



# Nordic neighbors in pandemic crisis: the communication battle between Sweden and Norway

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## Abstract

This essay is focusing how the strategic communication about the COVID-19 pandemic created tensions between Sweden and Norway, nations that from an outside view are very much alike when it comes to political, economic and cultural aspects. Both countries, together with Denmark, Finland, and Iceland, belong to the Nordic region, with a common history, plenty of collaboration forms and high levels of trade exchange, as well as a common high level of trust in society and governments. In the essay secondary data (news media content and national statistics) is used to describe and analyze how the communication battle between Norway and Sweden developed. It is concluded that it is possible to see the handling of the pandemic, and the strategic communication about this, as part of a grand and negative narrative about Sweden's societal development since the 1990s. Sweden has in some aspects become a negative international projection surface for many countries. From a public diplomacy approach the pandemic led to constant international comparisons, providing states both risks and opportunities. Drawing comparisons between states risks alienating certain publics, opens one to attacks from other countries and may harm a nation's image.

**Keywords** Strategic communication · COVID-19 · Public diplomacy · Crisis management

## Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis triggered a wave of international comparisons and intense media coverage across national borders. Anxious citizens wanted to know why some countries failed, while others succeeded and national decision makers were continually criticized based on data and assessments from other countries. The larger question is whether these international comparisons improved or aggravated the relationships between countries? This case study focuses on how the mediated communication of the COVID-19 pandemic created tensions between Sweden and Norway, nations that from an outside view are very much alike. Although it is too early to make reliable conclusions about the specific effects

on public diplomacy, this bilateral relationship is a useful lens for observing potential unintended consequences of the handling of the pandemic.

We use examples from news media content and national statistics to describe and analyze how the communication battle between Norway and Sweden developed. The emphasis is mainly on national public health officials' mediated communication where comparisons are made between the two nations and the debate that arose in national news media. In the essay we reflect upon if the pandemic, defined as a "creeping crisis" (Boin et al. 2020), made old friends enemies or if it was only a temporary quarrel between spouses? We also, based on our qualitative case, reflect upon the COVID-19's consequences for public diplomacy in Nordic context.

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## The same but different

Sweden and Norway are in many ways similar countries. The border between the two countries is the longest land border in Europe. Norway and Sweden share a common history, in many ways also culture, are major trading partners and



are usually aligned when it comes to foreign policy. Still, there are some institutional political differences (Norway is a member of NATO, while Sweden is a member of EU) as well as other cultural, social and economic distinctions. But if one compares to differences between other European countries, these differences are minor. This makes it even more interesting to analyze why the COVID-19 crisis created increased negative tensions between opinions in the two countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a complex crisis phenomenon to define. It may be defined as a “slow-burning crisis” (t’Hart and Boin 2001) which, contrary to the fast-burning-crisis, evolves gradually over time. But crisis scholars Boin et al. (2020) mean that the COVID-19 pandemic is a new form of crisis, a “creeping crisis” that is defined as a threat to widely shared societal values or life-sustaining systems that evolves over time and space, is foreshadowed by precursor events, subject to varying degrees of political and/or societal attention, and impartially or insufficiently addressed by authorities. Analyzing the COVID-19 pandemic as a creeping crisis is relevant from a public diplomacy perspective, since the tensions or conflicts may be connected to the challenges that arise when trying to manage such a crisis. The unclear evolution of the pandemic creates space for different interpretations and, as an effect, differing political, health and administrative decisions. These decisions—lockdowns or not, facemasks or not, quarantine or not, other restrictions or not—are at the center of the debate between Norway and Sweden.

## The Covid communication battle

The Nordic region is often seen as an integrated region that tends to meet international challenges with similar approaches. Furthermore, Sweden has been seen as the epitome of “Nordicness” and has had the strongest national brand among the Nordic countries (Brommesson 2018). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic Sweden went their own way. While countries like Norway, Denmark and Finland committed to lockdown with closed borders and mandatory regulations, the Swedish government insisted on a more relaxed approach with voluntary regulations and decided to keep the society more open (Simons 2020).

Initially, this strategy was communicated quite aggressively by Swedish authorities. The two strongest advocates for the Swedish strategy were state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell at the Swedish Public Health Agency, and the former state epidemiologist and now consultant, Johan Giesecke. In March 2020, Giesecke told a Norwegian newspaper that “the others are doing it wrong. We take into account the scientific evidence. Norway and Denmark have a more political leadership that will show strength and implement measures”

(Mogen 2020). Thus, Sweden framed itself as the epitome of rationality in a world of politicians in panic. The Swedish government clearly saw the opportunity for a public diplomacy win and some even argued that Sweden should brand itself “smart Sweden” or “kind Sweden”, the nation immune from the hysteria of other countries (Simons 2020).

In neighboring Norway, the Swedish strategy raised considerable debate and the media coverage was massive and mostly critical (see media analysis reports at [www.si.se](http://www.si.se)). The high-flying rhetoric from Tegnell and Giesecke pressured Norwegian health experts into a comparative debate they clearly were hesitant to participate in. In May 2020, Norway’s state epidemiologist, Frode Forland, told a Swedish newspaper that Giesecke and Tegnell should be more “humble” and that Norway had done better in protecting the older population against the virus (Falkirk 2020). In the aftermath of the interview Tegnell admitted in internal emails obtained by the Swedish newspaper Expressen, that he felt “betrayed” by Forland (Røyne 2021).

However, by June 2020 Sweden had clearly lost control of the framing of their public diplomacy efforts. As the death toll in Sweden far surpassed the other Nordic countries, Sweden was met with intense negative media coverage and in Norway the Swedish approach was presented as a major failure (Andersson and Aylott 2020; Simons 2020). The ridicule of Sweden in Norwegian newspapers was so intense that in Aftenposten in June 2021 a journalist asked: “Soon the world will spin. The borders open. But will the Swedes ever forgive a neighbor who stood on the sidelines and triumphed while their death toll rose?” (Nipen 2021).

## Why did Sweden diverge?

It seems clear that Sweden’s international reputation has taken a blow from its handling of the pandemic, but it is still too early to say anything about its long-term effects. The confident Swedish rhetoric and its backlash raises many questions about why Sweden deviated from both Norway and the other Nordic countries. We will suggest that the role of experts in policy-making, the role of dissenting voices and the hesitancy in instruct the population in what to do separates Norway and Sweden in the handling of the pandemic.

During the first phase of the pandemic, Sweden had an extreme reliance on narrow expertise and a clear tendency of a rally-around-the flag-effect among the public opinion in Sweden, an effect that decreased later in 2020 and was replaced with a more critical debate (Johansson et al. 2021). In Norway, experts openly quarreled about the correct strategy from the start and Norwegian health authorities were open about the insecurity of their assessments. Thus, in Norway about 80% of the population have said they trust the Norwegian Institute of Public Health throughout



the pandemic, while in Sweden trust in the Swedish Public Health Agency decreased from 75% in March 2020 to 57% in February 2020 (Ihlen 2021). Furthermore, in Norway politicians and not bureaucrats were clearly in charge of the response and accountable for its results, while Swedish politicians to a large degree delegated authority to Anders Tegnell and the Swedish Public Health Agency (Andersson and Aylott 2020).

A possible assumption, which, however, requires more empirical evidence, is that this is an example of a larger Swedish deviation from the Nordic model where Sweden has weaker political leadership combined with less tolerance for dissenting voices (Andersson and Aylott 2020). In a commentary in the Guardian in May 2020 Sweden was characterized as “an authoritarian technocracy intolerant of opinions and individuals that don’t fit in” (Cohen 2020). It is interesting to note that the quarrel with Norway fits into a larger picture where Norway and Sweden have reacted differently to the debate on both right-wing populism and immigration (Heinze 2017). The same deviation from the Nordic norm was evident during the refugee crisis in 2015, where Sweden held their borders open longer at the same time as they criticized other Nordic countries for being small-minded and intolerant (Andersson and Aylott 2020; Pamment et al. 2017).

## Concluding discussion

In this essay the focus is how the COVID-19 pandemic has stressed the relationship between Norway and Sweden, but the same pattern can be seen in the relationship between Sweden and the other Nordic countries. As mentioned before Norway and Sweden are very much alike. But if we place the pandemic in a larger Nordic context, it is obvious that Sweden is the deviation to which others react.

If we then broaden the perspective, it is possible to see the handling of the pandemic, and the strategic communication about this, as part of a grand narrative about Sweden's societal development since the 1990s. Sweden has in some aspects become a negative international projection surface for many countries (not infrequently with clear political purposes), where the handling of the pandemic is only seen as another example of lax control of society. Right or wrong, it is in the eye of the beholder.

From a public diplomacy perspective the COVID-19 pandemic is novel and interesting in that it led to constant international comparisons, providing states both risks and opportunities. Flouting one's pandemic management achievements can help bolster a nation's image, but drawing comparisons between states risks alienating certain publics, opens one to attacks from other countries and may actually harm a nation's image.

Lastly, the pandemic highlights the problem of evaluating crisis management and public policies in general (Boin et al. 2021; t'Hart and Compton 2019). For when does a crisis start and end? Should we study crisis management as a snap-shot or wait for the full movie? How aware are governmental actors of the potential public diplomacy effects of crisis management? One of the major arguments of the Swedish former state epidemiologist Johan Giesecke, was that the Swedish Covid-strategy would work much better in the long term even though the short-term costs were higher with regards to death rates and the number of infected. Thus, the last word in the comparative Covid-battle between Norway and Sweden has not yet been said.

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