

Gotland



# Disinformation in Sweden

**NATIONS INVOLVED:** Sweden; Russian Federation

**TIME PERIOD:** June – July 2015

**THEMATIC AREA:** Media

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 2015, a Swedish government proposition for a new National Defence Policy 2016-2020 triggered a nation-wide debate about rebuilding Sweden's "total defence" capacity and the remilitarisation of the strategically important island of Gotland. During this domestic debate, a report by a US think tank also stimulated pro-NATO narratives, alleging that Sweden was not able to defend itself against a qualified opponent without NATO support.

Joining the debate, *Sputnik* published an English-language news article which directly accused Sweden of preparing to fire missiles from Gotland Island. The article used statements from the Governor of Gotland and a well-known military commentator, but removed context, and mistranslated and distorted their remarks. *Sputnik* did not quote the original source, but instead referred to third-party sources in different languages. This *Sputnik* article provides a typical example of the systematic means by which Swedish domestic media debates are used as part of wider influence strategies by pro-Russian actors.

## KEY POINTS

- The **laundering of information** describes the technique of taking genuine sources and "laundering" them through intermediaries to obscure their origins. Typical techniques include the deliberate **mistranslation of key statements and the removal of context**.
- Through **framing and agenda setting**, single incidents of disinformation can be used to influence a country's public debate about national security and should be understood within the longer-term development of strategic narratives.
- In this case, officials repeated a number of lines that – in the context of systematic disinformation activities and active measures – were **open to abuse by hostile actors**. Minor changes to original quotes are enough to crucially alter their meaning. This underlines the need for training to improve understanding of media and information-based threats.
- Misquoting is commonplace in news media. In this particular case, however, it is highly likely that the distortion of the original source was not a product of editorial process, but a **deliberate** attempt to deceive and part of a **systematic effort to further polarise** Swedish debates on national security.

# SUMMARY

In July 2015, the Russian media organisation *Sputnik* published an article titled “Sweden Getting Ready to Fire Missiles at Russian Troops from Gotland Island.” This article provides a typical example of the means by which Swedish domestic media debates are used as part of wider influence strategies by pro-Kremlin actors, and should be considered against a backdrop of hostile influence including: veiled threats about Swedish NATO membership; the dissemination of forged letters from politicians and business leaders; the falsification of debate articles aimed to mobilise and provoke; the use of bots and harassment on social media and the more general support of Swedish actors with interests that coincide with preferred Russian narratives.

The article analysed here falsely cited Governor of Gotland Cecilia Schelin Seidegård and military commentator Peter Mattsson, suggesting that Sweden was intending to attack Russia, and that the US was spreading disinformation in Sweden about Russia’s military capabilities. This study analyses

- 1) the broader context of Russian disinformation in Sweden,
- 2) the events and debates that shaped the main narratives around Swedish NATO membership and Gotland’s re-militarisation, and
- 3) the techniques by which debates and public statements were laundered by Russian news sources to suit *Sputnik’s* narrative. Although *Sputnik’s* low readership figures mean that limited effects can be determined, this case study unpacks the ways in which disinformation can be used to influence a country’s debates about national security.



Gotland is a 176km long Swedish island in the Baltic Sea with a population of around 60,000.

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**Sweden Getting Ready to Fire Missiles at Russian Troops From Gotland Island**

MILITARY & INTELLIGENCE 14:42 16.07.2015 (updated 14:45 16.07.2015) Get short URL 72 36 91

**Sweden keeps flexing its military muscle due to imaginary Russian aggression, Regnum news agency reported.**

The island of Gotland could be used as a key place to shoot from at invading Russian troops, if Russia were ever to decide to take over the Baltics, Governor of Gotland Cecilia Schelin-Seidegard said, according to [Regnum](#).

According to the Governor, for the longest time Gotland was the weakest link in Swedish defense, but now it will change as the Swedish government has decided to strengthen the island's defense capabilities.

Schelin-Seidegard seriously believes that Russia's looking to invade the Baltics and then threaten Sweden. She's eager to fight the Russians and believes her island could play a strategically important role.

*"From Gotland we could, for example, fire missiles [at Russians] and cover our ships sailing towards St. Petersburg," Schelin-Seidegard said.*



© AP PHOTO /

**US Uses 'Russian Threat' to Sell NATO Membership to Sweden - Swedish Expert**

Schelin-Seidegard clearly got up on the wrong side of her bed. Russia has never had an interest in "invading Baltic nations or Scandinavia," as everyone out there seems to believe. Peter Mattsson, a researcher at the Swedish National Defense College, said the United States deliberately spreads rumors about Russian aggression trying to convince Sweden and other Baltic nations that they are vulnerable without US troops in the region.

US military analysts cite Russian military drills and maneuvers to scare Europeans that the moves are designed to rehearse the impending "invasion" of the Scandinavian Islands and other territories in the Baltic region.

The fact of the matter is that Russia is doing what every nation on Earth is doing — training its own troops in its own territory. One could make similar unfounded speculations every time the United States conducts military drills. Is the recent Jade Helm 15 military drill a rehearsal to take over Mexico then?

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Screenshot of the Sputnik article published on 16 July 2015. The photo used is of decommissioned missiles at a military museum.

# Timeline of Key Events

2015

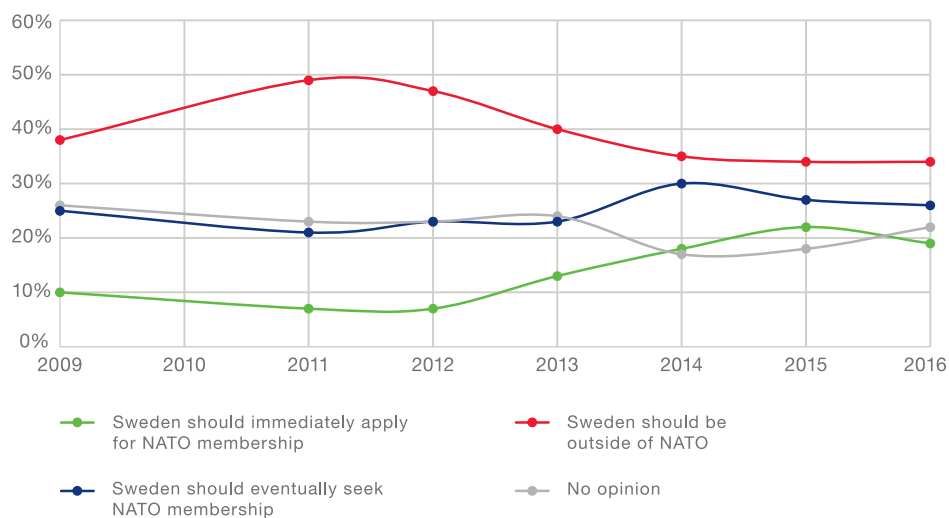


# CONTEXT

## Sweden and NATO

Although Sweden is not a NATO member, it actively cooperates in peace and security operations and exercises with NATO and NATO nations around the world. Discussions about formal membership regularly resurface and are heavily polarised in public debates. In 2014, public support for membership has increased to almost 50 per cent (see graph),<sup>1</sup> likely in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and support of separatists in Eastern Ukraine, security questions have become a priority, with Gotland representing a major point of contention.

Poll: Do you think Sweden should apply for membership in NATO or should we stay outside of NATO? (2016)



## Strategic Relevance of Gotland

Gotland occupies a strategically important location: shipping lanes from St. Petersburg, Helsinki, Tallinn, Riga, and Stockholm pass Gotland on their way to Copenhagen and the North Sea. Parts of Gotland were military zones during the Cold War, but this status was rescinded during the 1990s with permanent troops eventually standing down in 2005 until June 2015 when the Swedish government announced that a permanent battle group would be based at Gotland beginning in 2018, re-militarising Gotland and providing the foundation for the debates discussed here.

<sup>1</sup> Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, "Opinioner 2016: Allmänhetens syn på samhällsskydd, beredskap, säkerhetspolitik och försvar," 2016, <https://www.msb.se/RibData/Filer/pdf/28219.pdf>

## Sputnik

*Sputnik* is a media organisation which describes itself as a ‘news agency.’ It was established in 2014 by the Russian government-controlled news agency *Rossiia Segodnya*, and operates in over 30 languages.<sup>2</sup> According to the presidential decree which established its parent company, *Sputnik*’s purpose is “to provide information on Russian state policy and Russian life and society for audiences abroad.”<sup>3</sup> *Sputnik* is widely considered to be a major source of fake news and systematic disinformation.<sup>4</sup>

The Swedish language site was launched in April 2015 and closed in March 2016, with traffic redirected to the main English site. While active, the site published 400-500 articles per month; readership figures are not available but are believed to be low. For example, the Twitter handle @Sputnik\_se records 3,842 tweets between December 2014 and March 2016, and just 359 followers. A study of 4,000 articles on the Swedish site during 2015 found that the most common themes were ‘Crisis in the West’ (705 articles), ‘Positive image of Russia’ (643) and ‘Western aggressiveness’ (499); however, it should be noted that Sweden was only the 7th most mentioned country, which suggests that it was not a priority, that resources were too low to cover the domestic sphere, and/or that facilitating foreign news through its particular lens was an objective of the channel.<sup>5</sup> A recent study of articles on the English language site suggests that the top four topics in relation to Sweden have been international relations, migration, defence, and criminality.<sup>6</sup> Stories are often re-writes of existing material from major bureaus and other national news outlets, with alternative narratives drawn from right-wing sources.<sup>7</sup>

## “Sweden Getting Ready to Bomb Russia” – Sputnik Article

**16 June 2015** – The Swedish parliament approves proposition 2014/15:109 with a majority of 75 per cent. The proposition covers Swedish defence policy 2016–2020, and outlines a series of measures aimed to strengthen Sweden’s defence – alongside political, diplomatic and economic tools under the rubric “total defence” – against a perceived threat from Russia.

**24 June 2015** – The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) releases “The Coming Storm: Baltic Sea Security Report.”<sup>8</sup> The report claims that a Russian exercise on 21–25 March 2015, involving 33,000 troops, involved a scenario for “the speedy seizure” of several Nordic territories, including Gotland.

**25 June 2015** – The CEPA report stimulates nationwide debate in Sweden. An article in national broadsheet *Swedish Daily* (SvD) includes comments from security analysts including Peter Mattsson of the Swed-

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<sup>2</sup> “About Us,” *Sputnik News*, accessed 5 February 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/docs/about/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> “Executive Order on Measures to Make State Media More Effective,” *Kremlin.ru*, 9 December 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/19805>

<sup>4</sup> Ben Nimmo, “Blowing the Whistle On Sputnik,” *Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab*, 31 May 2017, <https://medium.com/dfriab/blowing-the-whistle-on-sputnik-493e0bc26e99>; Neil MacFarquhar, “A Powerful Russian Weapon: The Spread of False Stories,” *The New York Times*, 28 August 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/world/europe/russia-sweden-disinformation.html>

<sup>5</sup> Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg, “Russia’s Strategy for Influence through Public Diplomacy and Active Measures: the Swedish Case,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 6 (2017).

<sup>6</sup> Svante Nygren, *Sverige i Sputnik News – en kvantitativ studie av ryska byrånyheter på nätet* (Gothenburg: Göteborgs Universitet - JMG, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg, “Russia’s Strategy for Influence through Public Diplomacy and Active Measures: the Swedish Case,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 6 (2017).

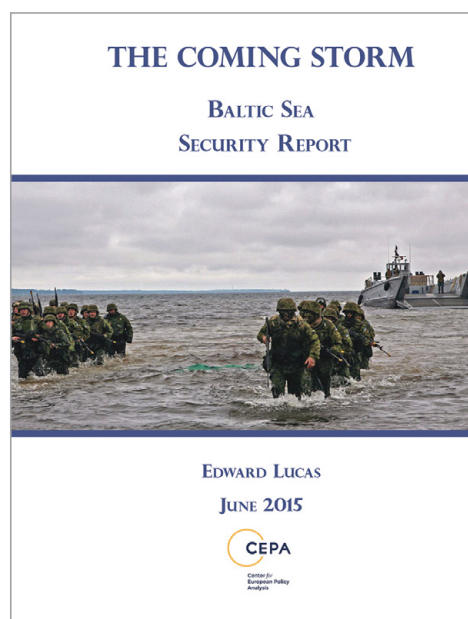
<sup>8</sup> Edward Lucas, *The Coming Storm: Baltic Sea Security Report* (Washington, D.C.: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2015), [http://cepa.org/sites/default/files/styles/medium/Baltic%20Sea%20Security%20Report-%20\(2\).compressed.pdf](http://cepa.org/sites/default/files/styles/medium/Baltic%20Sea%20Security%20Report-%20(2).compressed.pdf)

ish Defence University confirming both the exercise and the strategic vulnerabilities Sweden faces with Gotland.<sup>9</sup> Military representatives declined to be interviewed. In a second SvD article, a former defence chief for Gotland claims that Russia could invade Gotland in 6 hours.<sup>10</sup> Mattsson adds that Russia has the capacity for an invasion but disagrees on the method.

An article in tabloid *Aftonbladet* features more extensive interviews with Mattsson, under the headline “A Part of American Information Warfare.”<sup>11</sup> Mattsson argues that the CEPA report should be considered “part of American information warfare, just as Russia is also doing to us. They want to build up Russia to be a major, serious threat that only an American presence can solve. The report is really about our relationship with NATO.” Mattsson claims that there is nothing remarkable about Russian military exercises aimed at the Baltic context; rather, the remarkable thing is that the report names Gotland and other locations as though there is a systematic Russian will to conquer these areas. He concludes that the report is an important contribution to public debate, and that Sweden needs an objective inquiry into its future relationship with NATO conducted on the basis of Sweden’s interests.

In an interview with *Swedish Radio*,<sup>12</sup> Mattsson makes similar claims.<sup>13</sup> He argues that Russia is not as much of a threat as the reports make it out to be, and that we should be wary toward and critical of the sources of such reports; in this case a Washington, DC think tank partially funded by NATO. “The premise is that Russia is militarily strong, the Baltic has a weak security structure in which Russia is strong, NATO is weak, and the neutral countries are weak, especially Sweden. The conclusion is that the only way to restore order is under American leadership.” Although critical of the CEPA report and its conclusions, Mattsson argues that the threat against Gotland is substantial with the biggest issue being that Gotland is basically defenceless. However, it remains unlikely that somebody would invade Gotland. He concludes that an inquiry into Sweden’s partnership with NATO is necessary.

**28 June 2015** – Governor of Gotland Schelin Seidegård gives an interview with tabloid *Expressen* under the headline, “Sweden is right to collaborate with NATO.”<sup>14</sup> The article references CEPA report “The Coming Storm,” which Schelin Seidegård dismisses as a familiar story for those living on the island. Her right-hand man is a former colonel, and they are more than aware of Gotland’s strategic position in the Baltic and previous Russian exercises preparing for invasion. She continues that Gotland’s residents are obviously worried by geopolitical



CEPA's report on Baltic Sea Security

<sup>9</sup> “Rapport: Ryssland ‘intog’ Gotland,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, 25 June 2015, <https://www.svd.se/rapport-ryssland-intog-gotland>

<sup>10</sup> Ines Micanovic, “Ex-försvarschef: Putin kan ta Gotland på sex timmar,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, 25 June 2015, <https://www.svd.se/ex-forsvarschef-putin-kan-ta-gotland-pa-sex-timmar>

<sup>11</sup> Julia Burman Görans, “En del av amerikansk informationskrigföring,” *Aftonbladet*, 25 June 2015, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article21024351.ab>

<sup>12</sup> Independent public service radio broadcaster listened to by approx. 5 million Swedes each day (over 60 per cent of the population). Similar to BBC insofar as it does not represent a political agenda or specific audience. Has a substantial online news & digital radio service in several languages including Russian; however, the Russian language service was closed in early 2016. See: “Så mats lyssnandet,” *Sverige Radio*, 27 May 2013, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=3113&artikel=5546111>; “Новости по-русски из Швеции,” *Sverige Radio*, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/default.aspx?programid=2103>

<sup>13</sup> Isabelle Strengbom, “Försvarsforskare: Vi är utsatta för informationsoperationer från båda sidor,” *Sverige Radio*, 25 June 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=94&artikel=6198568>

<sup>14</sup> Diamant Salihu, “Sveriga gör rätt som samarbetar med Nato,” *Expressen*, 28 June 2015, <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/sverige-gor-ratt-som-samarbetar-med-nato/>



developments, and that while the announcement of a permanent defence is positive, 230 troops is not enough. “We need people on the ground prepared for a possible invasion.”

**30 June 2015** – Schelin Seidegård participates in a panel at the annual Almedalen political week, entitled “*Baltic Security – From Cooperation to Conflict?*”<sup>15</sup> “We usually say that we are an aircraft carrier. You can launch a war [on mainland Sweden] from Gotland. You can easily land 1,000 or 10,000 troops, so it’s good to have a permanent defence here.” She argues that it is important in the context of Ukraine for Gotland to signal both that it is part of Sweden and that it is prepared to defend itself. It is in the middle of a vitally important shipping lane for Russia, and hence Gotland should be understood as a point of strategic interest. There is now a fear of Russia’s intentions and it would be naïve to ignore Russia’s history and assume that its authoritarian government is not prepared to sacrifice its own people. Today’s open society is vulnerable to a variety of propaganda, disinformation and cyber-attacks and Russia is prepared to use such methods against our critical infrastructure. It is therefore important that Gotland continue its Baltic partnerships and acts as a node for trade and culture, and that the issue is not seen purely in terms of military build-up.

**15 July 2015** – A story by the state broadcaster *Swedish Radio* appears in Russian<sup>16</sup> (15 July) and German<sup>17</sup> (16 July), but not Swedish or English, on the topic of a proposed change in legislation with regards to Swedish cooperation with NATO, and the position of Gotland as a “weak link” in Swedish security. Schelin Seidegård is quoted as saying: “Of course, we in Sweden are worried, just as the residents of other countries are worried. We see what is happening in Ukraine. We know that citizens of the Baltic countries are also worried, so, of course, such anxiety exists, because we do not know what Putin thinks ... Gotland is located in a very strategically important region. I do not think that people in other parts of Sweden are as worried as they are in Gotland.” Schelin Seidegård again compares “Gotland with an aircraft carrier that could be used if Russia, for example, introduced troops to the Baltic countries. ‘From Gotland it would be possible, for example, to launch a rocket attack, or to secure the way for ships to St. Petersburg or to other harbours of the Baltic Sea,’ says the head of the island’s administration and stresses: ‘We must have the right to defend our own territory without fear that it will be perceived as a provocation’.” This quote becomes the key citation in future articles. Russian news agency *Regnum*<sup>18</sup> publishes a



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**Radio Schweden**  
Aktuelles aus Schweden

Hintergrund: Konfrontation mit Russland

### Gotland als „Flugzeugträger“

Publiziert: freitag, 16. Juli 2015 12:19

„Schweden steht bei Verteidigung nicht gut da“  
(17 min)

Cecilia Schelin Seidegård, die Vorsitzende des Provinzialparlamentes von Gotland, macht sich Sorgen um die Insel, die strategisch als Flugzeugträger genutzt werden könnte. (Foto: Stefan Lennarsson/Sveriges Radio)

Die Nachrichten von vermehrten militärischen Aktivitäten Russlands in der Ostsee und sogar in den Stockholmer Schären sorgen seit einiger Zeit für Beunruhigung in Schweden. Dabei ist auch Gotland verstärkt ins Zentrum gerückt, seit bekannt wurde, dass es russische Manöver zu einer Invasion gegeben haben soll.

Die zuständige Landtagspräsidentin vergleicht die Ostseeinsel mit einem Flugzeugträger, der bei militärischen Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Russland und dem Westen eine enorme Bedeutung hätte. Die Inselbevölkerung nimmt es derweil gelassen.

Screenshot from Sverige Radio’s German-language article on 16 July 2015

<sup>15</sup> “Säkerhetsläget i Östersjöregionen – från samarbete till konflikt?” Video of panel discussion on 30 June 2015, <https://www.sei-international.org/sei-at-almédalsveckan-2015/tisdag-30-juni/3146>

<sup>16</sup> Liv Heidebüchel (translated by Irina Makridova), “Швеция не может и не хочет изолироваться,” *Sverige Radio Russian*, 15 July 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2103&artikel=6212352>

<sup>17</sup> Liv Heidebüchel, “Gotland als ‘Flugzeugträger,’” *Sverige Radio German*, 16 July 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2108&artikel=6213266>

<sup>18</sup> A Russian non-governmental, nationwide online news service. Its editorial policies are believed “to oppose Russian investment in any country whose politics are hostile to Russia or which is promoting the rehabilitation of World War II-era Nazism and fascism.” Analyses of fake news have suggested that *Regnum* is hostile to NATO and some of the policies of the Baltic countries. Although figures do not appear to be available, one source claims that it is among the top three most cited online media in Russia. See: Natalya Krasnoboka, “Media Landscapes: Russia,” *European Journalism Centre*, n.d., accessed 5 February 2017, [http://ejc.net/media\\_landscapes/russia](http://ejc.net/media_landscapes/russia)

short summary of the Russian version of the *Swedish Radio* article consisting mainly of direct citations of Schelin Seidegård.<sup>19</sup>

**16 July 2015** – *Sputnik* publishes a French language interpretation of the *Swedish Radio* article with the headline “Swedish Official: The Island of Gotland is Well-Placed to Bomb Russia.”<sup>20</sup> It begins, “The Swedish island of Gotland is an ideal bridgehead for bombing St. Petersburg in the event of a Russian invasion of the Baltic states, the head of the island administration said.” Schelin Seidegård is quoted as comparing the island to a well-equipped aircraft carrier to bomb Russia. “The island could be used to fire missiles or direct warships heading for St. Petersburg or other Baltic ports.”

*Sputnik*'s English language site publishes the article, “Sweden Getting Ready to Fire Missiles at Russian Troops from Gotland Island.”<sup>21</sup> The *Regnum* article is cited as the source. The article paraphrases Schelin Seidegård: “The island of Gotland could be used as a key place to shoot from at invading Russian troops, if Russia were ever to decide to take over the Baltics ... Schelin-Seidegard seriously believes that Russia’s looking to invade the Baltics and then threaten Sweden. She’s eager to fight the Russians and believes her island could play a strategically important role.” The only direct quote is an English translation of the following line: “From Gotland we could, for example, fire missiles and cover our ships sailing towards St. Petersburg”. The ambiguity in the sentence, when removed from the context of the whole paragraph, is utilised to give the impression that the quote is about Swedish aggression toward Russia rather than vice versa. The article continues, “Schelin-Seidegard clearly got up on the wrong side of her bed. Russia has never had an interest in ‘invading Baltic nations or Scandinavia,’ as everyone out there seems to believe.”

The article then claims that Peter Mattsson of the Swedish Defence University said the United States deliberately spreads rumours about Russian aggression, trying to convince Sweden and other Baltic nations that they are vulnerable without US troops in the region (see 25 June). It also refers indirectly to the CEPA report on Russian military drills, defending Russia’s right to train its troops (see 24 June). The article includes an image of a decommissioned Saab Robot 08 coastal missile housed at the Gotland Coastal Artillery Regiment KA 3 museum, giving the impression that Gotland is militarily ready.

**17 July 2015** – Local newspaper *Helagotland* publishes a short article explaining that Schelin Seidegård was cited “somewhat questionably” by Russian media.<sup>22</sup> Schelin Seidegård states, “what I said is that Gotland’s location makes it a good base for launching and protecting transporters on the Baltic, because the shipping lanes to the east of Gotland are important.” She confirms that *Sputnik* did not interview her, but that she believes the source to be an *Expressen* article which exaggerated something she said at *Almedalen* (see 28 June). This appears to be incorrect (see 15 July), although it may be added that a number of her statements from the previous months could be misinterpreted without major alterations to the quotes.

<sup>19</sup> “Шведская чиновница: Готланд – авианосец для ракетного обстрела России,” *Regnum*, 15 July 2015, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1943250.html>

<sup>20</sup> “Responsable suédoise: l’île de Gotland bien placée pour bombarder la Russie,” *Sputnik News*, 16 July 2015, <https://sptnkne.ws/gDtC>

<sup>21</sup> “Sweden Getting Ready to Fire Missiles at Russian Troops from Gotland Island,” *Sputnik News*, 16 July 2015, <https://sptnkne.ws/gDtK>

<sup>22</sup> Hannes Tobiasson, “Landshövdingen citeras i rysk media,” *Helagotland*, 17 July 2015, <http://helagotland.se/samhalle/landshovdingen-citeras-i-rysk-media-11299171.aspx>

# Sweden Narratives

- **Russia is a potential threat to Sweden, but should not be exaggerated.**
- **NATO membership is a multifaceted issue.**
- **Swedish defence of Gotland is important for regional security in the Baltic Sea.**

## **Peter Hultqvist, Minister for Defence**

3 June 2015: “We are facing a more provocative, unpredictable and destabilising Russia that has lowered the threshold to use military force. [...] Russian activities in the Baltic Region and in the High North have also increased.”

“We have to cooperate closely with our partners in the Nordic, the Baltics, within the NATO partnership, within the EU and we must maintain a strong Transatlantic link.”

“We are looking at a renewed regional focus, with emphasis on national defence and planning for wartime scenarios. For example, we will re-establish permanent units on the island of Gotland.”<sup>23</sup>



## **Cecilia Schelin Seidegård, Governor of Gotland since 2010**

15 July 2015: “Of course, we in Sweden are worried, just as the residents of other countries are worried. We see what is happening in Ukraine. [...] Gotland is located in a very strategically important region. I do not think that people in other parts of Sweden are as worried as they are in Gotland.”<sup>24</sup>

28 June 2015: “We need people on the ground prepared for a possible invasion.”<sup>25</sup>

30 June 2015: “We usually say that we are an aircraft carrier. You can launch a war from Gotland. You can easily land 1,000 or 10,000 troops, so it’s good to have a permanent defence here.”<sup>26</sup>



## **Peter Mattsson, lecturer at the Swedish Defence University with expertise in Russian military capability; one of the main commentators for the Swedish press on Russian military**

25 June 2015: “I don’t think Russia is as dangerous as it is presented in [the CEPA report]. We are starting to get a skewed image. [...] It is important to think of who the issuer of the report is, a Washington think tank.”<sup>27</sup>

“The level of threat is substantial. Gotland is of geopolitical significance, and perhaps most seriously of all, Gotland is un-defended, so it contributes to geopolitical uncertainty in the Baltic – that’s the conclusion we can draw from this report.”<sup>28</sup>



<sup>23</sup> Peter Hultqvist, “Speech at the U.S.-Sweden Defence Industry Conference,” *Government Offices of Sweden*, 3 June 2015, <http://www.government.se/speeches/2015/06/speech-at-the-u.s.-sweden-defence-industry-conference/>

<sup>24</sup> Liv Heidbüchel (translated by Irina Makridova), “Швеция не может и не хочет изолироваться,” *Sverige Radio Russian*, 15 July 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2103&artikel=6212352>

<sup>25</sup> Diamant Salihu, “Sverige gör rätt som samarbetar med Nato,” *Expressen*, 28 June 2015, <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/sverige-gor-ratt-som-samarbetar-med-nato/>

<sup>26</sup> “Säkerhetsläget i Östersjöregionen – från samarbete till konflikt?” Video of panel discussion on 30 June 2015, <https://www.sei-international.org/sei-at-almedalsveckan-2015/tisdag-30-juni/3146>

<sup>27</sup> Isabelle Strengbom, “Försvarsforskare: Vi är utsatta för informationsoperationer från båda sidor,” *Sverige Radio*, 25 June 2015, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=94&artikel=6198568>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

# Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) Narratives

- US involvement is vital for regional security in the Baltic Sea.
- Russian military activity in the Baltic Sea is a threat to security.
- Allied defence of Gotland is important for regional security in the Baltic Sea.

**CEPA, a non-profit think tank dedicated to the study of Central and Eastern Europe with offices in Washington, D.C. and Warsaw.<sup>29</sup> Its diverse sponsors include NATO, the US Department of Defense, the US Department of State and a number of major military contractors.<sup>30</sup>**



June 2015, excerpts from CEPA report "The Coming Storm" authored by Edward Lucas: "A snap drill in Kaliningrad in December caught NATO completely by surprise. Much larger exercises in March, involving probably 33,000 troops, took place in response to a notional Western attempt to create a 'Maidan' uprising in Moscow. The scenario included the speedy seizure of northern Norway, the Åland islands (demilitarized Finnish territory, populated by Swedish-speakers), the Swedish island of Gotland and the Danish island of Bornholm. If carried out successfully, control of those territories would make it all but impossible for NATO allies to reinforce the Baltic states."<sup>31</sup>

"Europe's new front-line states are the Nordic five (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden), the Baltic three (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), plus Poland. These countries (the NBP9) share a common concern about a revisionist and rapidly rearming Russia. [...] These countries' strategic incoherence, their resulting inability to defend themselves without outside help, and the threat this creates to NATO's credibility in the region make the NBP9's security an issue of global importance. Only the United States can spur the NBP9 to start the close security and defense cooperation needed to counter the Russian threat."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> CEPA Homepage, <http://cepa.org/home>

<sup>30</sup> "How We Are Funded", CEPA, accessed 5 February 2017, <http://cepa.org/How-We-Are-Funded>

<sup>31</sup> Edward Lucas, *The Coming Storm: Baltic Sea Security Report* (Washington, D.C.: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2015), [http://cepa.org/sites/default/files/styles/medium/Baltic%20Sea%20Security%20Report-%20\(2\).compressed.pdf](http://cepa.org/sites/default/files/styles/medium/Baltic%20Sea%20Security%20Report-%20(2).compressed.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

# Russian Narratives

- There is an irrational fear of Russia in Sweden.
- US is demonising Russia to encourage Swedish NATO membership.
- Key communicators in Sweden are aggressive and warmongering.
- Sweden's increased defence spending is destabilising the Baltic Sea.

## Viktor Tatarintsev, Russian Ambassador to Sweden

18 June 2015: "Unfortunately, the fear and antipathy towards Russia in Sweden is now on a larger scale than before. The explanation lies in the aggressive propaganda campaign conducted by the Swedish mass media. Russia is often described as an attacker who only thinks of conducting wars and threatening others. But I can guarantee that Sweden, which is a non-aligned state, does not appear in any war plans of the Russian General Staff. Sweden is not a target for our armed troops."



"I don't think [Swedish NATO membership] will become relevant in the near future, even though there has been a certain swing in public opinion. But if it happens there will be countermeasures. Putin pointed out that there will be consequences, that Russia will have to resort to a response of the military kind and reorient our troops and missiles. The country that joins NATO needs to be aware of the risks it is exposing itself to."<sup>33</sup>

## Sputnik News

16 July 2015: "Sweden keeps flexing its military muscle due to imaginary Russian aggression [...]. The island of Gotland could be used as a key place to shoot from at invading Russian troops, if Russia were ever to decide to take over the Baltics, Governor of Gotland Cecilia Schelin-Seidegård said."



"Schelin-Seidegård clearly got up on the wrong side of her bed. Russia has never had an interest in 'invading Baltic nations or Scandinavia,' as everyone out there seems to believe."

"Peter Mattsson, a researcher at the Swedish National Defense College, said the United States deliberately spreads rumors about Russian aggression trying to convince Sweden and other Baltic nations that they are vulnerable without US troops in the region."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Michael Winiarski, "Rysslands ambassadör: Vi har gjort allt för att starta en dialog," *Dagens Nyheter*, 18 June 2015, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/rysslands-ambassador-vi-har-gjort-allt-for-att-starta-en-dialog/>

<sup>34</sup> "Sweden Getting Ready to Fire Missiles at Russian Troops from Gotland Island," *Sputnik News*, 16 July 2015, <https://sptnkne.ws/gDtK>

# MEASURES

## Strategic Logic

A recent study of Russian hostile influence in Sweden suggests that activity has increased markedly since 2014. This is considered similar to measures seen in other Nordic and Baltic states, albeit with each state experiencing quite different forms of influence:

*Disinformation, forged telegrams and fake news items have surfaced in the information landscape; Russian politicians and diplomats have intervened in Swedish domestic political affairs on NATO and Baltic Sea security; pro-Kremlin NGOs and GONGOs have become operative in Sweden and revelations of a Russian owned company in Sweden connected to party financing in the European Union have emerged in media. In social media, troll armies are targeting journalists and academics, including the 'hijacking' of Twitter accounts. Russian state TV has castigated Swedish politicians as agents of Washington and falsified interviews with Swedish citizens, and Swedish journalists and diplomats working in Russia have been targets of harassment and espionage activities. Lastly, there exist examples of actors in Sweden, such as politicians, academics and newspapers, who wittingly or unwittingly perform a role as agents of influence or interlocutors of disinformation.<sup>35</sup>*

The core technique utilised in this case study of disinformation is the laundering of information. This describes a process similar to money laundering – the process of legitimising dirty money by obscuring its illegal origins – adapted to the information sphere. In this case, the process is reversed, by taking information and laundering it through intermediaries to deliberately distort the original meaning. These intermediaries cite genuine sources but do so with minor changes to the text and by removing the original context and meaning. *Sputnik* then refers to these intermediaries as its sources for the falsified quote. The result is a “dirty” quote that has been “laundered” via intermediaries to appear legitimate. Fake news and disinformation sources may also be legitimised through this process. The *Sputnik* article can be placed in a context in which Sweden has been exposed to a variety of active measures and disinformation techniques.

**Diplomatic.** A recent study by Kragh & Åsberg claims that “Russian politicians and diplomats have intervened in Swedish domestic political affairs on NATO and Baltic Sea security.”<sup>36</sup> This can be found in official statements, digital diplomacy, disinformation, and forgeries of documents. President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov have openly and provocatively warned Sweden against NATO membership.<sup>37</sup> Much of the domestic political security debate is based around polarised pro- and anti-NATO positions that are difficult to distinguish from foreign influence, and that may coincide with Russian diplomatic interests.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg “Russia’s Strategy for Influence through Public Diplomacy and Active Measures: the Swedish Case,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 6 (2017): 789.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Damien Sharkov, “Russia’s Lavrov Warns Sweden against NATO Membership,” *Newsweek*, 29 April 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/russias-lavrov-warns-sweden-nato-membership-453890>; Michael Winiarski, “Russia Issues NATO Warning to Sweden,” *DN*, 28 April 2016, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/russia-issues-nato-warning-to-sweden/>; “Putin Emphasizes that Sweden’s Entry to NATO would Jeopardize Ties with Moscow,” *TASS*, 1 June 2017, <http://tass.com/politics/949067>

**Information.** *Sputnik* is one example of how information is used with the aim of undermining Swedish society and weakening confidence in public and private sector institutions. A recent study identified 26 examples of forgeries and fake articles circulating in the Swedish press between 2015 and 2016.<sup>38</sup> One example is the leak of fake correspondence between the CEO of a military supplier and the Minister of Defence in February 2015, which suggested that Sweden was supplying arms to Ukraine.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) cyber attack that hit many of Sweden's main news outlets in March 2016 was traced back to Russia,<sup>40</sup> resulting in an increased debate about and governmental funding of cyber security.

**Military.** Russia has a long history of violating Swedish airspace and waters. Sightings of submarines in the Stockholm archipelago are frequent. The Russian Embassy in Sweden has referred to these sightings as disinformation and as evidence of Swedish hostility toward Russia in various Facebook posts.<sup>41</sup> This has contributed to an increased sense of a threat to national security that places public concerns about Russia at only a marginally lower level than the threat of international terrorism.<sup>42</sup>

**Economic.** More recently, Nord Stream 2 has been a source of contention. To facilitate the Nord Stream 2 project, the majority Russian-owned company Nord Stream attempted to lease two Swedish ports, including one on Gotland. The promise of economic incentives for those regions was used to strengthen public support. Following government intervention on national security grounds, Gotland rejected the proposal. Given the high-level political involvement and the nature of the debate regarding these decisions, they contributed to a context in which Gotland may be positioned as a focal point for active measures including disinformation.

**Intelligence.** A recent high profile case suggests that individuals may be seeking to infiltrate political parties in order to push agendas that support Russian narratives. In September 2016, a civil servant from the right-wing nationalist party Sweden Democrats, Alexander Fridback, resigned from his position after being accused of spreading disinformation. Fridback moved to Sweden in 2007 and is a naturalised Russian citizen. Posing as a volunteer for the organisation Refugees Welcome using a fake name, Fridback sent a debate article to *Aftonbladet* arguing that asylum seekers should have the right to vote. Then, under the pseudonym Egor Putilov, Fridback tweeted responses to the same article. It later emerged that the Putilov identity was used in several other efforts to sell reports to the media. In 2014, Fridback bought a house from a known Russian criminal for half the price that had been paid for it three years earlier – it was then immediately sold for double the buying price. Security experts commenting on this story suggested that Fridback was working in the service of a foreign power.<sup>43</sup> The technique used here is basically the “sock puppet” technique, which uses fake identities online to mask that the same actor is fuelling both sides of the debate, in order to provoke and polarise.

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<sup>38</sup> Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg, “Russia’s Strategy for Influence through Public Diplomacy and Active Measures: the Swedish Case,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 6 (2017).

<sup>39</sup> “Sverige erbjuder sig sälja vapen till Ukraina i förfalskat brev,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, 21 February 2015, <https://www.svd.se/sverige-erbjuder-sig-salja-vapen-till-ukraina-i-forfalskat-brev>

<sup>40</sup> “Attack on Sweden’s Media,” *radware*, 22 March 2016, <https://security.radware.com/ddos-threats-attacks/threat-advisories-attack-reports/sweden-attack-threat-alert/>

<sup>41</sup> Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg, “Russia’s Strategy for Influence through Public Diplomacy and Active Measures: the Swedish Case,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 6 (2017).

<sup>42</sup> Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, “Opinioner 2016: Allmänhetens syn på samhällsskydd, beredskap, säkerhetspolitik och försvar,” 2016, <https://www.msb.se/RibData/Filer/pdf/28219.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Lisa Röstlund, Mattias Sandberg, and Richard Aschberg, “Avslöjandena som fällde SD-tjänstemannen,” *Aftonbladet*, 24 September 2016, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article23582209.ab>; Lisa Röstlund, Mattias Sandberg, and Richard Aschberg, “Alexander, 34, är SD:s hemliga desinformatör,” *Aftonbladet*, 3 September 2016, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article23449197.ab>

# NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS

## Critical Functions

**Political.** For the case study of disinformation via the *Sputnik* article, the key critical function is influencing and/or instigating public debates surrounding political decision-making for defence matters. The article analysed in this case study may be considered part of an effort to influence political decisions regarding:

- I. the level of threat from Russia,
- II. Sweden's relationship with NATO,
- III. the level of funding of the Swedish military,
- IV. the relationship between Gotland and the Swedish mainland.

The public debate is led by experts and former military personnel who are interviewed when an issue is raised in the press. A relatively small number of experts tend to be cited across multiple Swedish news sources, leading to a limited variation in presented points of view. Experts play a pivotal role in public debates. Far-left and far-right narratives are sometimes raised in the mainstream press, although a report that raised this risk was vehemently criticised.<sup>44</sup> This would suggest that agenda-setting reports, such as the one by the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) referred to in the case study, have a strong impact on national debates.

**Military.** Recently, largely in response to Russian activity in Ukraine, Sweden re-introduced conscription, boosted defence spending, and strengthened its cooperation with NATO. The 2017 Aurora exercise centred on territorial defence, with an emphasis on military-civilian cooperation.

On 16 June 2015, the government's proposition 2014/15:109, which covers Swedish defence policy 2016-2020, was approved by the Swedish parliament with a majority of 75 per cent, despite a vocal lobby arguing that the resources requested were only 60 per cent of those required according to the military's own assessments. The proposal outlines a series of measures aimed to strengthen Sweden's defence – alongside political, diplomatic and economic tools under the rubric “total defence” – against a perceived threat from Russia. It includes an increase in defence expenditure of 10.2 billion SEK (about USD 1.3 billion) over previous forecasts, as well as an expansion of multilateral and bilateral partnerships.

The definition of the threat is clear:

*The security situation in Europe has deteriorated. The Russian leadership has shown that it is prepared to use military force to achieve its political goals. The deterioration of the security situation means changing demands on Swedish defense capabilities.*<sup>45</sup>

Given its geographical location, Gotland is considered to be “an especially important position.” A permanent battle group comprised of a mechanised company and a tank company (230 soldiers) was proposed to begin in 2018, together with other reorganisations in Gotland's defence and defence training capabilities. The proposal lifts the concept of “total defence” to emphasise the necessity of collaboration between military and civilian defence, with a particular focus on the roles of government agencies and local government.

<sup>44</sup> Kragh and Åsberg, “Russia's Strategy.” See e.g. “Hård kritik mot UI-artikel om Ryssland,” *Expressen*, 13 January 2017, <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/hard-kritik-mot-ui-artikel-om-ryssland/>

<sup>45</sup> Regerings proposition 2014/15:109. Försvarspolitisk inriktning – Sveriges försvar 2016–2020. <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/266e64ec3a254a6087ebe9e413806819/proposition-201415109-forsvarspolitisk-inriktning--sveriges-forsvar-2016-2020>



**Economic.** Sweden and Russia do not have particularly strong economic ties, and these have worsened since Russian activity in Ukraine. Sweden is supportive of EU sanctions against Russia and therefore is subject to counter-sanctions.

**Social.** The concepts of “psychological defence” and “total defence,” which diminished after the end of the Cold War, have returned to the government’s agenda.

**Information.** A number of information-based threats and vulnerabilities are raised throughout this document. Initiatives related to countering disinformation and fake news, bursting filter bubbles, and source criticism have been launched in Sweden or have been supported by Swedish actors. A handbook was recently developed to provide public sector communicators with counter-influence techniques.<sup>46</sup>

## Vulnerabilities

An open and democratic debate is a critical function that can also turn into a vulnerability when actors deliberately seek to leverage pre-existing ideological divisions in a domestic debate to suit other ends. Differences in political views are appealed to in terms of pro- or anti-military/NATO/US sentiment. The territorial vulnerability of Gotland is raised, and skewed to give the impression that it would be a launch point for an attack against Russia.

## Threats

The role of *Sputnik* and other Russian news sources in skewing domestic political positions poses a threat to Sweden, especially regarding domestic political debates about military funding and cooperation.

In addition to NATO membership, the question of migration is perhaps the main example of where Russian narratives take up similar themes to domestic political actors. During the 2015 European migration crisis, Sweden was forced to close its borders because its institutions could not handle the volume of refugees. This supported narratives of Sweden as a country on the edge of collapse because of the burden of migrants. The nationalist party Sweden Democrats (SD) re-entered parliament in 2010. This created challenges for the two main centre-left and centre-right political blocks, with the SD often acting as the tie-breaker when consensus cannot be achieved. An unwillingness to cooperate with SD has hindered the effectiveness of successive governments, and caused chaos within the Conservative Party (M). Far-right and extremist websites such as *Avpixlat* (which was closed in August 2017) link Swedish migration debates to international information sources, some of which have received support from Russia among other actors. Questions of disinformation and fake news are closely linked to these right-wing political sources, for example with evidence of Russian journalists bribing teenagers to riot.<sup>47</sup> Although they are not alone in this endeavour, Russian press sources such as *RT* and *Sputnik* propagate the image of Sweden as Islamised, a “rape nation,” and with “no go areas.” This impacts negatively upon Sweden’s international reputation, and is increasingly considered as a threat to national security. Note, however, that the 2016-2020 defence strategy predates the migration crisis.

<sup>46</sup> The handbook was commissioned by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) and is being prepared by researchers at Lund University. *Countering Hostile Influence: The State of the Art*, version 1.0 (Karlstad: MSB, December 2017).

<sup>47</sup> Chloe Farand, “Swedish Teenagers Claim Russian TV Crew Offered to Bribe them to Cause Trouble After Trump Comments,” *The Independent*, 7 March 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/wedish-teenagers-russian-tv-name-of-channel-crew-money-action-camera-donald-trump-refugee-rape-a7615406.html>

## Effects

From a general perspective, it is clear that right wing interest groups are strengthened by interaction with international groups with similar interests, which originate from Russia as well as other Western countries. However, by far the most significant effect of Russian aggression in Ukraine and the current disinformation climate is increased government and public awareness of the threat posed to national security by Russian information warfare and active measures. In this regard, these efforts have backfired to a certain extent, although they have likely contributed to the polarisation between social groups with regards to questions such as migration.

With regard to the *Sputnik* article discussed here, there is no suggestion or evidence of effects. The vulnerability in roused debates was not harnessed particularly effectively by *Sputnik*. An actor seeking to skew these debates and decisions could have done so far more effectively; indeed, CEPA did a far better job in setting the agenda for the Swedish NATO membership debate. Despite the Swedish *Sputnik* site pumping out hundreds of stories per month during this period, there is little evidence to suggest that this particular narrative was singled out as a vulnerability or point of pressure to influence Swedish society. Nor was the broader defence funding debate linked to this story.

CEPA's input was effective because of the nature of the messenger: a pro-Western think tank supporting US perspectives on the region. It explicitly names Gotland and other Nordic islands, which speaks to a closer knowledge of local vulnerabilities than US think tanks reports usually disclose. It should be noted, however, that there is no specific evidence of Russia targeting these named islands – rather than simply conducting exercises aimed at capturing islands in general. It is entirely possible that the mention of Gotland as a target of Russian exercises is speculative. It is also possible that the Swedish sources used in the CEPA report were also sources for the Swedish experts who commented on the report in the daily press.

There is no evidence to suggest that these narratives performed a decisive role in government decision-making. The US-NATO perspective is already well-represented in domestic debates. Knowledge of any specific Russian threat against Gotland and other Swedish territories would be shared through traditional channels. Preparing public opinion for changes in threat levels, and subsequent military funding and preparedness levels is, however, a salient issue. CEPA performed a significant role in agenda-setting by increasing public awareness and debate; *Sputnik* lifted a narrative that may fit with unlikely conspiracy theories about Swedish aggression against Russia, and/or re-militarisation. In the absence of clear evidence, it would be inadvisable to suggest that the *Sputnik* article achieved anything beyond reinforcing certain minority opinions.

# CONCLUSIONS

This case study presented a typical example of how Russian media sources exploit domestic debates on NATO membership, Swedish defence capabilities and the role of NATO and the US in the region. Russian media uses genuine quotes from key players in the debates and “launders” them through a) Russian news sources and b) news stories produced in different languages. Mistranslation and removal of context are therefore the main techniques of the laundering process, and are in this example used to support the deliberate misrepresentation of key statements. It is quite clear that *Sputnik* has produced a deliberately misleading and harmful story based upon quotes falsified in only minor – but nonetheless crucial – points. As was noted earlier, a majority of stories on the Swedish language *Sputnik* platform were not about Sweden. Therefore, this concept of laundering news through multiple languages – i.e. that the Swedish channel actually circulates translated news from other languages and about other countries – serves as an influence technique that has mistranslation and removal of context as its modus operandi.

The extent of the vulnerability is substantial. Several other quotes by the actors cited here could have been used in similarly negative ways by an actor wishing to skew or otherwise undermine domestic Swedish security debates. As Mattsson argues (25 June), the CEPA report is also questionable in its representation of the security situation in the Baltic, and had far more tangible effects. Polarised domestic debates are fertile ground for foreign influence. Use of the relatively obscure Swedish language, and a strong consensus culture on political questions, have traditionally shielded Sweden somewhat. The relatively closed circle of expert commentators used by mainstream news sources helps to provide narrower interpretations, even when the political angle of the news source may be biased. Certain tabloid newspapers, which were accused of carrying narratives that suit pro-Russian narratives, decidedly rejected this criticism.<sup>48</sup>

It should be noted that in this case the Russian language web-platform of *Swedish Radio* appears to be the one which was monitored and utilised by *Sputnik* and/or *Regnum*. While it cannot be ruled out that Swedish language sources were also monitored, it is not necessary to look beyond the Russian version of *Swedish Radio* as the original source for the *Sputnik* story. The Russian language section of *Swedish Radio* represents an important opportunity and threat for coverage of Swedish news in Russian sources – yet the channel was shut down in early 2016.

## Recommendations

- Sweden should look to the UK’s sponsorship of the *BBC World Service*’s Russian channels, which closed in 2011 but were given new funding to pursue Russian-language audiences in 2015 as part of a Strategic Defence Review.
- High-level military preparedness briefings, such as the one attended by Schelin Seidegård (May

<sup>48</sup> Åsa Linderborg, “Grundlös attack mot Aftonbladet,” *Aftonbladet*, 15 January 2017, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/alerEvK/grundlos-attack-mot-aftonbladet>

2015),<sup>49</sup> should include workshops on communication. It should be clear from the many examples cited above that Schelin Seidegård, though an experienced politician, repeated a number of lines that are – in the context of the systematic disinformation activities and active measures referred to above – open to abuse by hostile actors. Part of the training in understanding the threat should include an understanding of media and information-based threats.

- The actor with responsibility for monitoring information-based threats should actively mediate between government, military, think tanks, journalists and researchers to establish common understandings of the threats and vulnerabilities. Many actors can play a significant role in public debates as interlocutors, and there should be regular opportunities for dialogue between all who are active in this field to ensure – at the very least – a common understanding of the problem based on facts. Work with journalists should be prioritised.

This case study has been placed in the context of some broader trends. What remains difficult to ascertain, however, is the relationship between the specific technique used in the article – that of laundering information – and the other active measures that have been raised in the example of Sweden. Should the *Sputnik* article be placed in a chain of events that seeks to aggressively deter Swedish membership of NATO? Or within a dossier of provocations relating to the fallout out from Nord Stream 2? Or is it simply a standalone, opportunist article that seeks to criticise a political decision? It is important to appreciate that the thousands of stories propagated by *Sputnik* and other sources, in conjunction with dozens of active measures conducted every year, begin to shape their own logical chains and narratives, and may simultaneously belong to several. It is essential that the informational threat is considered not just in terms of visible narratives or the underlying influence techniques, but also as building blocks that can be rearticulated in new contexts to create new logical chains. In this case, the idea that Sweden will invade St. Petersburg is patently absurd. However, it is perfectly conceivable that the “Gotland as aircraft carrier” metaphor could recur in future scenarios, as part of more damaging narratives.



NATO membership is a very polarised topic in Sweden: people holding anti-NATO sign during march in Stockholm, 1 May 2017. IMAGE – juninatt / SHUTTERSTOCK

<sup>49</sup> On 11-13 May 2015, Schelin Seidegård spent three days on a “Total Defence” commanders’ field exercise together with all senior military leaders, many General Directors of collaborating government authorities, the National Defence Radio Establishment (FRA, with responsibility for signals intelligence), and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB, with responsibility for civil protection). This included general discussions of the current politics of national security followed by a day conducting field exercises on Gotland.



