

## Chapter 11

# From High Hopes to Mundane Reality

## *Swedish Perspectives on Post-Communist Europe Thirty Years On*

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### INTRODUCTION

The objective of this chapter is to provide a Swedish perspective on the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. This is an intriguing task per se, which cannot be undertaken without first underlining that those years have meant a full-scale transformation of Sweden's role in European politics, as well as of the Swedish national self-image. For years and years after World War II, the Swedish policy of neutrality was an uncompromising dogma on which the country's foreign policy orientation rested. Even if official reports and scholarly research during the post-Cold War years have shown that the policy of neutrality was not very strict but rather leaned heavily to the political West, the neutrality line was an almost sacred official principle to adhere to, and publicly questioning the solidity of this line was a political non-starter. One of the most visible consequences of this practice was for a long time to exclude out of hand the option of Sweden's accession to the EU, or its acronymic predecessor, the European Community, as a fully-fledged member. This, it was often repeated, would have bereft the Swedish policy of neutrality of credibility in the eyes of foreign countries as well as the domestic audience.

The fall of communism in Europe ended all this and provided the preconditions for Sweden abandoning its longstanding policy of neutrality and joining the EU in 1995. Even if a ritual reference to the Swedish "non-participation in military alliances" remains in today's official declarations like the annual Swedish statement of government policy on foreign affairs,<sup>1</sup> little is left of the previously so sacred principle. This is accentuated by the nowadays

frequently reiterated passage that “Sweden will not remain passive if another EU Member State or a Nordic country suffers a disaster or an attack,” and that Sweden expects these other countries to behave in the same way should Sweden become affected. “We must therefore be able to both give and receive support, civilian as well as military,” the passage continues. Referring openly to what was previously undertaken covertly, that is preparing for receiving military support from like-minded countries in the West, is a stark contrast to the clandestine preparations during the Cold War. Whereas the policy of neutrality used to be the mantra and first-priority principle of the Swedish international orientation, EU membership has replaced it as such, albeit complemented with references to collaboration with Nordic and Baltic neighbors.

Like so many other countries of the Western world, Sweden was affected by the euphoria of the time. Francis Fukuyama<sup>2</sup> was the scholarly guru with his message of the end of history and the termination of all ideological conflicts as democracy and market economy had finally won the day. In 1991, the Swedish minister of foreign affairs, Sten Andersson, spoke about “boundless joy” as centuries of wars and distrust were at last to be replaced by an era of peace, freedom, and reconciliation.<sup>3</sup> With the hindsight that thirty years provides, we can conclude that this was not entirely to be.

The primary source material for this chapter has been the official Swedish statements of government policy in general and on foreign affairs specifically, delivered once annually to the Parliament by the prime minister and the minister of foreign affairs, respectively. As mentioned earlier, there is a ritual side to these declarations of policy priorities, and standard formulations are used year after year, which makes them interesting to compare over time. When shifts do occur, they signal a change of official positions.

### **The First Years after the Transformations**

The early 1990s were a tumultuous time, and like so many other countries Sweden seemed to be taken aback. The fundamental changes were regarded as positive, but it took some time for the political leaders to reorient themselves in the new and radically altered world. In the annual statement of Swedish policy in 1990 the Swedish prime minister, the Social Democrat Ingvar Carlsson, said that the popular demands in East and Central Europe for freedom, democracy, and better material living conditions had finally won.<sup>4</sup> A giant transformation was about to take place in these countries, he said, not least in the Soviet Union, and it was the obligation of all West European countries to contribute to their success. He confirmed that a Swedish accession to the EU had become possible because of the changes, and that there was an emerging political consensus in Sweden to make use of the opportunity to apply for membership.

Alongside the optimism about developments in the world, there was thus an awareness of the formidability of the tasks that lay before the reforming countries. The transformation from dictatorship and planned economy to democracy and market economy was going to be both painful and complicated, it was concluded.<sup>5</sup> Sweden was prepared to help through the provision of material and ideational resources. During the first years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the prioritized geographical areas for such assistance were Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the St. Petersburg region of Russia. Sweden was particularly engaged in helping the Baltic countries, first, to achieve independence, and then to bring them into the European processes of integration, while also promoting their development of harmonious relations with Russia.<sup>6</sup>

The new lines of Swedish policy were clearly pursued in the statement of government policy made by the then newly appointed prime minister the Conservative Carl Bildt in 1991. Whereas his Social Democrat predecessor had pointed at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), as the primary actor in forging the new European architecture of cooperation and development, the new government identified the EU as the uncontested key actor. This was a historic opportunity to transform Europe and the world, Bildt said, and Sweden could not afford to abstain from taking part actively in the project.<sup>7</sup> Peace and development could be secured for generations ahead, and Sweden had to give its contribution to the historic moment.

The statement of government policy in 1992 was tainted by pessimism over the new war that had broken out in the middle of Europe, in the country that up to that point had been known as Yugoslavia.<sup>8</sup> In the statement of government policy of 1993, the enthusiasm was also dampened by the developments of internal conflicts in Russia, between the executive power of the president and the parliamentary structure inherited from the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> The overriding policy priority of the Bildt government was still to pursue full Swedish membership in the EU, and thereby to secure for Sweden a place at the core of European integration and cooperation. According to the official statement of policy on foreign affairs, there were two prioritized areas in Swedish policy on Europe: achieving full membership in the EU and developing the relations with the new democracies in CEE.<sup>10</sup>

In 1995, Sweden finally fulfilled its ambitions and joined the EU. From the very beginning, Sweden, in her capacity as a new and enthusiastic member, stood for optimistic outlooks on the future of Europe and the role of the EU in it. The perceived panacea for the structural problems that hampered political and economic progress in the democratizing countries was a continuing and progressive enlargement of the EU, up to the inclusion of every country that was qualified and had an interest to join. This was described as the major

means of promoting political and economic stability<sup>11</sup> and was depicted as key for achieving the goal of common security in Europe.<sup>12</sup> The historic mission of the contemporary times was nothing less than tying together the peoples of Western and Eastern Europe, making wars in Europe unthinkable and strengthening the ideals of democracy. To this end, it was said to be imperative to avoid pitting rich against poor countries in Europe and to set up West Europeans against East Europeans.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, Sweden had only just become a full member when it started to champion the cause of bringing the new democracies of the former Eastern Europe into the EU.<sup>14</sup> Even if the EU was to be open against all prospective members, it was stressed that the new democracies in the former East should be prioritized since they needed every assistance in the dealing with the urgent and formidable task before them. The Swedish government was particularly eager to promote the cause of the accession of the three Baltic countries.<sup>15</sup> There was a slight contradiction in the sense that Sweden officially held that membership negotiations should be taken up with all prospective new members simultaneously. The large-scale enlargement, bringing in ten front-row candidates in 2004 was the highest priority of the Swedish EU presidency of 2001, and the further enlargement issues continued to be high on the agenda also for the Swedish presidency of 2009, at a time when the attention had turned to the Western Balkans as the next likely prospects for membership.

The enlargement of 2004 was described by the Swedish government as an event that opened a new page in European history.<sup>16</sup> This is easily understood as the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Poland all entered at the same time. When the enlargement was implemented, the Swedish minister of foreign affairs, Laila Freivalds, boasted that few if any other EU member-states had pushed for and promoted the processes of EU enlargement as strongly as Sweden had done. In 2007, Minister of Foreign Affairs Bildt argued that every successful enlargement had contributed to making the EU stronger in its promotion of the values of peace, democracy, and freedom in Europe and worldwide.<sup>17</sup> He also held that the enlargements had set an example of peaceful cooperation, which could inspire regions in other parts of the globe. It was, he argued, a strategic commitment on the part of the EU to continue to keep its door open to all prospective members.<sup>18</sup>

Toward the end of the 1990s, the annual statements of government policy indicated that there were also material interests behind the Swedish engagement for the enlargement cause. These were primarily tied to the Baltic Sea region, which was hoped to become one of the areas in Europe where the annual growth figures could be the highest.<sup>19</sup>

This is not to say that there were no official Swedish voices articulating certain misgivings about the fast development. Prior to the Big Bang

enlargement in 2004, considerable attention was stirred by the statement by the Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson, as he warned about “social tourism” in the case of a large-scale enlargement bringing in CEE. He saw migratory pressure from these new member countries as a likely outcome.<sup>20</sup> This would allegedly be prompted by the extensive social welfare security net in Sweden, which was feared to attract a wave of immigration from the new member countries. In the public debate, there were also assertions that the Swedish labor market would be negatively affected by wage competition and that immigration would rise as restrictions on labor migration would be imposed in all, or the majority of, the other EU member-states.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Eastern Partnership**

The year of 2009 marked a special year in Sweden’s relations with the former Soviet republics in Europe, which aspired to, but were not ready for, accession to the EU. This was the year when the Eastern Partnership was established, following an initiative of Poland, which Sweden had been invited to, and accepted to, co-sponsor.

The Eastern Partnership countries were Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. As long as there was only the “waiting room” structure of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) to accommodate the interests of aspiring member countries, it was feared that the six former Soviet republics would be treated no better than the North African prospects who were often given the cold shoulder by the EU. Being part of the ENP structure only would thus have made the possibility of the ultimate accession of the six more remote.<sup>22</sup> The Partnership was therefore set up to enhance further integration with the EU in the areas of legislation, trade, and the movement of people.<sup>23</sup> Areas such as the development of civil society and the implementation of other necessary reforms were to be promoted.<sup>24</sup>

Amid the general optimism about political and economic developments, the main outlier was Belarus. In the years preceding the establishment of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the Minister of Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt had argued that the lack of democracy and civil rights in Belarus marked “a dark spot on the map of Europe.”<sup>25</sup> Some years later, he condemned the “brutal repression” in connection with the presidential elections of 2011, which had meant a “severe setback to the strivings for peace, democracy and freedom in Europe.”<sup>26</sup> Some years after the establishment of the Partnership, Foreign Minister Bildt mentioned Georgia and Moldavia as countries where progress had been made on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. By way of negative contrast, Belarus still manifested gross violations of human rights, and Bildt said that recent developments in Ukraine had meant that also its respect for human rights needed to be questioned.<sup>27</sup>

Issuing a statement on the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the Partnership in 2019, the Swedish minister of foreign affairs, Margot Wallström, labeled it a success. She claimed that the Partnership had transformed the six partnership countries, their relations with the EU and the EU itself. She brought somewhat scant evidence to the table in her argument, even if she rightly pointed out that the establishment had meant a shift of outlook on the six states, away from a post-Soviet to a European frame of reference. As priorities for the future she identified the need to build a community on shared values, bring tangible benefits to the peoples, and allow for the development of societies and economies at different speeds.<sup>28</sup> Here, the attentive reader could detect a message between the lines. The development of a common mindset on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law had been found wanting in the six countries, and public opinion in the EU and the EaP countries had not been overwhelmed by the success of the partnership. The Swedish minister underlined that the common values on which the EU was built were under pressure globally and even inside the EU itself. Whereas the Eastern Partnership had ever since its inception been lauded as a structure, which held strategic promises for Sweden, it was now recognized to harbor substantial tensions and challenges.

### **Illiberal Democracies**

When analyzing the evolving views of official Sweden on developments in post-communist countries of Europe since 1990, the issue of illiberalism growing inside the EU itself needs to be dealt with. Even if explicit mentions have so far been shunned in the official annual statements of Swedish policy, concern has been voiced repeatedly about developments in two of the countries that entered the EU in the Big Bang enlargement in 2004, namely Hungary and Poland.

In Hungary, the populist leader, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, came to power after the national elections in 2010, at the head of a coalition government led by his national conservative party Fidesz. After the elections, his government could rely on a two-thirds majority in Parliament, which made it possible to amend the constitution. Several restrictive changes to judicial independence have since occurred, and the freedom of the press has been curtailed in pace with increases in state political control and constitutional amendments. Laws have been enacted that make the disparaging of national symbols a crime punishable with imprisonment. Academic freedom has been curtailed, as shown by the case of the Central European University, which has had to move part of its activities from Budapest to Vienna.<sup>29</sup> In Poland, the parliamentary elections in 2015 brought the national conservative party Law and Justice, endorsed by the party chairman Jarosław Kaczyński, to power

with the backing of an absolute majority in Parliament. Early on after its election win, the new government took measures to restrain the independence of the judiciary and to restrict the independence of the media.<sup>30</sup> The EU institutions, the European Parliament and the European Commission, have tried to initiate internal sanction mechanisms to bring both countries back in line with prevailing EU norms on democracy, human rights and the rule of law, so far to no avail.<sup>31</sup>

It was therefore quite clear which EU states the Swedish minister of foreign affairs, Margot Wallström, had in mind when she in 2016 remarked that the EU needed to stand up for common values and principles to promote peace and well-being. In the strained circumstances that prevailed in Europe since the so-called migration crisis of 2015, a situation where certain states invested in blankets, whereas others spent their resources on barbed wire was untenable, she stressed.<sup>32</sup> A couple of years later, the tone had sharpened, even if there was still no explicit naming and shaming of Hungary and Poland. As an active member of the EU, Sweden was concerned about “the growing intolerance and declining respect for the rule of law in some member-states,” Wallström underlined.<sup>33</sup> In the year after she cautioned in a way that almost seemed resigned that it could no longer be taken for granted that all EU member-states believed in the values that the European cooperation rested upon.<sup>34</sup> Wallström’s successor as minister of foreign affairs, Ann Linde, remarked a year later that the rule of law and the respect for the fundamental values of the EU had for some years been undermined in certain member-states, and that Sweden, together with the Commission and other member-states, was taking steps to react against this development.<sup>35</sup>

From the new formulations in the official Swedish statements of policy on foreign affairs, it seemed as if the negative developments inside the EU had finally prompted Sweden, the longtime champion of continuous processes of enlargement, to slacken its enthusiasm. A cursory observation that the prospect of EU membership had to remain there for the candidate countries of Western Balkans was made, but it was brief and perfunctory and had the added caveat that continued reforms were still needed.<sup>36</sup>

Of the two so-called illiberal countries of the EU it is clearly Hungary which has had the most inflamed bilateral relations with Sweden during recent years. In 2016, Hungary unilaterally refused to accept asylum-seekers from the outside, regardless of whether Hungary was the first country in the EU in which they had applied for asylum. This was seen by the Swedish government as disregard of the country’s obligations under the EU Dublin Regulation and a signal that cooperation in accordance with agreements made within the EU was not a priority for the country. The Swedish government protested vigorously, holding that the attitude was unacceptable and risked

undermining the spirit of solidarity, which was a precondition for a well-functioning EU.<sup>37</sup>

Over the past few years, there have been several other irritated verbal exchanges between Sweden and Hungary over migration policy and other matters. The then Swedish minister of foreign affairs, Margot Wallström, claimed that Hungary was part of an alliance against democracy in present-day Europe, which made her Hungarian colleague discard the statement as “a lie,” and retort that “pro-migration Sweden had launched a new attack against Hungary.”<sup>38</sup> Another dispute took place in 2019 when the then-minister of social affairs, Annika Strandhäll, wrote a critical tweet about Hungary’s proposed family policy, according to which Hungarian women who gave birth to four children or more would be granted a life-long exemption from income tax. Strandhäll tweeted that the policy was “alarming,” that its objective was to see to it that more “genuinely Hungarian” babies were born and that the policy “reeked of the 1930s.”<sup>39</sup> This provoked the Hungarian deputy prime minister to label the Swedish minister “a poor sick creature” and prompted the Hungarian foreign minister to summon the Swedish Ambassador to inform that the remarks by the Swedish cabinet member were “unacceptable.”<sup>40</sup>

The development away from liberal democracy in Hungary was further accentuated during the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020. In connection with this, Prime Minister Orbán secured for his government the right to exercise exceptional powers and rule by decree unless the Parliament overruled the action with a two-thirds majority vote. Persons found to have committed the crime of spreading “fake news” related to the virus, including criticism of the government’s handling of the matter, could be convicted to several years of imprisonment. Originally, there was no outer limit in time for these exceptional powers. Together with the other Nordic countries the Swedish minister of foreign affairs, Ann Linde, in April 2020 addressed a letter to the secretary general of the Council of Europe, expressing concern over the developments in Hungary. This led to caustic remarks by the Hungarian foreign minister, who accused his Nordic colleagues of spreading lies about dictatorship-in-the-making and labeled their intervention as “pathetic” and “hypocritical.”<sup>41</sup>

## EU Migrants—and Contrasting Success Stories

There was another issue that dampened the Swedish enthusiasm about developments in the newest EU member-states from the 2010s onward. This was the matter of the so-called EU migrants, which was a euphemism applied to migrants of Roma origin, coming primarily from Romania and Bulgaria, who had both joined the EU in 2007. These people were coming to Sweden attempting to improve their economic and social lots, thereby also trying to



flee the discrimination that they were subjected to at home.<sup>42</sup> The sight of panhandlers outside of major shopping malls, grocery shops, and liquor stores became a familiar sight in Sweden, which had hardly experienced any open manifestations of begging for several decades. Now, according to official estimates, some 5,000 of these so-called EU migrants had found their way to Sweden, provoking a vivid national debate, and visibly strengthening the hand of the populist and anti-immigrant party, the Sweden Democrats.

In sum, there seemed to be few success stories among the former communist states of Europe, and the Swedish public debate was seldom about those that were indeed there to be discerned. The Baltic countries could however be regarded as the clearest counter cases. When going through the annual official statements of policy offered by the Swedish government, references to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were from the beginning of the 1990s ever present in a ritual form to mark that Sweden felt especially committed to supporting their processes of societal transformation. Then, toward the latter half of the period studied in this chapter, the Baltic countries were mentioned as regular partners alongside Sweden's Nordic neighbors, and so the practice has continued ever since. The full conversion of the Baltic neighboring countries into mature democracies has been so successful as to be taken for granted and most often not pointed out explicitly anymore.

## **Relations to Russia**

Swedish perceptions of developments of the former Communist East cannot be discussed without devoting substantial attention to perspectives on Russia, even if the latter is formally outside the scope of this volume. Just like the membership in the EU and the actual abolishment of the Swedish policy of neutrality have fundamentally affected official Swedish views on developments in Eastern Europe, relations with Russia have constituted another basic determinant to be considered.

The political trajectory which Russia demonstrated during the post-Cold War period, together with the path taken by Belarus, have been the general exceptions regarding the Swedish optimism that Eastern Europe was generally heading toward democracy.<sup>43</sup> Even if statements in the early 1990s were basically optimistic and eager to underline the desire to embed Russia in multilateral cooperation in the Baltic Sea region, not least regarding environmental security, Swedish representatives almost always added caveats, be they motivated by uncertain economic conditions, conflict between the executive and legislative branch of Russian government, war and human rights infringement in Chechnya, or a verbally signaled new assertiveness in relation to the former Soviet republics, or what was in Russian parlance being called the "Near Abroad."

Overall, there was an apparent awareness that the situation in Russia was volatile and that civil and social unrest or authoritarian developments could easily lead to a precarious security situation affecting Sweden, as well as the other Nordic countries negatively.<sup>44</sup> To forestall such developments, it was made a priority in Sweden's relations to involve Russia as much as possible in the processes of all-European cooperation.<sup>45</sup> Just as in the case of other reforming countries in the geographical proximity, Sweden was prepared to support the transformations into democracy and market economy in Russia financially. The bottom line was that there opened a window of opportunity in the 1990s to achieve qualitatively better relations with Russia: there was a chance at last for Sweden to develop "normal relations" with the big neighbor.<sup>46</sup>

It basically went on this way for almost two decades: at bottom officials expressed hopes about developments in Russia and prospects for mutually beneficial cooperation, but at the same time severe concerns about bumps on that road were raised.<sup>47</sup> In the annual statement of Swedish policy on foreign affairs of 2007, the Swedish government was explicit in underlining its concern about authoritarian developments in Russian domestic politics, pointing at infringements of domestic human rights, such as the unsolved murders of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya and dissident Alexander Litvinenko.<sup>48</sup>

The brief Russo-Georgian war in 2008 was a turning point to the worse. The outcome of the war was an overwhelming Russian victory, with Russia transgressing deep into Georgian territory, and establishing a military presence in the two Georgian autonomous republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which it also chose to recognize as sovereign states. The tone in the Swedish statement of government policy on foreign affairs of that year was sharp. The statement had already the year before said that it was in Sweden's best interest that Russia developed into a "modern, successful and democratic state," but that authoritarian tendencies of development unfortunately pointed in an opposite direction.<sup>49</sup> The Russian warfare in 2008 was criticized as an armed attack not only against Georgia, which had become subjected to an unacceptable violation of its territorial integrity; it was also seen as an attack on the international legal order in general.<sup>50</sup>

What finally made the Swedish government shelve its optimism about developments in Russia, and indeed Europe generally, was the Russian annexation of Crimea and its involvement in the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014.<sup>51</sup> The stated Russian reasons for the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation, that this was a legitimate move only accommodating the results of the referendum in Crimea, failed to impress the Swedish authorities. Instead the annexation was interpreted as a sign of the Russian disregard of international law and its disrespect for the inviolability of recognized international borders. On these grounds, Sweden supported

the sanctions implemented by the EU against Russia. The Russian aggression against Ukraine constituted the biggest challenge to European peace and security since the Cold War, the Swedish government held.<sup>52</sup> On one occasion, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström blamed Russia for causing more than 10,000 deaths in the conflict in eastern Ukraine.<sup>53</sup> It was made patently clear by the Swedish government that it saw Russia as the greatest source of insecurity in Europe. “Russia’s behaviour, when manifested in military action, disinformation and influence operations, remains aggressive and increases tensions,” Wallström concluded in 2017. As for Ukraine, she went on to say, Sweden supported the country’s reform efforts and was standing up for its sovereignty and territorial integrity under international law, as well as its moving closer to the EU.<sup>54</sup>

The turn of tides in relation to Russia and the general perspective on a worsening security situation in Europe was vividly illustrated by the developments in Sweden’s defense. In the early 2000s, it was stated in the official statements of government that the threat of military attacks, which Sweden used to fear during the Cold War had practically vanished, and hence it was imperative to prioritize defense against other security threats more relevant in the prevailing circumstances, such as terrorism and international crime.<sup>55</sup> In the coming years, it was also expressed as a priority for Sweden to participate in peacekeeping missions abroad.<sup>56</sup> As late as in the government declaration of 2007, the necessity of a transition away from defense against military invasions and to defense through committed engagement abroad was pointed out.<sup>57</sup>

However, the chill of the international political climate brought about by Russian actions in 2008 and 2014 prompted an abrupt change. From 2015 onward, the need was stressed to invest in renewed military restoration.<sup>58</sup> The pendulum had swung back and done so hard. This was also reflected in Swedish public opinion. Whereas in 1990 more than 50 percent of the respondents to the annual SOM survey believed it to be a good idea to reduce Swedish defense spending, and only less than 25 percent thought it to be a bad idea, the figures were reversed in 2019 with 18 percent and 44 percent, respectively.<sup>59</sup>

Tellingly enough, general military conscription was reintroduced in Sweden in 2017 after having been abolished in peacetime since 2009.<sup>60</sup> In contrast to what used to be the case during the Cold War, the obligation to attend tests to determine eligibility for conscription applied to both young men and women, even if the numbers of those undergoing conscription were still limited in comparison.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, at the same time, there were the indicative matters of the reestablishment of a military garrison on the Baltic island of Gotland, and the general increase of the defense budget up to a sum of 10.2 billion SEK (about

1 billion euro) for the period of 2016–2020.<sup>62</sup> The rough equivalent of 100 million euro was invested in the rebuilding of military defense on Gotland. The reestablishment had signal value, both externally, in relation to the supposedly supportive NATO countries and the presumably hostile Russia, and internally, to the Swedish public opinion. It indicated that Sweden no longer had any illusions about the world developing in an ever more peaceful direction, as it had done only a decade before.

In May 2016, the Swedish Parliament voted, with 291 votes in favor and 21 votes against, to accept a host-land agreement with NATO, according to which Sweden may host NATO exercises facilitating the reception of military support from the outside in case of armed conflict.<sup>63</sup> Several large-scale military exercises have in recent years been held together with NATO. One aspect of the joint exercises has been to practice the Swedish ability “to give and receive support from foreign units.”<sup>64</sup> The Swedish drawing closer to NATO did not pass unnoticed by the Russian political leadership. The Minister for Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov stated in 2016 that Russia would consider a military response to a potential Swedish entry into NATO, whereas president Vladimir Putin cautioned that Russia in such a case would “be obliged to undertake something because we see this as an additional threat to Russia.”<sup>65</sup> When it came to bilateral Swedish-Russian relations, the chill seemed as deep as it had been during the Cold War. In that sense, the relations had come full circle since the early 1990s.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the end of 2016, the Swedish government submitted an official communication to the Riksdag (the Parliament) about its ambitions and priorities in the fields of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.<sup>66</sup> The government also listed an inventory of problems to be concerned about in present-day Europe. As of today, it was said, democracy had suffered a backlash in countries politically and geographically close to Sweden. Hungary and Poland were both mentioned explicitly as prime examples. In several fields, they had failed to uphold the principles of the rule of law and of international human rights conventions. Likewise, it was pointed out, discrimination against Roma continued in many EU member-states, and anti-democratic forces grew in strength all over Europe. Particularly worrisome was Russia’s “repressive policy and influence,” especially regarding its illegal annexation of Crimea, its “destructive actions” in eastern Ukraine, and its “propaganda and disinformation” directed inward as well as against other countries.

The most evident contrast when comparing Sweden in 1990 and 2020 was that the country was now a committed, even if also somewhat disillusioned, member of the EU. Little remained of the so-called policy of neutrality that had been so cherished during the times of the Cold War. The euphoria of the early 1990s, those brief years when everything seemed possible, was clearly gone. The years when Sweden had been a relentless champion promoting enlargements of the EU as the standard recipe for ensuring peace and democracy in Europe had come and then waned considerably. The European Partnership had largely brought disappointing results. Whereas optimism about general developments used to be almost unbridled in official Sweden by the end of the Cold War, disillusionment seemed to reign ever since the mid-2010s, when moves toward illiberal democracy, populism, and Russian violations of international law defined much of the order of the day in Europe. Gray and somber realities characterized for the most part the everyday, and it was left to the Swedish government to deal with this in its practical policies.

## NOTES

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