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Legitimating Policy Branding: Constructing "Sellability" of Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This article examines how foreign policy branding is legitimated as a response to human rights crises. Drawing on legitimation theory (van Leeuwen, 2007), this study takes a discourse perspective with a focus on the enactment of foreign policy in communication and argues that legitimacy is the foundation for constructing a convincing and credible image of a country and its foreign policy. Building on the example of Sweden's feminist foreign policy and an analysis of relevant policy documents, three themes were formulated. These illustrate that Sweden's feminist foreign policy branding was legitimated by framing the policy as a form of "good" activism, creating a knowledge brand of the policy, and aligning the policy branding with established discourses of solidarity. Thus, the study suggests that a branding logic imposed by the attention economy leads foreign policy communication to focus on constructing "sellability" of foreign policy, legitimating it in ways that make it relatable to wider publics. This article contributes to foreign policy communication research through the conceptual development of foreign policy branding.

Keywords

branding logic; discourse; feminist foreign policy; foreign policy branding; government communication; legitimation; Sweden

1. Introduction

This study builds on and problematizes previous literature on nation branding and international relations by arguing that foreign policy, the extension of a nation's interests abroad (Roselle, 2019), needs to be studied from a dynamic communication perspective. Going beyond the view of foreign policy communication as a projection of narratives (e.g., Miskimmon et al., 2013), this study proposes that foreign policy be investigated as

a discursive practice that needs to be "sold." This is a consequence of globalization and the attention economy (e.g., Jansen, 2008; Kaefer, 2020; Zulli, 2018), which increasingly pressures states to position themselves and to compete with others. Furthermore, a shifting global security agenda prompts countries to work with their reputation for their security (e.g., Cull, 2022), which leads to increased demand for countries to "do good." To "sell" foreign policy and their "doing good," states engage in branding practices. This extends to the branding of foreign policy—a practice and phenomenon that has scarcely been addressed in the literature.

Examining the empirical case in point of Sweden's feminist foreign policy, this study aims to gain an understanding of how policy branding, as an indicator of what a country can bring to the world (Browning, 2021), is legitimated as a response to global human rights crises. Sweden has for several decades sought to position itself as a progressive frontrunner and thus a role model for other countries to follow (e.g., Jezierska & Towns, 2021; Marklund, 2017; Towns, 2002) and expressed a sense of moral superiority (e.g., Nylund et al., 2023), of which its feminist foreign policy, introduced in 2014, can be seen as a continuation. Several other countries have since followed the Swedish example by including feminist perspectives and approaches in their foreign policy. There has, however, also been "a marginal, yet growing (inter)national discussion" on whether Sweden lives up to its reputation of being a "good," "open," and "safe" society (Marklund, 2017, p. 624). Browning (2021, p. 26) also noted that branding the foreign policy as feminist "raised some interesting questions, in particular with regard to the distinction between 'doing good' and the imperative to 'be seen to be doing good.' " The policy was abolished in 2022 by the newly elected government with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Tobias Billström, stating that the feminist terminology tended to obscure the policy's content (Julin, 2022, para. 8). These examples of skepticism illustrate that publics abroad and at home must be convinced of a policy's usefulness, rightfulness, and efficacy. In this vein, the article assumes that government communication strategically works by formulating answers to the publics' "spoken or unspoken 'why' question" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 94).

Inspired by Dolea (2018) and Kaneva (2014) and based on the notion that foreign policy is enacted and brought to life through communication, this study takes a discourse perspective on foreign policy. It zooms in on the making, hence, the discursive enactment of foreign policy branding at an early "point" in the communication process, that is, constructing legitimation of foreign policy. Such legitimation, the article argues, lays the ground for constructing a convincing and credible image of the country and its foreign policy. To explore this, the study employs a framework based on legitimation theory (van Leeuwen, 2007) and conducts a discourse analysis of action plans as the key official communication documents for the policy, asking the following research question: How was Sweden's feminist foreign policy legitimated in government communication?

2. Foreign Policy in a Branding Logic

The overarching concept of this study is foreign policy communication, which entails foreign policy branding as a way of communicating a country's values to various publics, with the goal of "selling" foreign policy. Embracing both the notion of the "brand"—a construct—and of "branding"—a construction process—the article will discuss an overarching branding logic that guides foreign policy enactment in communication. Foreign policy communication has been described as a tool for states to "declare their intentions and prime concerns, which both aid their internal policy integrity and international perception as a consistent actor" (Sheludiakova et al., 2021, p. 1). International relations literature tends to focus on foreign policy as a reality with linear communication processes, which is mirrored in the concept of strategic narrative (e.g., Miskimmon et al., 2013,

2017; Roselle et al., 2014; Zhukova et al., 2022); or it views communication as a tool to extend foreign policy and thus generate soft power (e.g., Chitty, 2017; Nye, 2008). In other words, foreign policy communication is under-researched in terms of how it discursively enacts policy.

It has been proposed that "policy formulation should take account of how the policy could be sold later" (Riordan, 2005, p. 187), as it will be easier to implement if key stakeholders buy into it. This, in turn, is intended to positively impact countries' international standing. The policy must also be sold at home, both to increase the support of domestic audiences (as, for example, in the war on terrorism in the US; e.g., Zaharna, 2010) and of practitioners in relevant organizations (see, for example, in the legitimation of conflicting targets in organizations; Rahm & Thelander, 2021).

Branding is "about showing others what we consider to be desirable, in the hope (and expectation) that it will be emulated" (van Ham, 2014, p. 22), for example, by providing "an emotional dimension with which people can identify" (Gilboa, 2008, p. 67). It is about using strategic communication practices to influence "a customer's idea about a product" (van Ham, 2001, p. 2), in this case, various domestic and international publics' understanding of the usefulness, rightfulness, and efficacy of a certain foreign policy.

In international relations, branding logic implies the competition for political power through "mind share and market share" (van Ham, 2008, p. 129). One aspect of this is the increasing pressure to "sell" foreign policy (see Riordan, 2005; van Ham, 2008), which is linked to countries' identity, status, loyalty, reputation, and recognition in the global attention economy (e.g., Jansen, 2008; Kaefer, 2020; Zulli, 2018), "where a lack of visibility is seen as inherently problematic" (Browning, 2015, p. 196). Thus, branding can be seen as the production of information, which tends to rely "on the ability to appropriate, enclose or otherwise valorize a socially produced surplus" (Arvidsson, 2007, p. 7), like the attractiveness of an authentic, solidaric foreign policy.

Anholt (2015, p. 190) argued that "countries are judged by what they do, not by what they say," which is why he finds the "promise that the images of countries can be directly manipulated using the techniques of commercial marketing communications" to be a "dangerously misleading phrase." However, it seems that "showing" might weigh heavier than "doing" in the sense that nation branding is not about what countries actually do; instead, nation brands seem to be "best understood as simulacra of the nation—that is, copies without an original—rather than as genuine representations or expressions of nations" (Kaneva, 2023, p. 164). Foreign policy, then, is discursively constructed in communication for the purpose of securing "a place on the high ground of the global imagination" (Cull, 2019, p. 29). Simultaneously, however, countries such as Sweden have to walk a tightrope so as not to "appear as self-righteous in the quest for moral status, as that would usurp the moral superiority crown" (Jezierska & Towns, 2021, p. 57).

As a form of strategic communication, country and foreign policy brands express a "logic of control" (Arvidsson, 2007, p. 26). This is imposed by the attention economy and illustrates an inherent sense of superiority of the country engaging in branding. Following this logic, some norms and values—constructed as "belonging to a country"—are made more desirable than others (for the Swedish context, see Jezierska & Towns, 2018; Karlsson, 2022) via foreign policy. In other words, states want to form "the way we see the world" (van Ham, 2014, p. 19), and they do so by proposing certain frames in communication and thus limiting the range of interpretive possibilities of, for example, the legitimacy of their foreign policy. This aspect of the branding logic

highlights perhaps its most important and, at the same time, most problematic characteristic. Not only does it contribute to constructing social hierarchies, which then "situate actors in a pecking order of superordination and subordination" (Towns & Rumelili, 2017, p. 764), but it also incentivizes the selection, simplification, and deployment (Jansen, 2008) of only aspects of a country's values and political agenda in foreign policy that enhance their marketability.

An illustrative example of this is norm advocacy, or norm entrepreneurship, as exemplified by Sweden's approach (see Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016; Davies & True, 2017). Norm entrepreneurs are actors with "strong notions about appropriate or desirable behavior" in the global community (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 896). They "engage in frame competition, trying to persuade relevant audiences and actors to see things their way" (van Ham, 2014, p. 20), often constructing new visions of reality (Jansen, 2008). From these, some actors, i.e., the initiating country, tend to benefit more than others. The norms and values that are extended beyond national borders are usually those that "fit rather coherently within the status quo," as these "are generally considered less threatening…more legitimate" (van Ham, 2014, p. 20), and more likely to be accepted by intended publics (see Rosén Sundström et al., 2021). And, as it is the publics who judge (policy) branding efforts, legitimizing foreign policy in their eyes is crucial (van Ham, 2014).

This article proposes that foreign policy branding is a discourse in which some aspects of a state's interests and policy agenda are emphasized, and others are marginalized. Thus, it reproduces power relations and contributes to the construction of a worldview in which it is accepted as an organizing principle of international relations. However, while foreign policy is enacted in a branding logic and should be critically interrogated, the relationship between branding and foreign policy has so far not been explored extensively. Providing a first glimpse into the phenomenon, this study, therefore, focuses on authorities engaging in the legitimation of foreign policy branding.

3. Foreign Policy Branding Through a Legitimation Theory Lens

In branding logic, foreign policy must be legitimated to become more "sellable." To understand how legitimation practices around foreign policy play out, this study employs a framework based on legitimation theory (van Leeuwen, 2007), which is embedded in the field of discourse theory. Discourse establishes, consolidates, and implements power relations, which in turn permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body and are more profitable for some actors than others (Foucault, 1980; Miskimmon et al., 2013). Discourse "defines and produces the objects of our knowledge" through language, constructs topics, and governs how they "can be meaningfully talked…and reasoned about" (Hall, 1997, p. 44). It constitutes social practices and adds to them purposes and legitimations—"an answer to the spoken or unspoken 'why' question" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 94).

The construction of legitimacy enables the linking of social practices and "discourses of value" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 109). Thus, communication "produces and reproduces (i.e., legitimates) a particular structure of power relations (i.e., system of interests) to the arbitrary exclusion of other possible configurations of interests" (Deetz & Mumby, 1990, p. 42)—which, in the context of foreign policy, can happen through norm entrepreneurship. "Legitimacy is a power reality," and "competitive struggles over legitimacy are part of enhancing or depriving actors of soft power" (Nye, 2013, p. 568). However, going beyond the notion of soft power, power can also be seen as "the ability to set standards and create norms and values that are deemed

legitimate and desirable" (van Ham, 2014, p. 19). Power is thus viewed here as "fluid and non-linear," moving through relationships and communication (van Ham, 2014, p. 18).

The following is a selective account of the key categories of legitimation suggested by van Leeuwen (2007). These forms of legitimation, he argues, can occur separately or in combination; "they can be used to legitimize, but also to de-legitimize, to critique"; they can be explicit or subtle; and they all manifest in language (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92).

Authorization means "legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). There are several sub-forms, such as: expert authority, where legitimacy is provided by expertise; role model authority, where legitimacy is provided by role models or opinion leaders; and impersonal authority, where legitimacy is provided through laws, rules, policies, or guidelines. Another sub-form is the authority of tradition, where legitimacy is proved because it has always been like that.

Moral evaluation means "legitimation by (often very oblique) reference to value systems" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). Here, legitimation is "linked to specific discourses of moral value" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 97). Usually, however, these discourses are only hinted at. One sub-form is evaluation through "naturalization"; another sub-form is abstraction, where moral evaluation is expressed by "referring to practices…in abstract ways that 'moralize' them by distilling from them a quality that links them to discourses of moral values" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 99). In other words, it is about using abstractions to foreground the desired and legitimate qualities of an action.

Rationalization means "legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). One sub-form is instrumental rationalization, meaning "reference to…goals, uses and effects" containing an element of moralization (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 101). Types of instrumentality are goal-, means-, and effect-orientation. The other sub-form is theoretical rationalization, meaning legitimation "by reference to a natural order of things," that is, "the way things are" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 103). Relying on generalization, this sub-form can be expressed by defining an activity in terms of another moralized activity, by explaining one or more actors involved in the practice, or by providing predictions based on expertise.

Mythopoesis means "legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 92). It can take the form of either moral tales or cautionary tales.

The legitimation theory framework informed the coding of the empirical material. Van Leeuwen (2018, p. 144) argues that "critical discourse analysis must go beyond linguistic analysis if it is to convincingly identify misrepresentations." Consequently, attention will also be paid to silences, that is, aspects that are not highlighted in the branding discourse but that could have been expected to emerge given the previous literature and human rights discourse.

4. Methodology

To explore an empirical example of how foreign policy branding is being enacted in a particular setting, the study focuses on Sweden's feminist foreign policy and the government communication thereof.

Since the 1990s, when Sweden entered the EU, gender equality has been a priority area for the country (Towns, 2002). In 2014, the left-green coalition government introduced Sweden's feminist foreign policy, which was in force until 2022, when the newly elected liberal-right coalition government announced that the country's foreign policy would no longer be called "feminist." In the last decades, Sweden also increasingly turned from its conception of cosmopolitan duty, as mirrored, for example, in international aid, multilateralism, and a form of general activism beyond national borders towards Europe and even more so to the closer neighborhood (Bergman, 2007; Brommesson, 2018).

Sweden's feminist foreign policy was "embedded in the broader global efforts to promote gender equality in the international arena" following the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, p. 323), with Sweden playing a leading role in the implementation of the resolution (Rosén Sundström & Elgström, 2020). Thus, it could be seen as a response to an ongoing global human and especially women's rights crisis, understood in broader terms as a systematic subordination of women and girls. The feminist foreign policy was part of Sweden's overall branding as a feminist nation at the time (see Bergman Rosamond & Hedling, 2022) and an example of how gender-friendly norms could act as an "identity marker," describing who a country is and "how it intends to conduct itself in the world" (Lee-Koo, 2020, p. 240). Sweden thus exemplified a small country striving to make its voice heard by carving out a reputational niche (Jansen, 2008; van Ham, 2001). This suggested a strategy aimed at greater global influence and increased security through branding (Aggestam & True, 2020; Bergman Rosamond, 2020; Zhukova et al., 2022).

Being a form of strategic government communication, the empirical material for this study consists of action plans on Swedish feminist foreign policy published by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs annually from 2015 to 2021. The action plans are a platform on which the meaning of the policy is constructed and are therefore considered artifacts of strategic communication that offer "insight into the key nodal points employed in discursive constructions of the contents, normative ambitions, and potential pitfalls of [feminist foreign policy]" (Bergman Rosamond, 2020, p. 226). From 2017 onwards, the action plans even formed part of the Foreign Service's operational planning and resource allocation process (see action plans since 2017) in that they specify "approaches, starting points, tools, and actors" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016, p. 1). They furthermore constituted a written rationale and a strategy for understanding and communicating the policy. This study argues that the action plans can also be seen as branding strategy papers that proposed certain interpretative frames with the purpose not only to inform and to indicate a standpoint but also to persuade publics of the policy's legitimacy.

The material is analyzed by means of discourse analysis, following an iterative, abductive approach in which van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation categories inspired the coding.

5. Legitimating the Feminist Branding of Sweden's Foreign Policy

5.1. Framing the Policy as a Form of "Good" Activism

The first theme emerges from legitimation practices such as mythopoesis, especially in the form of moral tales (van Leeuwen, 2007). Only the beginning of these tales is spelled out, implying that the reader can finish them in their mind: If Sweden gets it right, a feminist foreign policy will make the world a better place.

Mythopoesis is in the material frequently linked to other categories of legitimation, such as theoretical rationalization (van Leeuwen, 2007). In the form of cautionary tales, this form of legitimation can also be seen as a twisted form of "negative" naturalization in that the "natural" order of things, if there were no feminist foreign policy, is shown. This helps frame the policy as a part of the solution. It also implies that the reader understands what would happen if the story continued—namely, a bad world—as exemplified in the following quote:

> Around the world, gender equality has improved. The proportion of women in parliaments is increasing. More girls go to school. And yet the commitments made at the World Conference on Women in 1995 are far from being fulfilled. Violence, oppression and systematic subordination still mark the daily lives of countless women and girls. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 4)

Another example of a cautionary tale, or parts thereof, is the following: "Opportunities for people to achieve their full potential and contribute to positive social development are hindered by discriminatory gender norms" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016, p. 11). These two examples can also be seen as legitimation by prediction based on expertise as a form of theoretical rationalization. The latter can also be seen as an example of "negative" naturalization.

In general terms, addressing issues of gender equality can, in international relations, be considered radical, unfamiliar, and untested (Rosén Sundström et al., 2021). Considering, however, that "the most successful brands target powerful ideological contradictions produced by society" (Melki & Jabado, 2016, p. 99), Sweden's foreign policy was legitimated through a policy branding that evokes an activist notion. In other words, by attempting to legitimate the meaningfulness of its purpose to the international community, the discursive enactment performed in the action plans activated the feminist foreign policy as a "good" brand practice.

5.2. Creating a Knowledge Brand of the Policy

The second theme emerges, among others, from authorization, frequently in the form of "policy authority" and expert authority, linked to moral evaluation and abstraction (van Leeuwen, 2007). Policies established by supranational authorities and frameworks serve as grounds for legitimating Sweden's feminist foreign policy. For example, reference is made to the still unfulfilled commitments made at the World Conference on Women in 1995, adherence to the 2030 Agenda, linkages to the framework of the Human Rights Council, and the work of the World Humanitarian Summit. Other examples are the adherence to the Istanbul Convention, the EU guidelines, and the regulatory framework within the EU internal market. All of these could also be considered examples of moral evaluation in the form of abstraction. Some could also be considered expert authority. Sweden's membership of the UN Security Council in 2017 and 2018, as an example of role model authority, adds to this dynamic.

The policy is also discursively legitimated through notions of expert authority (van Leeuwen, 2007), for example, when Sweden implies its expertise by arguing for its excellent monitoring skills: "Like the rest of the operational plan, the action plan will be monitored….This will enable us to learn from experience" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 4). Another example is the highlighting of collaborations, for example, with the Red Cross, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, the International Criminal Court, the

UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, UN Women, and many others, which implies legitimacy by hinting towards endorsement by already established "experts." This can also be seen as an example of role model authority and moral evaluation. Legitimation by role model authority can furthermore be found in the omnipresent notions of uniqueness and firstness around Sweden's feminist foreign policy. However, this is only mentioned in the summary and foreword of the action plans of the first years (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, 2016, 2017), indicating a shift in the narrative after 2017.

Further, by building on the "natural" discourse that ensuring gender equality is important, legitimation by naturalization (van Leeuwen, 2007) happens on different levels in the text. One way is by referring to "our" feminist foreign policy several times throughout the action plans. This way, Sweden presented feminism "as a self-evident Swedish value" (Nylund et al., 2023, p. 269) and used pro-gender norms to suggest that it is a progressive country (Thomson, 2020). Thus, Sweden was portrayed as a natural leader and expert endorsed by other experts, which helped to legitimate the feminist foreign policy as part of a Swedish "knowledge brand" (Browning, 2021).

5.3. Aligning the Policy Branding With Established Discourses of Solidarity

The third theme emerges from legitimation practices such as constructing law-based authority (van Leeuwen, 2007), for example, by highlighting how the policy "is based on international law and international and EU agreements" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 13). In general, legitimation through moral evaluation, abstraction, and authorization (van Leeuwen, 2007) can be found when actions are located within wider regulatory frameworks or in the context of organizations that are considered to do "the right thing," thus distilling qualities of moral value that links them to discourses of morality. Examples are links to UN Women, the Red Cross, and others, as also illustrated in the previous theme.

The following two quotes can be seen as examples both of legitimation by moral evaluation and by goal-oriented rationalization: "Sweden wants this discrimination to end" and it will "intensify efforts to guarantee the sexual and reproductive rights of all people" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016, p. 3, p. 1). Thus, strategic efforts are constructed as following a "morally sound" direction.

Examples of legitimation through goal orientation as a form of instrumental rationalization can be found in the following quote, which also appears in slightly different forms in other action plans: "Gender equality is a goal in itself. But it is also essential for the achievement of the Government's other overall objectives, such as peace, security and sustainable development. This is why gender equality and human rights efforts must continue unabated" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 2). Another example of legitimation by goal orientation can be found in the following quote:

> Throughout our foreign policy, including in peace and security efforts, we will apply a systematic gender perspective. In so doing, we can contribute to real progress. And in so doing, we will become the strongest global voice for gender equality and the full enjoyment of human rights by all women and girls. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016, p. 3)

This can also be seen as an example of naturalization, as well as expert authority and even some aspects of role model authority that legitimate the policy branding.

In some instances, legitimation by rationalization, both in terms of goal and means orientation, can also be found, as this example shows: "By applying this deeper, broader and more systematic approach, the feminist foreign policy will develop to achieve results that strengthen the rights, representation and resources of all women and girls" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 2). At several points, Sweden's monitoring and evaluation work is highlighted, indicating legitimation by rationalization through effect orientation. An example of means orientation is the highlighting of Sweden's membership of the UN Security Council in 2017 and 2018, which provides "an additional platform" for Sweden's gender equality work (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016, p. 3). In terms of means orientation, the following quote provides another example, which also appears in slightly different forms in the other action plans:

> The Foreign Service will use its Sweden promotion activities to advance gender equality and the rights of women and girls, both as a separate agenda and when promoting the image of Sweden abroad. As part of this, the annual work on promotion plans will be used to map gender equality promotion by the missions abroad. (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 18)

Theoretical rationalization can be found throughout the text when the activities of the policy are defined in terms of other moralized activities, such as adhering to the law, Agenda 2023, or human rights. This is often linked to legitimation by authorization.

Sweden enacted narratives of "broader global problems (for example, poverty, international insecurity, migration, etc.) to be solved by addressing gender inequality" (Zhukova et al., 2022, p. 200). Against this backdrop, linking the policy to already established frameworks was an attempt to align the policy branding with recognized efforts to tackle sociopolitical issues, thus legitimating it as part of a broader global solidarity discourse.

5.4. Discussion

The analysis suggests three themes that illustrate how Sweden's feminist foreign policy branding was legitimated: by framing the policy as a form of "good" activism, by creating a knowledge brand of the policy, and by aligning the policy branding with established discourses of solidarity. However, these three themes reveal tensions in the discourse. On the one hand, the feminist foreign policy is committed to provoking and implementing change. On the other hand, foreign policy needs to serve a country by making it recognizable and securing an advantageous (security) position. This tension is mirrored in a potential contradiction of the first and the third themes, with the first proposing an activist position and the third proposing a seamless insertion into an established paradigm.

However, both themes indicate discursively constructed performances that contribute to legitimating the feminist foreign policy branding as "doing good." To this end, the activist positioning and the embedding, together with the strategy of creating a knowledge brand, ultimately tapped into and utilized the momentum of (hegemonic) human rights discourse, albeit from different angles.

Furthermore, the action plans embrace a certain degree of vagueness insofar as they are kept quite general, which is a contributing factor in concealing these tensions. This indicates that—in accordance with branding logic—in the making, the formulation, and especially the legitimation of foreign policy, the professionals

responsible for it probably consider its appeal to broad publics. It also mirrors practical issues with communicating a polarizing branding such as that of the feminist foreign policy, which, at the end of the day, individual public diplomacy practitioners had to handle.

This interpretation suggests that Sweden, when seen as following a branding logic, discursively legitimated and enacted foreign policy in a way that also commodified, to some extent, the societal issue of gender (in)equality. This dynamic may perhaps have been inevitable considering the competition for attention among states. However, it challenged Sweden to balance authenticity in pursuing political ambitions to address human rights crises and self-exposure to the potential critique of disconnecting activist messages and actual practice (see Vredenburg et al., 2020).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Sweden's feminist foreign policy is an example of foreign policy branding, which was legitimated on different grounds as a response to and part of the solution to human rights crises. This can be seen as a reaction to pressures from globalization and the attention economy, which increasingly tie countries' security to reputation and thus (self)promotion (see Pamment et al., 2023). Consequently, government communication of the feminist foreign policy, beyond making meaning of its content and objectives, focused on constructing relatability and "sellability." This suggests that when foreign policy is being branded—even if that branding can be seen as provocative, like in the case of Sweden's feminist foreign policy—a higher degree of relatability, allowing as many people as possible to accept it, comes at the price of edginess and possibly also precision. Thus, the attention economy permeates international relations with a branding logic governed by consumer orientation, that is, giving consumers what they want. For Sweden's feminist foreign policy, that meant support from some and opposition from others (see Towns et al., 2023), and ultimately an ending eight years after its launch.

Following a branding logic, crises can be seen as a catalyst for both the introduction and—perhaps paradoxically—the abolition of Sweden's feminist foreign policy. The prospect of being able to contribute with a response to human rights and especially women's rights crises has made the launch of a feminist foreign policy interesting for Sweden. However, domestic political polarization, war in Europe, a general political shift to the right, and a changing security agenda seem to motivate a change of priorities in this regard. One can also conclude that the reason that a "good cause" needed convincing is that it perhaps was more activist than the world could handle—which in turn could be an indicator that it actually hit a (too) sore spot of the global community.

On the one hand, for foreign policy more generally, the findings of this article suggest that the dynamics of the attention economy, as well as the current developments in the world, unfortunately, do not seem to encourage activist and progressive foreign policy approaches (see Rosén Sundström & Elgström, 2020). Part of the reasons are that the attention economy incentivizes relatability and "sellability" of policy branding and that the current developments—including the increase of (gender-)conservative forces—make the legitimation of such policy branding harder because of increasing contestation. On the other hand, several countries have, in recent years, followed Sweden's lead in adopting feminist approaches to their foreign policy. In this sense, Sweden has succeeded in its (former) quest of being a progressive frontrunner and role model. It furthermore indicates an increase of interest in gender-related issues and in adopting a respective lens when addressing

topics of societal concern globally. This may also be credited to Sweden's feminist foreign policy branding and its capability to appeal to a big crowd.

This study contributes insight into and conceptual development of the phenomenon of foreign policy branding—a practice that will probably see an increase but that has so far only been touched superficially in the literature. It encourages the consideration that foreign policy branding—despite its challenges and pitfalls—holds the potential to promote and implement change, not least because "looking good" ultimately only works if a country actually "does good." Since foreign policy positions countries in the global (geo)political landscape, it cannot escape public expectations. However, it also has the potential to raise awareness of societal problems at a global level, which may, in turn, raise public expectations of state "activism." On a more critical note, however, it must be noted that highlighting one issue necessarily goes hand in hand with obscuring others. Foreign policy branding, therefore, goes beyond differentiating a country from other countries and their foreign policies: it can be a way of defining a standpoint, as it involves deciding and showing who and what issues a country stands for—something that is essential for today's crisis-ridden world.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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