described how “Russian missiles rained down on airports and military targets around several major cities across the entire country”³⁶. On February 25, at the onset of the war, *Aftonbladet* was also however quick to discuss the economic impact of the conflict. The article examines how the war will significantly drive up oil and gasoline prices due to the disruption of trade between the EU and Russia. It warns readers not only about rising fuel prices but also about increasing electricity costs³⁷. On the same date, *Dagens Nyheter* also published an article describing how explosions were shaking Ukraine and claiming civilian lives. Sympathy was entirely on Ukraine’s side, with no Russian narratives being given a platform. The humanitarian situation was primarily discussed in terms of refugees and the impact on civilians, along with the international response and its implications for security policy in Europe³⁸. Several Ukrainians are interviewed in another article, describing how they have seen helicopters over the city and heard explosions near Kyiv’s international airport. The article portrays a society in crisis, with long traffic queues as people attempt to flee the cities and streets filled with frightened and injured civilians³⁹.

Reporting on the situation at the front continues uninterrupted in Swedish mass media. On April 22, for example, the front pages highlight the Russian siege of the Azovstal steel plant in the city of Mariupol. *Dagens Nyheter* writes, “*The battle for Mariupol is practically over – Russia has conquered a city in ruins.*” The article describes the defenders as Ukrainian naval infantry, a motorized rifle brigade, and soldiers from the Azov Battalion, which it refers to as a paramilitary group with far-right affiliations.⁴⁰ It is noteworthy that they choose to label the Azov Battalion as a far-right organization, as this aligns with one of Russia’s justifications for the invasion – namely, the so-called denazification of Ukraine and the removal of groups it claims have far-right or Nazi connections. It should be noted however that this is one of very few times alleged Nazi connections are brought up post-February 22, 2022.

Fairly early on, articles begin to appear discussing not only the necessity of Sweden accepting Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war but also how this should be done. In March, just a month after the outbreak of the war, *Dagens Nyheter* writes: “*The people of Ukraine are fighting for their right to their country and their democracy. The struggle for an open society concerns us all, and the refugees arriving in Sweden deserve a real chance to integrate into society*”⁴¹. It is very clear early on that there is a big focus on that Sweden now must brace itself for yet another wave of immigration but that this one will be different in many regards.

As the war progresses, the focus begins to shift. The conflict has unfolded more favorably than initially expected in Sweden, and the media now turns its attention to Sweden’s role in the world, as well as to the EU and NATO. On June 24, *Dagens Nyheter* reports on how the war is contributing to the expansion of both the EU and NATO. The article argues that while Putin’s goal was to halt the expansion of the Western world and NATO, the war has had the opposite effect⁴². It should be noted that it was around this time, a few months after the full-scale invasion, that Swedish media and politicians began discussing Sweden’s NATO membership. However, this was always accompanied by the condition that Finland would join first.

What stands out in how Swedish media portray the war in Ukraine is that the majority of articles focus on issues other than the conflict itself and developments on the battlefield. Instead, the primary emphasis is on international politics, the broader confrontation between Russia and the West, and matters affecting Sweden, such as EU and NATO discussions. The fact that reporting is relatively disconnected from events in Ukraine is likely due to the war’s significant consequences for Sweden, placing the country in a tense security and domestic political situation. This may explain why many articles center on the NATO accession process, the EU, and energy policy. Another key aspect highlighted by this study is how Swedish media demonstrate clear support for Ukraine while condemning Russia’s actions.

³⁶ Nordh, C. (2022), *Krig i Europa*, *Aftonbladet*, pp. 6–7.

³⁷ Persson, I. (2022), *Putins bästa kunder håller på att ge upp*, *Aftonbladet*.

³⁸ Dahl, A. (2022), *Allvarligaste säkerhetsläget sedan andra världskriget*, *Dagens Nyheter*, p. 8.

³⁹ Torén Björling, S., Svensson, A., and Fares, N. (2022), *Kievborna säger “jag älskar dig” till varandra*, *Dagens Nyheter*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Bergkvist, F. (2022), *Putin stoppar stormningen av stålverket*, *Dagens Nyheter*, p. 20.

⁴¹ Mårder, G., and Bengtsson, F. (2022), *Tio sätt att ge flyktingar från Ukraina en bra start*, *Dagens Nyheter*, p. 5.

⁴² Gripenberg, P. (2022), *Putin fick fart på processen att göra EU större*, *Dagens Nyheter*, p. 14.

⁴³ Kosoy, D. (2024), *How to Be a Part of the International Legion of the Defense Intelligence of Ukraine*, UNITED24 Media, Available Online: <https://united24media.com/war-in-ukraine/how-to-be-a-part-of-the-international-legion-of-the-defense-intelligence-of-ukraine-1769>.

Volunteer Experiences. On February 27, the International Legion, also known as the Ukrainian Foreign Legion, was established⁴³. The response in Sweden was significant this time. Shortly after the call for volunteers, several hundred Swedish military volunteers enlisted in the International Legion for Ukraine, according to the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*. On March 25, 2022, TT News Agency reported that 678 Swedes were already on the ground fighting Russian forces in Ukraine⁴⁴. By mid-summer, questions began to arise also in media regarding the accuracy of the reported numbers⁴⁵. It is difficult – if not impossible – to determine exactly how many Swedes are fighting or have fought in Ukraine. However, what is clear is that in the first months of the war, there was significant surprise at the high number of volunteers, as well as considerable uncertainty surrounding the administrative process. For instance, the man who presented himself as the main representative for the Swedish volunteers in Ukraine—Philip Brännvall – turned out not to be recognized by other volunteers from Sweden⁴⁶. This uncertainty became a primary focus for the media when reporting on the International Legion in Ukraine. How many of the early volunteers who fought for Ukraine as far back as 2014 chose to fight again in 2022 also remains unknown. As we can see, the lack of data in this area leads to significant doubt. However, it is clear that the image conveyed of those volunteering in Ukraine at this time was entirely different from the one that had circulated, particularly in early 2015. Jesper Söder had previously gained some recognition in Sweden after fighting for the Kurdish YPG, where he was captured by another Kurdish military group⁴⁷. He was later released and became relatively well-known in Sweden in 2017. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Söder traveled to Ukraine to take part in the fighting⁴⁸. However, his camp Javoriv close to Lviv was bombed early in the war, resulting in many casualties. He had never experienced anything like it, he claims⁴⁹. Following the attack, Söder fled back to Sweden. He told Swedish media that he had not originally gone to Ukraine to fight but rather to assist Swedes who wanted to return home, and that he left because “everything was so poorly organized and we did not receive proper military equipment”⁵⁰. Another Swedish volunteer, who chose to remain anonymous but was also present in Ukraine (and who had been there already back in 2014, described to me in an interview seeing how frightened Söder had been⁵¹. Once back after two weeks in Ukraine but now in Trollhättan, Sweden, Söder told *Sveriges Radio* that he now regretted ever traveling to Ukraine and he does not think he will return⁵². He never did. Jesper Söder’s story is likely not unique, as many volunteers initially went to Ukraine, only to leave after a short time when the reality of war – fighting against a modern, well-equipped invasion force like the Russian army – became evident.

Political Statements and Official Perspectives. Sweden has explicitly condemned Russia in its foreign policy declaration issued by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. In June 2022, Foreign Minister Ann Linde stated that a new dark chapter had opened in European history, with Russia waging an unprovoked, illegal, and indefensible war against a democracy. The statement further asserts that it is in Sweden’s security policy interest to ensure that Russia’s unacceptable war does not result in a political victory and that a Ukrainian defense prevents further aggression. Linde emphasizes that Sweden’s extensive support is of historic proportions, making a contextual reference to 1939, when Sweden provided weapons during an ongoing regional conflict – implicitly alluding to Sweden’s covert support for Finland’s struggle against the Soviet Union⁵³. Sweden also issued a new official statement reaffirming that it has not recognized and

⁴⁴ Samuelsson, J. (2022), *678 frivilliga svenskar strider i Ukraina* [678 Swedish Volunteers Are Fighting in Ukraine], *Svenska Dagbladet*, Available Online: <https://www.svd.se/a/y4M04E/678-frivilliga-svenskar-strider-i-ukraina>.

⁴⁵ Fahlman, F. (2022), *Ukraina: Svenskarna som tar till vapen mot Ryssland*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, Available Online: <https://www.svd.se/a/Po8eQ0/ukraina-svenskarna-som-tar-till-vapen-mot-ryssland>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Arnsäter, P. (2017), *Uppgifter: YPG-svenskar gripna*, *Aftonbladet*, Available Online: <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/GVrjm/uppgerifter-ypg-svenskar-gripna>.

⁴⁸ Schau, O. (2022), *Jesper Söder redo att försvara Ukraina*, *SVT Nyheter*, Available Online: <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/jesper-soder-redo-att-forsvara-ukraina>.

⁴⁹ Kennedy, M. (2022), *Jesper Söder: Bland det jävligaste jag varit med om*, *Göteborgs-Posten*, Available Online: <https://www.gp.se/nyheter/varlden/jesper-soder-bland-det-javligaste-jag- varit-med-om.43f16276-261b-4e74-a3e4-12bfb3431d7>.

⁵⁰ Dahlin, P. (2022), *Svensken: Många frivilliga lämnar efter ryska attacken*, *Omni*, Available Online: <https://omni.se/svensken-manga-frivilliga-lamnar-efter-ryska-attacken/a/QyARXP>.

⁵¹ Anonymous interview, conducted by the author, in person, 19.01.2025.

⁵² Almryd, F. (2022), *Efter bombattacken i Lviv – Jesper Söder hemma i Trollhättan igen*, *Sveriges Radio*, Available Online: <https://www.sverigesradio.se/artikel/efter-bombattacken-i-lviv-jesper-soder-hemma-trollhattanigen>.

⁵³ Regeringskansliet (2022), *Regeringens deklaration den 10 juni 2022*, Available Online: <https://www.regeringen.se/globalassets/regeringen/bilder/utrikesdepartementet/utrikesministern/utrikesdeklarationen-juni-2022.pdf>.

will not recognize Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory. The statement was released shortly after Russia announced its intention to unlawfully annex several Ukrainian regions. Sweden condemned these actions as violations of international law and the UN Charter, a position that was also conveyed to the Russian ambassador⁵⁴. From a legal perspective, an interesting development is that due to the Swedes who volunteered for Ukraine in 2014 and those who traveled to Syria to fight for the Islamic State, Sweden introduced yet another new law between these two events. This law prohibits Swedes from recruiting or being recruited by a foreign power or organization to participate in armed conflict without the Swedish government's approval. It is codified in Swedish law under Chapter 19, Section 12 of the Penal Code (2020:16). From 2020 onward, the penalty for violating this law was considered severe by Swedish standards – up to two years in prison.

At the beginning of the war, discussions arose in the Swedish Parliament about whether this law could negatively impact Swedes wishing to travel to fight for Ukraine. In March 2022, Markus Wiechel of the Sweden Democrats directly questioned Sweden's then-Minister of Defense, Peter Hultqvist, asking whether the law needed to be amended or whether he believed it was problematic that Swedes were volunteering for Ukraine. In their inquiry, the Swedish politicians now referred to these Swedes as "heroes" and emphasized the need to support them in the best possible way. Hultqvist responded that the law did not constitute an obstacle for Swedish individuals who wished to assist Ukraine⁵⁵. This was interpreted as rendering the law highly ambiguous and arbitrary. Questions were raised about whether the law was discriminatory, particularly if it only targeted Muslims traveling to fight for the Islamic State. In response, the so-called "Azov Swedes" from 2014 were cited as an example by the government to demonstrate that the law was not intended to be selectively enforced.

Most importantly for Sweden, some of its first official documents following the outbreak of the war expressed a desire to join NATO and framed Ukraine's self-defense as a defense of other nations' territories – including Sweden's⁵⁶. Thus ending Sweden's 200 yearlong status as a neutral country.

Discussion and Analysis. The contrasting responses to the Ukrainian conflict in 2014 and 2022 reflect significant shifts in Sweden's political and societal landscape. While the 2014 response was shaped by a cautious and often skeptical narrative, particularly regarding Swedish volunteers, the 2022 response demonstrated a more unified and morally driven stance. This shift can be attributed to changes in global geopolitics, domestic political dynamics, and evolving media framing.

Media portrayals in 2014 largely centered on Ukraine's European aspirations, presenting pro-EU demonstrators in a positive light while excluding voices sympathetic to Yanukovich. Russian narratives were acknowledged but not extensively engaged with, except in discussions of internal affairs. However, by 2022, the media's framing had become overwhelmingly pro-Ukrainian, with little space given to Russian perspectives. The war was now framed as a clear-cut invasion, and Sweden's role in supporting Ukraine – both politically and militarily – was extensively covered. Notably, while media narratives in 2014 hesitated to label Swedish volunteers as anything other than foreign fighters, in 2022, those joining Ukraine's defense were often described in more heroic terms, though the presence of far-right elements continued to be a point of contention.

Political responses followed a similar trajectory. In 2014, Sweden expressed strong diplomatic condemnation of Russia's actions but maintained a policy of military non-alignment. By contrast, the full-scale invasion in 2022 prompted Sweden to abandon over 200 years of neutrality and apply for NATO membership. The Swedish government's official statements reflected this shift, emphasizing Ukraine's self-defense as integral to European security and aligning Sweden more explicitly with Western defense structures.

Volunteer experiences also reveal a stark contrast between the two periods. In 2014, Swedish volunteers were met with skepticism from authorities and media, often being conflated with extremist elements. In 2022, while logistical challenges persisted, there was broader political and public support for those who

⁵⁴ Regeringskansliet (2022), *Sverige erkänner inte, och kommer inte att erkänna, Rysslands illegala annekteringar av ukrainskt territorium*, Available Online: <https://www.regeringen.se/uttalanden/2022/09/sverige-erkanner-inte-och-kommer-inte-att-erkanna-rysslands-illegala-annekteringar-av-ukrainskt-territorium/>.

⁵⁵ Sveriges riksdag (2022), *Frivilliga till Ukraina: Skriftlig fråga 2021/22:1232 från Markus Wiechel (SD) till försvarsminister Peter Hultqvist*, Available Online: https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/skriftlig-fraga/frivilliga-till-ukraina_h9111232/.

⁵⁶ Regeringskansliet (2022), *Regeringens deklaration den 10 juni 2022*, Available Online: <https://www.regeringen.se/globalassets/regeringen/bilder/utrikesdepartementet/utrikesministern/utrikesdeklarationen-juni-2022.pdf>.

traveled to fight for Ukraine. However, accounts from volunteers suggest that many were unprepared for the realities of modern warfare, with some returning to Sweden shortly after arriving. Meanwhile, legal uncertainties surrounding Sweden's 2020 law on foreign combatants raised concerns about unequal application, particularly in light of past policies toward individuals who had fought for the Islamic State.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that Sweden's response to Ukraine evolved from diplomatic and cautious in 2014 to politically engaged and militarily committed in 2022. This transformation was shaped by both external and domestic factors, including Sweden's changing security priorities, shifts in public discourse, and growing alignment with Western defense structures. As the conflict continues, Sweden's role in supporting Ukraine is likely to remain a crucial part of its broader strategic and political orientation.

Conclusion. The stark contrast between Sweden's responses to the Ukrainian conflict in 2014 and 2022 highlights a significant evolution in the nation's stance. In 2014, Sweden's approach was marked by skepticism and suspicion, with volunteers traveling to Ukraine often framed in narratives that likened them to extremists traveling to Syria—an effort to demonstrate that even ethnic Swedes could pose a similar threat as violent radicals. By 2022, however, this narrative had shifted dramatically. Volunteers were now framed as defenders of democracy and sovereignty, and Sweden's broader political and security orientation aligned more explicitly with the West.

This transformation was not merely rhetorical. Sweden's move from a policy of neutrality to NATO membership underscores how deeply the full-scale invasion of Ukraine reshaped the nation's strategic priorities. The media's role in framing these events, alongside shifting political discourse, illustrates how Sweden's engagement with international crises is shaped as much by narrative as by policy. What was once a cautious approach defined by diplomatic statements has now turned into active military and political commitment. In many ways, 2022 marked not only a turning point for Sweden's foreign policy but also a redefinition of its role on the global stage.

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КОНТРАСТНІ РЕАКЦІЇ: ПОЛІТИКА І СУСПІЛЬСТВО ШВЕЦІЇ ПІД ЧАС ВІЙНИ РОСІЇ ПРОТИ УКРАЇНИ у 2014 і 2022 рр.

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The reporting on the war in Ukraine has been extensive, both in 2014 and in 2022. Media coverage and the way information is framed shape public perceptions, influence political discourse, and contribute to broader policy responses. Based on this premise, this article employs qualitative content analysis and framing theory to examine how the war in Ukraine has been covered in Swedish newspapers. The aim is to analyze how media narratives have evolved over time and how Swedish political strategies shifted between 2014 and 2022 in response to the conflict. The article addresses the following questions: How has the war in Ukraine been framed by Swedish newspapers in 2022 compared to 2014? Can biases favoring or opposing certain actors be identified, and how do these compare between the two periods? Additionally, how do shifts in media framing reflect broader changes in Swedish political strategies regarding the war? The analysis is based on articles published in 2022 alongside those from 2014, as well as government propositions and firsthand accounts from Swedish volunteers. The findings indicate a strong continuity in media framing, with the majority of articles in both periods focusing on the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West rather than on developments in Ukraine itself. The analysis further reveals that both in 2014 and 2022, media coverage was largely supportive of the Ukrainian side. In 2014, sources primarily highlighted the voices of EuroMaidan demonstrators and opposition figures, while President Yanukovich and his supporters were largely absent from the narrative. Through the use of value-laden language, the European Union, pro-EU demonstrators, and the Ukrainian opposition were portrayed as the "good" side, whereas President Yanukovich, his supporters, and Russia were depicted as the "bad" side. The most striking difference between the two periods lies in the treatment of Swedish volunteers. In 2014, Swedes who joined Ukrainian forces were often framed as extremists or potential national-socialist terrorists, whereas in 2022, Swedish volunteers were hailed as heroes. Additionally, in 2022, new themes such as migration, economic consequences, and the energy crisis became more prominent, reflecting broader political and societal concerns. These shifts in framing align with notable changes in Sweden's political response to the conflict, underscoring an evolving strategic approach in both policy and public discourse.

Key words: Russian-Ukrainian war, Swedish media, Swedish volunteers, public discourse, public policy