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National discourses in (de)legitimations of the Swedish COVID-19 strategy

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Abstract: During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sweden's way to handle the crisis was referred to as 'the Swedish strategy' and regarded as unconventional. Most studies of the Swedish strategy have focused on politicians' legitimations, but not on the discursive negotiation in a media context. The objectives of this critical discourse study are to examine how the Swedish strategy was (de)legitimised in Sweden's largest newspaper, Dagens Nyheter, during 2020, and what role national discourses played for discursive framings of the Swedish strategy. Using legitimisation analysis combined with affect as a discourse analytical concept, we examine 71 newspaper articles. The findings show how a nationalistic framing highlights trust and responsibility as key aspects of the strategy, but also how trust and responsibility are used in delegitimisations with additional frames, such as consequences for individuals' everyday lives, or the frame of an international scientific community. The findings shed new light on the role of national discourses in the initial internal debates about Swedish COVID-19 management, and on the usefulness of an analytical approach that considers an elaborated analysis of different delegitimation strategies and the importance of affect for discourses and (de)legitimisations.

Keywords: affect; COVID-19; critical discourse studies; (de)legitimation; nationalism; Sweden

1 Introduction

According to the Swedish Institute Annual report 2020 (Swedish Institute 2021), no previous event relating to Sweden is deemed to have raised a correspondingly great and persistent interest in international media, in terms of the number of published articles and depth of reporting, as Sweden's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In

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comparison to other nations' strategies to minimise the spread of the virus, the Swedish COVID-19 strategy stands out as liberal in terms of avoiding a lockdown of society and appealing to people's common sense by recommending social distancing and handwashing (Andersson and Aylott 2020; Pierre 2020). In contrast to other nations, including the Nordic countries Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland, Sweden kept primary schools, day-care centres, industries, stores and restaurants largely open throughout the pandemic. The Swedish strategy was intensely discussed in Sweden, not least in Swedish media. The overall research interest of this article concerns the discursive framing of the Swedish strategy as it appeared in the media when politicians, experts and citizens gave their opinion on why or why not Sweden should handle the pandemic according to the guidelines set out by the Swedish strategy.

More specifically, this article aims to explore the social practice known as 'the Swedish COVID-19 strategy' from a Swedish insider perspective by studying how the strategy was legitimised and delegitimised in Sweden's largest morning paper, *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) during 2020, the first year of the pandemic. In addition, the article examines the discourses about Sweden that emerged in the (de)legitimations and discusses what role ideas of national ideals played for discursive framings of the Swedish strategy.

1.1 The Swedish model

In order to understand the social practice of the Swedish COVID-19 strategy, it should be considered in relation to the historical context of 'the Swedish model' and 'the Swedish welfare state' that have informed the self-identity of Sweden since 1945 (Hilson 2008). The Swedish model is a version of the Nordic model that comprises the economic and social policies as well as typical cultural practices common to the Nordic countries (besides Sweden: Finland, Denmark, Norway and Iceland). The Swedish model is, like the Nordic model, a result of the social democratic move from a "working-class party" to a "people's party" addressing the "national interest" rather than the "proletarian cause" after the Second World War (Hilson 2008: 38). The Swedish model is based on a compromise between capitalist interests and the labour movement's demands for social justice. It contains a 'consensual democracy', where broad consensus-building mechanisms are favoured over majority rule and where social divisions are neutralised by overarching sentiments of solidarity. Swedish historians describe the Swedish model as characterised by a paradox in that it wants to preserve conservative values, at the same time as it wants to represent a force for progress (Linderborg 2001).

The Swedish welfare state, anchored in the Swedish model, is today regarded as an integral part of economic policy, firmly linked with the maintenance of high levels of economic growth, low unemployment and a high standard of living. It stands out in the way that social programs such as old-age pensions, education, child care and health care are not targeted at the poor, but instead cover the entire population. The Swedish welfare state is financed out of general taxation, rather than for instance through contributions related to employment. Ideals such as trust between state and citizen and individual freedom under responsibility originate from the ideas of the Swedish model and the Swedish welfare state (Hilson 2008).

In what follows, we provide a brief literature review in Section 2. Section 3 introduces our data and the discourse analytical methodology. Section 4 engages with the findings from the (de)legitimation analysis, and Section 5 discusses the results and presents conclusions.

2 Literature review

2.1 The Swedish COVID-19 strategy

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, a Swedish tradition of separating the political from expert leadership has meant that governmental decisions on regulations have been firmly based on advice from The Public Health Agency (PHA). The act of placing public health experts before politicians has been pointed out as deviant to other nations' pandemic strategies. Key decisions have been made on narrow epidemiological terms with the consequence that science has taken precedence over social, economic, and political considerations (Björkdahl et al. 2021; Pierre 2020; Wodak 2021). A statement made early on by the PHA claimed that eradicating the virus was not an option, resulting in recommendations that people would be able to follow for a long time period (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al. 2020).

Criticism towards the Swedish COVID-19 strategy seems to have been stronger from other countries than from within Swedish borders (Pierre 2020). In fact, levels of institutional trust among citizens increased and reactions across different politically oriented groups were kept largely homogeneous as the pandemic evolved from an initial to an acute phase in the spring of 2020 (Esaiasson et al. 2021). In order to explain why Sweden chose its own COVID-19 strategy Wodak (2021) identifies the discursive framing of establishing trust as specific for Sweden, and points out that the strategy also "aimed to guide society and identity further in this direction" (p. 343). Other discursive frames that appeared in Europe – a religious frame, a dialogic frame and a frame of war – were absent in the Swedish political discourse. Wodak (2021) concludes that the strategy to trust citizens to take responsibility for social distancing

instead of closing down the society, was a rationalisation that sacrificed the elder for the benefit of the majority.

As in other countries, ethical perspectives on responsibility were largely debated in Sweden. Ellerich-Groppe et al. (2021) points out the use of the concept of ‘responsibility’ as unclear and ambivalent in the European public discourses on COVID-19 (in politics, civil society, and mass media). Against this background, it is relevant to analyse how the view of responsibility emerges in the (de)legitimations of the Swedish COVID-19 strategy, and how responsibility is distributed between the individual and the collective (cf. Jonas 1984). It is also relevant to analyse how responsibility is framed as moral, concerning social agreements that shape behaviour according to norms and ethics, and as legal, i.e., how responsibility is tied to certain roles, e.g., politicians and authorities (Solin and Östman 2012).

In addition to trust and individual responsibility, previous research explains the Swedish strategy with reference to other aspects interpreted as typically Swedish. Pierre (2020) argues that the Swedish liberal COVID-19 strategy was believed among decision-makers to be the strategy best suited for Swedish social behaviour. He argues that Swedish culture for a very long period of time has been defined by its homogeneity and consensualism. In their study of political leaders’ speeches in Scandinavian countries, Bjørkdahl et al. (2021: 9) add rationality to the list of characteristics that define Swedish culture, stating that: “Sweden’s decision to opt for a more ‘technical’ discourse in response to the pandemic can be seen as an appeal to the underlying values – indeed, the morality – of that nation”. Strang (2020: 3) acknowledges a Swedish custom of resolving every question independently referring to a self-image of being “one of the most modern countries in the world”.

Previous studies of the Swedish strategy have not dealt with delegitimation, but instead focused on the legitimations by political actors. What is not yet clear is how legitimations made by authorities were responded to by journalists, scientists, citizens and other actors involved in media discussions.

2.2 The nation as a cultural artefact

Starting from the premise that times of crisis such as war, natural disasters, economic crises and pandemics constitute critical junctures that put national affinity to the test (Bieber 2020), this article concerns how nationalistic perceptions of Sweden and Swedish people are reinforced in the (de)legitimations of the Swedish strategy. We align with a theoretical consideration of the nation as a cultural artefact. Only as long as people believe, feel and act as if they have a national identity, will there be such entities as nations. Nations are in that sense imagined communities (Anderson 1983). They are held together by each and every member’s idea about a common

national identity. And these ideas are passed down in the narratives, myths and discourses about the nation. These can be found in the speeches of politicians and authorities, as well as in media, and texts that thematise the nation (cf. Idevall Hagren 2021).

In the performance of nationalism, affect is a resource through which national leaders can gather citizens in shared collective emotions (Ahmed 2014). Invoking shared emotions in a group of people will strengthen their shared group identity, e.g., as Swedes, and might be a way for leaders to get people to act in certain ways.

3 Data and methodology

3.1 Data

Our data comes from Dagens Nyheter, DN, which is Sweden's largest morning newspaper. It is independently liberal in orientation, is written in Swedish and reaches 1.1 million people daily and has about 800,000 unique online readers each day. Due to its reach and impact on public debate, we find it suitable for our purposes, but the reader should bear in mind that our findings are derived from one single media actor.

The data consists of 71 written articles from the web version of DN. Although photographs and other visual text are relevant for meaning-making, they have been excluded from this specific study. The time period of investigation was limited to one year, from February 1st 2020 to January 31st 2021. At the end of this period, Sweden had begun to vaccinate, and during the spring of 2021, vaccination rates increased and the spread of infection decreased. The vaccination issue was from now on in focus in the media reporting.

The dataset was selected through a three-stage process. Stage one entailed collecting links to all articles from DN's webpage that were found when using the key words 'Covid' and 'Corona'. About 4,700 articles were included in the first corpus. Stage two was to systematically read all headlines and introductions, and exclude all articles that did not concern the handling of the pandemic in Sweden. The third step of the process was to closely read the 216 articles from the second sample and select those that were relevant for analysing legitimisation and delegitimation of the Swedish strategy. This left us with a final sample of 71 articles. The majority (50) of the articles were published in the first three months, when the newspaper paid most attention to the strategy. The material reflects the initial discussions of the strategy and it is beyond our scope to make chronological comparisons.

Our material includes the paper as a whole, since we aim to capture as many perspectives on the Swedish strategy as possible. One important aspect is that

different genres in the paper include different types of texts from different types of authors. This affects *how* legitimations, delegitimations and discourses are articulated. For instance, in news articles, individuals and representatives for the government are cited or referred to, while debate articles and letters to the editor reveal subjective authors.

The genres represented in our data are domestic news (30 articles), letters to the editor (12), opinion and debate (15), editorial line (9), and culture (5). All articles included in our final data set have been analysed according to the methodological approach set out in Section 3.2. The analyses are made on the original texts written in Swedish (see Appendix). The examples used in the article are translated into English by the authors.

3.2 Analytical framework

The analytical framework of this study is Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) (Wodak and Meyer 2016). Within CDS, the two important concepts of discourse and social practices are seen as entirely interrelated, and discourses can be comprehended, according to Van Leeuwen (2016: 138), as “context-specific frameworks for making sense of things”. Following Foucault (1980), discourses are the ways in which meanings are legitimised, normalised and, finally, accepted as reality and observed as social rules. Discourses represent and transform the *doings* of social actors, and why they do what they do (Van Leeuwen 2007). Applied to the handling of the pandemic, this study is interested in the legitimations and delegitimations of the social practices, as they are represented in media texts discussing the Swedish COVID-19 strategy. Through media, we learn about the types of things, relations and processes that build up the social world and make sense of it, not least through political discourse shaping and shaped by the media context (Breeze 2019; Couldry 2012). The Swedish strategy is discursively framed through the way different actors speak and write about it.

In order to analyse how the Swedish COVID-19 strategy is constituted in news media reports on COVID-19, we analyse legitimations and delegitimations of the strategy. Legitimisations concern the question: why should Sweden handle the pandemic in this way? And delegitimations appear when those being critical explain why Sweden should not handle the pandemic in that way. In accordance with Van Leeuwen (2007), we analyse the language of legitimation with respect to four basic types: ‘authorisation’, ‘rationalisation’, ‘moral evaluation’ and ‘mythopoesis’. Authorisation means legitimising a practice by referring to personal, expert or role model authority, or the authority of tradition or conformity. Authorisation takes for instance the form of verbal process clauses, or is expressed in the use of key words

such as “tradition” and “custom”, or in references to “most people”. Legitimisations referring to the goals, uses and effects of social practices, are identified as instrumental rationalisations. These legitimisations are recognised when actions are linked to purposes. Theoretical rationalisations instead legitimise actions with reference to what is true or general for a practice and participants. Moral evaluation promotes legitimisations based on moral values, by making positive evaluations or analogies. Mythopoesis alludes to storytelling, and the legitimisation of social practices through narratives.

Delegitimisations are accomplished through strategies that either question the Swedish strategy, or question the legitimisations of the Swedish strategy. Van Leeuwen (2007) argues that legitimisation strategies can also be used to delegitimise, and mentions negative evaluations and cautionary tales as delegitimising strategies. In our study, we elaborate the analysis of delegitimation of authority and rationalisation, and separate two basic approaches to delegitimation. A delegitimation of an authority legitimisation is analysed as ‘unauthorisation’ (cf. Gustafsson 2009), e.g., when the PHA is questioned as expert authority. A delegitimation of a practice by reference to alternative authorities is analysed as ‘contra-authorisation’, e.g., when critiques invoke the authority of World Health Organisation (WHO) instead of the PHA. Similarly, delegitimisations of rationalisations are analysed as ‘irrationalisations’ (cf. Gustafsson 2009), most typically taking the form of negations, obligations or irony, that respond negatively to legitimisations. Delegitimisations which instead produce alternative rationalisations that do not correspond with the practices of the Swedish strategy, are analysed as ‘contra-rationalisations’.

In addition, we analyse affect as part of (de)legitimisations, and of the constitution and reproduction of discourses. Discourse is a social practice that evokes relations and ideologies through affective work, meaning that emotions are a central part of meaning-making (Ahmed 2014; Breeze 2019; Glapka 2019; Wetherell 2012: 10). In this article, ‘affect’ is used as an analytical concept to understand how emotions are used in discourse. Discourses and discursive practices can be affective if they concern ideologies and knowledge about a certain emotion in a certain time and place, so called ‘interpretative repertoires’ (Glapka 2019: 604). For instance, trust towards authorities have been found to be constitutive for the Swedish national identity (Andersson and Aylott 2020; Pierre 2020). In addition, affect is analysed as meaning-making through emotional subject positions (cf. Glapka 2019: 604), and how they support (de)legitimisations. Emotional subject positions are expressed through language in several ways, e.g., through the use of words for emotions, such as “worrying” or “being worried”, and through demands that position the reader, for instance as calm (“don’t worry”), or claims that position the writer, for instance as worried (“I am afraid”). Such positions are performative in that they not only express emotions, but also elicit emotions (Breeze 2019). Our approach to affect is thus that emotions are made meaningful

discursively through the practices in which they are expressed and elicited, and through the cultural interpretative frames of these practices.

4 Analysis and findings

The Swedish strategy is most commonly legitimised with reference to expert and personal authority, and by rationalisations with reference to goal, means and effects of different aspects of the practice as politicians and the PHA have defined it, such as keeping schools open, keeping distances instead of legislating on use of face masks, etc. The Swedish strategy is delegitimised through two somewhat different principles. One strategy is to respond to the legitimations done by the PHA and the politicians through unauthorisations and irrationalisations that question their authority and the rationality of their arguments. Another strategy is to respond directly to the social practice, the Swedish strategy, and provide contra-legitimisations that negatively evaluate the strategy as immoral and unequal, and that offer alternative authorities, such as the WHO and other nations, and alternative practices that are legitimised as rational.

4.1 Authority (de)legitimisations

Legitimisations of the Swedish strategy are found in references to expert authority. Most commonly, researchers and representatives from the Public Health Agency (PHA) are acknowledged as experts supporting concrete interventions and policies in the handling of the crisis. Recurring references to expert authorities and their statements are for instance: “According to the Public Health Agency ...”, “says the state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell ...” and “The scientific scholar X has shown that ...”. This act of placing public health representatives as experts before politicians was highlighted in Pierre (2020) and Bjørkdahl et al. (2021). Our findings show that sometimes, these experts also use authority of tradition to frame the COVID 19-strategy as a traditional Swedish way of acting. For instance, Tegnell is cited while referring to the so-called Swedish model (see Hilson 2008): “This works very well, it works according to the Swedish model and I am sure that we will be as successful as other countries in dealing with this issue.”

In March 2020, the Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven addressed the nation in a television speech. The speech centred around the need for citizens to act responsibly. Examples (1) and (2) are extracts from reports of the speech (The specific examples from the data that we have chosen to highlight in the analysis illustrate phenomena that we have noted in the data as a whole).

- (1) The Prime Minister addresses the nation and stresses the importance of citizens handling the emergent situation in the same way as we traditionally have handled crises. By rallying behind public institutions and their experts. But also, by adapting our behaviours, without the need for the public authorities to impose bans. Soft steering over hard.
- (2) – The only way to manage this is that we handle this crisis as a society where everyone takes responsibility for themselves, for each other and for our country. I know many people are worried. Worried about how our society will manage this. Worried about yourself, about someone you love that belongs to an at-risk group, or about losing your job. I understand that. The next few months will be hard. But our society is strong, said Löfven.

In (1), the writer invokes the authority of tradition. Practices such as “rallying behind public institutions and their experts”, “adopting our behaviours” and to apply “soft steering” without bans, are described with the word “traditionally”. The bottom-line is that Swedes traditionally trust authorities and experts.

Both examples stress the personal authority of the Prime Minister. Example (2) is a quote from the speech, where the personal authority of Löfven is revealed by the reference to him, “said Löfven”, and to the statements he makes: “The only way to manage this is that we handle ...” etc. Using his personal authority, Löfven offers the reader an emotional position of security. He first acknowledges people’s concerns “I know many people are worried [in Swedish: *oroliga*]”, and counters this through a contrastive statement, “but our society is strong”, which instead elicits emotions of feeling secure.

In her analysis of affect in political discourse, Breeze (2019) separates expressed emotions from elicited emotions. In the Prime Minister’s speech, the emotion of feeling secure is elicited by the expressed emotion of people being worried, which is delegitimised by the statement that our society is strong. The very process of reflecting and replacing people’s emotions also invites the readers to an emotional position of feeling trust in the authorities. And since the Prime Minister addresses the nation, his speech can be considered as an invitation for all citizens to share a ‘collective emotion’ (Ahmed 2014) of trusting the authorities to keep the country safe.

The combination of personal authority legitimation and emotional positions is recurrent in quotes and references to politicians. Our findings suggest that emotional positions such as feeling secure, not feeling fear and not panicking, are used specifically to elicit a collective feeling of trust. Politicians say for instance that it is “a waste of fear” to be afraid of being sick, that they “feel safe [in Swedish: *trygga*]” and are “far away from feeling panic”. Thus, affect is used discursively in legitimations. However, emotional positions are also part of the very practice that is being

legitimised. The Swedish COVID-19 strategy depends on a practice of citizens trusting authorities (Esaiaasson et al. 2021), and therefore, trust is commonly addressed more directly in legitimations. In an interview with the minister of foreign affairs, Ann Linde, the journalist quotes her answer to the question why no other nations are going the Swedish way. Linde refers to trust as typically Swedish:

- (3) I believe one of the greatest positive things in our community is that we have trust. We still have great trust, in each other but also in authorities and politicians.

In (3), the Swedish strategy is legitimised by referring to trust as an authority of tradition. Furthermore, trust is supposed to be the aspect that separates Sweden from other nations.

In delegitimations of the strategy, experts are often questioned. Examples (4) and (5) are extracts from a letter to the editor where an academic scholar in mathematics claims that the PHA has shown poor judgement in the handling of the crisis.

- (4) The Swedish line against the corona virus differs from the rest of the world. The Public Health Agency has shown poor judgement with its late restraining orders on nursing homes and its rejection of face masks, which rests on a gross logical fallacy, writes Marcus Carlsson, associate professor in mathematics.
- (5) In the Czech Republic, it is the law to use primitive face masks in public areas, and those who don't comply are seen in unfavourable ways. In the US, the equivalent of the PHA, with access to the same research material, has reached out and strongly recommended the public to wear these masks. But in Sweden, the PHA, for some obscure reason, is opposed to recommending it.

In (4), the writer's accusation that the PHA "has shown poor judgement" is an unauthorisation that makes the PHA untrustworthy as an expert authority. By citing the writer, the "associate professor in mathematics", an alternative expert is invoked. Thus, unauthorisation is followed by a contra-authorisation. In addition, the first sentence is an authorisation with reference to conformity, implying that Sweden deviates from common practice. The "Swedish line against the coronavirus" is said to differ "from the rest of the world".

In (5), contra-authorisation is made when the author refers to the strategies of other countries with different pandemic strategies. These nations are invoked as alternative role model authorities to delegitimise the authority of the Swedish PHA.

As regards affect, delegitimations of the strategy are often supported by emotional subject positions of worry and fear. This response to the politicians'

elicitation of emotions of security and trust makes visible the discrepancies between the affective decrees and the actual emotional reactions to lived experiences. In delegitimations, expressed emotions of worry and fear work as unauthorisations of the authorities. Example (6) is a news article about students starting a petition in protest against the PHA's recommendations not to close schools in Sweden.

- (6) “We draw the conclusion that the school environment is not a safe place for either students or teachers, as further spread of infection is likely within the next few days”, reads the text of the petition. [...] [A student] says that many people call in sick even though they are not sick, because they are afraid to go to school. – There are many. So many people are nervous about this.

In (6), the school is referred to as not “a safe place” [in Swedish: *en säker plats*], and students are said to be “afraid to go to school”, which expresses emotions of insecurity and fear. The reference to “many people” and their feeling of fear and nervousness, delegitimises the authority's guidelines to keep schools open, and the collective emotion of feeling security and trust that the authorities elicit. Affect is, in this case, a discursive practice that facilitates delegitimations by reference to conformity. Critique is not aimed at the authorities directly, but indirectly through delegitimations of their affective positions.

Finally, the Swedish strategy is delegitimised by invoking the authority of tradition to show discrepancies between what should be and what is. This is illustrated in (7), an extract from a letter to the editor written by a citizen, concerning the topic of priorities in the care of COVID-19 patients.

- (7) I never thought this would have to be said in Sweden. All people should have the same rights. Everyone is equal. This is enshrined in a number of laws. Nevertheless, the elderly who become seriously ill with COVID-19 are now being abandoned in a modern form of precipice. The National Board of Health and Welfare's priority rules state that older people should not receive respiratory assistance to the same extent as younger people. This is a shame for Sweden.

The declaration “I never thought this would have to be said in Sweden”, and the statement that equality is “enshrined in a number of laws”, imply that equality is characteristic for Sweden. The writer is of the opinion that the Swedish strategy leads to inequality in health care and the elderly “being abandoned”. In (7), equality is presented as an ideal that is treated as an authority of tradition. The statement “Everyone is equal” is a declaration of this national discourse. The discrepancy between the ideal and the negative effects of the strategy is also evaluated with reference to a morally framed emotion, shame [in Swedish: *skam*], and by the analogue between the strategy and a “precipice” [in Swedish: *ättestupa*], i.e., sacrificing the elderly.

4.2 Rationalisation, irrationalisation and contra-rationalisation

Rationalisations of the Swedish strategy are often combined with personal or expert authority, primarily in the statements made by the PHA, academic scholars and politicians. Example (8) contains another quote from the Prime Minister's speech to the nation.

- (8) – Now we all have a great responsibility. There will be a few crucial moments in your life when you will have to make sacrifices not only for your own sake but also to take responsibility for your surroundings, for your fellow human beings, and for our country. That moment is now. That day is here. And that task is for everyone. Each of us has a responsibility to prevent the spread of disease, to protect the elderly and other at-risk groups.

The quote in (8) contains theoretical rationalisations in the form of 'explanations' (Van Leeuwen 2007: 104). The Prime Minister addresses the Swedish citizens with the personal noun "you", and frames an individual responsibility as a practice tied to Sweden. Individuals are expected to take responsibility for "fellow human beings". This practice is legitimised by descriptions of activities expected of the Swedish citizens in "our country", e.g., "to make sacrifices", "to prevent the spread of disease" and "to protect the elderly and other at-risk groups".

In the data, personal responsibility as a central practice in the Swedish COVID-19 strategy is also legitimised by instrumental rationalisation, by pointing out the means, goals and effects of the practice. A physician in Stockholm is cited in a news article:

- (9) – The Swedish strategy is based on the idea that if you are well informed, you will be unwilling to contribute to the spread of infection and you can also take responsibility for your behaviour. I think it is a wise strategy and I am proud of it.

The physician uses an effect-oriented legitimation to explain the rationale of the strategy: people are well informed, therefore they will be willing to take responsibility for their behaviour, so that they will not contribute to the spread of infection. The quote ends with a positive evaluation of the strategy, as "wise", supported by an emotional subject position of being proud.

Another expert, a professor emeritus in mathematical statistics, legitimises the strategy as a means to gain immunity and, in the long term, provide for a situation with as few deaths as possible. In a letter to editor he writes:

- (10) It is in the nature of things that we in Sweden have higher death rates than some others. It is a consequence of the fact that we have our own strategy. By being less closed, we naturally suffer more deaths. But eventually, when we have achieved a certain immunity in society, the number of new deaths will decrease because the virus will find it increasingly difficult to spread. In a closed society, the spread of infection is limited because almost everyone is isolated.

In (10), the professor states that it is in “the nature of things” that Sweden had “higher death rates than some others”. This is a means-oriented rationalisation that says that in accordance with the Swedish COVID-19 strategy “being less closed”, the Swedish society will eventually reach immunity, and this will decrease the spread of the virus. The writer claims that the higher death rates at the moment are a natural consequence of this.

In the articles that delegitimise the Swedish COVID-19 strategy, we have found two types of delegitimations with reference to rationalisation. The authors who are critical towards the strategy produce alternative rationalisations that contradict the rationalisations that legitimise the strategy, for instance by suggesting alternative interventions and framing them as rational or true. Such contra-rationalisations are directed towards the strategy itself, and often occur with references to alternative authorities. Irrationalisations are directed towards the rationalisations of the strategy promoted by e.g., the PHA or academic scholars. In the statements that use negations, modal verbs for obligation, conjunctions or irony, the critics address the legitimations and make them appear irrational. The delegitimations in our data are occupied with issues concerning face masks, virus testing, social distancing and priorities in health care. They primarily concern the PHA’s grounds for recommendations, but also whether the PHA’s recommendations are grounded in reliable facts. They suggest that other recommendations would be more suitable.

Rationalisations directed towards the strategy itself can be found in statements concerning purposeful practices to handle the virus that are not part of the Swedish COVID-19 strategy. Example (11) is an extract from an article that published e-mails from readers telling about their experiences from healthcare during the first month of the pandemic.

- (11) One woman writes in an email: Most residents have poor hearing and therefore you move even closer – just to explain what you are going to do next or what pills the elderly person should take. There are lots of moments during the day when the caregivers come very close despite that activities and visits from people from the outside have been cancelled. Social distancing does not work in the elderly care!

In (11), the e-mail writer uses an experience based theoretical rationalisation by declaring some generalisations about caregivers; they need to work physically close to their patients in many situations. The writer claims that “social distancing does not work in the elderly care”. This delegitimises social distancing as a purposeful measure in healthcare.

In the articles that are critical towards the Swedish strategy, delegitimations are often made in direct dialogue with the PHA’s rationalisations. In a debate article, five researchers argue that one cannot draw any conclusions about the virus before more evidence has been published, and until then, the authorities need to be open about the uncertainties:

- (12) Only when population serological studies have been carried out will we have a good idea of the spread of the infection, and until then we should be open to different scientifically based predictions, even if they may appear frightening. [...] The pandemic crisis reinforces the urgency of an open and transparent debate. Claims and models should be substantiated and tested, and uncertainty in results should not be hidden.

In (12), the authors write that “we *should* be open”, that “claims and models *should* be substantiated and tested” and that uncertainty “*should not* be hidden” [our emphasis]. The modal verbs of obligation and the negation counter the rationalisations of the Swedish strategy and express a call for a different approach. The formulation “even if they [the predictions] may appear frightening” is an implicit answer to the emotion of not feeling worry that the authorities frequently elicited in the beginning of the pandemic. This statement acknowledges the possible emotional position of being afraid without replacing it with a position of being secure. Such alternative emotional positions sometimes appear in delegitimations.

Example (13) is an extract from the article that published e-mails and letters from readers (see also 11). Here, the experienced emotion of being in agony [in Swedish: *dödsångest*] and feeling worry supports an irrationalisation of the PHA’s absence of recommendations to wear face masks and to make changes in the routines in the elder care. Example (13) not only uses irrationalisations to delegitimise the Swedish COVID-19 strategy, but is also one of the few examples of mythopoesis in the data.

- (13) My mother receives home care. I called the manager because there have been no changes in the routines due to the pandemic. There are as many different staff, they don’t wear face masks. Her answer is that is the way it should be because they follow the guidelines of the Public Health Agency, so she as a manager is not doing anything wrong. My mother is in agony and the staff are worried about infecting their patients.

The story from the writer's everyday life serves as a cautionary example of the discrepancy between reality and the recommendations of the Swedish COVID-19 strategy. The discrepancy has to do with a perception that the health service is not taking enough responsibility to stop the spread of infection, while the manager refers to the fact that she is acting according to the PHA guidelines. The PHA leaves a collective responsibility to the service, but the perception is that they fail in their responsibilities towards the elderly since the guidelines are not sufficient enough to stop the infection. This uncertainty about how to deal with responsibility was also found in a broader European context (Ellerich-Groppe et al. 2021).

4.3 Moral evaluation and a discourse of equality

The Swedish strategy is rarely legitimised with reference to morals, but when it does occur, it is often in conjunction with authority legitimisation or rationalisation. Example (9) above shows how an effect-oriented rational legitimisation is followed by a moral legitimisation: "I think it is a wise strategy and I am proud of it". The emotional position of being proud reinforces the positive evaluation. This also occurs in (14), where the Prime Minister in his speech to the nation expresses pride when people take responsibility as fellow citizens. This pride, expressed with reference to his personal authority, indicates a positive evaluation of people taking responsibility and legitimises the Swedish strategy as morally right. Individual responsibility is framed as a matter of morals.

- (14) – I am proud to be Sweden's Prime Minister when I see what so many people do for their fellow human beings. There are many of you who take your responsibility as fellow human beings too.

Moral evaluations are otherwise most commonly found in delegitimations. The Swedish strategy is negatively valued as unethical and unequal. Most moral evaluations concern challenges in the elderly care, in which the Swedish COVID-19 strategy is accused of sacrificing the weakest in society.

Example (15) is an extract from a letter, where a citizen criticises the National Board of Health and Welfare for not providing respirator help for elderly care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- (15) In some military units you learn that no one should be left behind, everyone is going home (*no one left behind*). You do not abandon a wounded comrade, not even a dead one. This creates security and cohesion. One for all, all for one. No one is abandoned. Denying older people respirator assistance is cruel and inhuman. Many may say: "Yes, but if we do not have respirators for everyone, then we must prioritise..."

The writer uses an analogy in the form of a moral tale from a military situation, framing COVID-19 as a war, a trope we recognise from narratives about COVID-19 (cf. Wodak 2021). By association with emergency, feelings of fear are elicited. In the military, the writer says, “no one should be left behind”. The moral evaluations, “one for all, all for one” and “you do not abandon a wounded comrade”, express the foundation for a discourse of equality, and this in turn is a foundation for mutual trust and for feeling “security and cohesion”.

Another aspect that is morally evaluated is the discourse of trust, and the actual trust of authorities during the pandemic. In (16), an article in the culture section, trust is initially described as “one of the most precious things there is”, and evaluated in positive terms as “democracy’s greatest asset and prerequisite”. However, the writer counters this positive evaluation of the discourse of trust by questioning if trust actually prevails. Instead, a negative evaluation of “what today is called trust” as “a euphemism, even a lie” delegitimises the Swedish strategy.

- (16) Trust is one of the most precious things there is, between individuals as well as between the different components of society. Trust is democracy’s greatest asset and prerequisite – I am all for trust. But what is called trust today can actually be a euphemism, even a lie, and a way of putting the responsibility on someone else.

5 Discussion and conclusion

(De)legitimations of the Swedish COVID-19 strategy in the analysed morning paper can be explained with reference to deeply rooted nationalistic discourses about the social engineering of Swedish society and relationship between state and citizens. Similar results have been highlighted in previous research (Bjørkdahl et al. 2021; Esaiasson et al. 2021; Pierre 2020; Strang 2020), but in addition, the current study offers some important insights into the negotiation of the Swedish strategy in a media context, where several actors are part of the discursive framing of the strategy. We have empirically demonstrated how discourses about Sweden are used, not only in articles defining and legitimising the strategy, but also in articles engaged in dialogue with politicians, authorities, and others. From our in-depth analyses, one important finding is that the nationalistic framing intersects with additional frames, such as consequences for individuals’ everyday lives, or the frame of an international scientific community.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the field of (de)legitimation analysis through the development of methods for analysing and distinguishing between

different types of delegitimation, and through the analysis of affect as a meaning-making practice linking discourses to (de)legitimation.

The concept of trust is central to the perpetuation of national identity, and our analysis shows how it fulfils various discursive functions, which might be a key to understanding the specific Swedish nature of the Swedish COVID-19 strategy. Firstly, trust appears as a preconceived or explicit national discourse, anchored in the idea of the Swedish model. This discourse was legitimised by reference to trust as authority, and by positive moral evaluations of trust. We found no objections to the importance of this discourse to the Swedish society, merely objections of the actual existence and meaning of trust. This leads to the second interpretation of trust found in our data, namely as a strategy; trust was used in various ways either to legitimise or delegitimise the Swedish COVID-19 strategy. For instance, trust was used in irrationalisations that reacted to how the authorities took their responsibility to formulate recommendations grounded in scientific evidence, and how they drew up guidelines to protect the elderly.

We found that the politicians and the authorities maintained trust in several ways. They appeared as experts with rational arguments and as personal authorities eliciting a collective emotion of security. Mutual trust was crucial to ensure the willingness of citizens to support the strategy. However, as the texts presupposed, trust could only be maintained if both the state and its citizens took the responsibilities expected of them. Insecurities concerning the meaning and the distribution of responsibility lead to doubts and criticism, which is shown in our analysis of delegitimations.

Taken together, mutual trust is not an unconditional phenomenon, but it sets requirements on both the state and the citizens. In order to trust authorities, citizens must be able to trust their rational, scientific grounds for decision making. If they cannot do so, taking individual responsibility is a difficult task. In a globalised world, and especially concerning a global crisis as COVID-19, the comparison with other nations revealed a discrepancy that casted doubt on the Swedish authorities. This was particularly prominent in the delegitimations invoking alternative authorities and rationalisations (with reference to the WHO, other nations or contradictory scientific evidence), or questioning the legitimations made by the politicians and the PHA.

Additionally, delegitimations revealed the importance of equality for feeling trust toward the authorities. Equality was framed as an ideal for Sweden, and moral evaluations showed the discrepancy between this national ideal and the reality for many people during COVID-19. Again, uncertainty concerning responsibility affected the ability to trust the authorities. When guidelines assigned to the healthcare were not experienced as enough to stop the spread of the infection, there was a gap where emotions of worry enabled distrust. The limits of individual responsibility imposed

on citizens became apparent in the analysis when shortcomings in collective responsibility were pointed out.

Every nation struggled with their own problems in the management of the global pandemic crisis, and this article is by no means able or aiming to sort out whether the Swedish strategy was successful or not. However, to conclude our discussion above, the main issue was not the Swedish strategy as an idea, but the discrepancy that appeared between this idea and the implementation of it. This in turn had to do with uncertainties, limitations and shortcomings in the division and taking of responsibility. What Wodak (2021) and others have defined as a strategy that sacrificed the weak for the good of the majority, might in the light of our findings rather be interpreted as a sign of a transforming national identity and thus a threat to the discourse of mutual trust, rather than caused by the discourse of trust itself. The Swedish model is at the same time grounded in the idea of conservatism and force for progress (Linderborg 2001). This dilemma was put to the test in the COVID-19 crisis, since the familiar way to handle crises clashed with the need to be progressive in a situation new to the world.

Appendix

Original data extracts in Swedish

Example 1

Statsministern håller tal till nationen och understryker vikten av att invånarna hanterar den akuta situationen på samma sätt som vi traditionellt sett har hanterat kriser. Genom att sluta upp bakom offentliga institutioner och dess experter. Men också att vi anpassar våra beteenden, utan att det offentliga behöver fatta beslut om förbud. Mjuk styrning framför hård. (<https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/qaisar-mahmood-ett-mangfaldssamhalle-kraver-tydligare-signaler-fran-myndigheterna/>)

Example 2

– Enda sättet att klara av detta är att vi möter krisen som ett samhälle där alla tar ansvar för sig själv, för varandra och för vårt land. Jag vet att många är oroliga. Oroliga för hur vårt samhälle ska klara av det. Orolig för dig själv, för någon du älskar som tillhör en riskgrupp, eller för att ditt jobb ska försvinna. Jag förstår det. De närmsta månaderna kommer att bli påfrestande. Men vårt samhälle är starkt, sa Löfven. (<https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/lofven-detta-ar-en-avgorande-stund-for-vart-land/>)

Example 3

– Jag tror att en av de största positiva sakerna i vårt samhälle, det är att vi har tillit. Vi har fortfarande väldigt stor tillit, till varandra, men också till myndigheter och politiker. (<https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/utrikesminister-ann-linde-vi-har-en-valdigt-stor-tillit-i-sverige/>)

Example 4

Den svenska linjen mot coronaviruset avviker från resten av världen. Folkhälsomyndigheten har visat dåligt omdöme med sitt sena besöksförbud på äldreboenden och avvisandet av munskydd, som vilar på en grov logisk miss, skriver matematikdocenten Marcus Carlsson. (<https://www.dn.se/asikt/folkhalsomyndigheten-har-daligt-omdome/>)

Example 5

I Tjeckien är det lag på primitiva munskydd på allmän plats, och de som inte följer detta ses med oblidla ögon. I USA har myndigheten som motsvarar FHM, med tillgång till samma forskningsmaterial, gått ut och starkt rekommenderat allmänheten att bära dessa masker. Men i Sverige motsätter sig FHM av oklar anledning att rekommendera det. (<https://www.dn.se/asikt/folkhalsomyndigheten-har-daligt-omdome/>)

Example 6

”Vi drar slutsatsen att skolmiljön inte är en säker plats för varken eleverna eller lärare, då ytterligare smittspridning är trolig inom de kommande dagarna”, står det i texten till namninsamlingen. [...] Eleven [namn] har också skrivit under. Han menar att många sjukanmäler sig trots att de inte är sjuka, eftersom de är rädda för att gå till skolan. – Det är jättemånga. Det är så många som är nervösa över det här. (<https://www.dn.se/sthlm/ingen-ville-sitta-bredvid-en-elev-som-hade-varit-i-alperna/>)

Example 7

Jag trodde aldrig att det här skulle behöva sägas i Sverige. Alla människor ska ha samma rättigheter. Alla människor är lika mycket värda. Det står inskrivet i en mängd lagar. Ändå överges äldre som blir svårt sjuka i covid-19 i en modern form av

ättestupa. I Socialstyrelsens prioriteringsregler säger man att äldre inte ska få respiratorhjälp i samma utsträckning som yngre. Det är en skam för Sverige. (<https://www.dn.se/asikt/aldre-overgesi-en-modern-form-av-attestupa/>)

Example 8

– Nu har vi alla ett stort eget ansvar. Det kommer några få, avgörande stunder i livet då du måste göra uppoffringar inte bara för din egen skull utan också för att ta ansvar för din omgivning, för dina medmänniskor, och för vårt land. Den stunden är nu. Den dagen är här. Och den uppgiften gäller alla. Var och en av oss har ett ansvar att förhindra smittspridning, att skydda äldre och andra riskgrupper. (<https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/lofven-detta-ar-en-avgorande-stund-for-vart-land/>)

Example 9

– Den svenska strategin bygger på att om man är välinformerad så är det ingen som vill bidra till smittspridning och då kan man även ta ansvar för sitt beteende. Jag tycker att det är en klok strategi och jag är stolt över den. (<https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/utmaning-for-myndigheterna-att-fa-folket-att-folja-instruktioner/>)

Example 10

Att vi i Sverige i vissa avseenden har högre dödstal än vissa andra ligger i sakens natur. Det är en konsekvens av att vi har en egen strategi. Genom att vara mindre slutna råkar vi, naturligtvis, ut för flera dödsfall. Men så småningom, när vi har uppnått en viss immunitet i samhället, kommer antalet nya dödsfall att avta eftersom viruset får det allt knepigare att sprida sig. I det slutna samhället får man en begränsad smittspridning eftersom nästan alla är isolerade. (<https://www.dn.se/insandare/svenska-strategin-har-hela-manniskan-i-fokus/>)

Example 11

En kvinna skriver i ett mejl: ”Dom flesta boende hör dåligt och då kommer man ännu närmare – bara för att förklara vad man kommer att göra eller vilka tabletter den äldre ska ta nu. Det finns massor av moment då vårdpersonalen kommer mycket nära hela dagen trots att man har inställt aktiviteter och besök från personer utanför. Social

distansering fungerar inte i äldreomsorgen!” (<https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/lasarnas-berattelser-om-smittspidningen-i-aldrevarden-inte-bekymmersamt-det-ar-katastrofalt/>)

Example 12

Inte förrän serologiska studier i befolkningen genomförts får vi en bra uppfattning om utbredningen av smittan och fram till dess så bör vi vara öppna för olika vetenskapligt baserade prognoser, även om de kan uppfattas skrämmande. [...] Pandemikrisen ökar det angelägna i en öppen och transparent debatt. Påståenden och modeller bör beläggas och provas och osäkerhet i resultat får inte gömmas undan. (<https://www.dn.se/debatt/vi-maste-vara-oppna-ocks-a-for-skrammande-prognoser/>)

Example 13

Min mamma får hemtjänst. Jag ringde chefen eftersom inga ändringar i rutinerna gjorts sedan pandemin. Det är lika många olika personal, de bär inte munskydd. Hennes svar är att så ska det vara för de rättar sig efter folkhälsomyndigheternas riktlinjer så hon som chef gör inget fel. Min mamma har dödsångest och personalen är oroliga för att smitta sina vårdtagare. (<https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/lasarnas-berattelser-om-smittspidningen-i-aldrevarden-inte-bekymmersamt-det-ar-katastrofalt/>)

Example 14

– Jag är stolt över att vara Sveriges statsminister när jag ser vad så många gör för sina medmänniskor. Ni är många som tar ert ansvar också som medmänniskor. (<https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/lofven-detta-ar-en-avgorande-stund-for-vart-land/>)

Example 15

I vissa militära förband får man lära sig att ingen ska lämnas kvar, alla ska med hem (*no one left behind*). Man överger inte en sårad kamrat, inte ens en död. Det skapar trygghet och sammanhållning. En för alla, alla för en. Ingen överges. Att förvägra äldre respiratorhjälp är grymt och omänskligt. Många säger kanske: ”Ja, men har vi inte respiratorer så det räcker till alla så måste vi väl prioritera ...” (<https://www.dn.se/asikt/aldre-overgesi-en-modern-form-av-attestupa/>)

Example 16

Tillit är något av det mest värdefulla som finns, mellan enskilda människor såväl som mellan samhällets olika beståndsdelar. Tillit utgör demokratins största tillgång och förutsättning – jag är helt för tillit. Men det som i dag kallas tillit kan faktiskt vara en försköning, till och med en lögn, och ett sätt att lägga ansvaret på någon annan. (<https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/elisabeth-asbrink-coronakrisen-visar-att-sverige-ar-ett-fredsskadat-land/>)

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Bionotes

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