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SWEDEN AS A "PARIAH STATE"
IN TIMES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

INTRODUCTION

The world is currently struggling with yet another challenge – the COVID-19 pandemic which struck almost all countries at the beginning of 2020. Although coronavirus is a global threat and challenge, European Union will be given here as an object of analysis – a specific case study, where all its member states will be subject to analysis with special regard to Sweden. The European Union since the outbreak of pandemic is trying to face it and find mechanisms supporting combating it. Similar to the refugee crisis, COVID-19 again exposed the lack of unanimity within the European Union, which member states at first had difficulties in finding joint solutions to new challenges. Most of the recommendations within freedom of movement issued by the EU were at the end followed by the member states, however, the attitude of certain governments and the general extent of limitations related to pandemic differed between them as well (European Commission 2020d).

The main research problem relates to whether making decisions different than majority influence the perception of a state, and possibly makes it a "pariah state"? Such tendencies could have been observed in the past when we take into consideration the European Union. One such example is Poland, which in recent years often stands in opposition to the main EU's political line. The brightest display of such opposition could be observed in 2016 during the migration crisis when Poland refused to obey the proposed relocation plan despite accepting it first. Since then, Poland has been frequently criticized by both EU's politicians and by international media (Stevis-Gridneff and Pronczuk 2020).

Sweden from the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak represented rather mild, not to say liberal, stance towards proposed by EU's limitations and it was not willing to implement severe restrictions aimed at minimizing the spread of the pandemic. While most of the EU member states decided on closing its borders, suspending international flights, closing schools, and non-essential shops, Sweden hesitated for a long time to do so and some of the restrictions implemented in other EU member states were never introduced. Since Sweden is a widely recognized state with a strong nation brand (Future Brand 2019), it is an interesting case to be analyzed,

whether its different stance (in comparison to other EU member states) on combating the pandemic influences the way it is treated by other EU states' authorities in the sense of imposed restrictions, especially within freedom of movement. This different treatment can be a result of at least temporal change of perceptions of Sweden. The research question refers to whether the decisions made by Swedish politicians during the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the way Sweden is treated by other member states' authorities within European Union. The second question refers to whether not following mainstream decisions may result in the long-lasting weakening of state's soft power. Answering these research questions can contribute to the public diplomacy in the sense of examining the effects of distinguishing behavior of a state and whether or not this may lead to soft disempowerment. It addresses the deeds vs. words question in public diplomacy as Sweden declares being a responsible subject of international relations while during the pandemic it decides to stand out in terms of combating COVID- 19.

The research has been conducted on the basis of collected data referring to the current state of the pandemic in every EU member state and confronting this data with restrictions imposed on those countries, mostly related to the freedom of movement within European Union. Since the main research question is focused on Sweden and how its distinct strategy of counteracting the spread of pandemic influenced its international position, perceptions and image, the aspect of potential soft diesempowerment is included into the scope of the research. Therefore, the aspects of media attention and its potential negative influence on Sweden is also considered. However, the methodology does not include extended content analysis, since the author is willing to concentrate rather on objective data referring to the number of diagnosed patients and confront it with subjective perceptions presented and disseminated by media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although tackling the threats of COVID-19 pandemic may not be related to the field of soft power or public diplomacy at first sight, in this research soft power and most significantly soft disempowerment will be a central point. Therefore, a starting point in mapping out a theoretical background for further analysis should be defining soft power. Since the basic objective of research is whether making different decisions than the majority influence the international position of a state, and if it makes it a "pariah state" which can be reflected by how it is treated by other states' authorities, soft power is a significant element. The concept of soft power, coined by Joseph Nye in the 1990s, stresses that soft power enables a state to build its attraction and credibility through its ideological or cultural potential. What is more, a state can sometimes achieve its objectives because other countries will want to follow its lead (see Nye 2004) – soft power and state's attraction build on certain potential makes other countries want to obey without the need of using strength (Hocking 2005: 33). Therefore, soft power is the power of influence, not the power over someone or something (Nye

2008: 95) and this power derives from attractiveness rather than coercion. The concept of using soft and intangible assets is not new and already in ancient China soft power was perceived as more powerful than hard power (Fan 2008: 149). States strive for building their attractiveness, image, and perceptions through public diplomacy and nation branding to strengthen their soft power and international positioning. Certain resources can build this power of attraction and influence.

Those resources that build attraction, influence, and most importantly in this research, credibility refer to the main pillars of soft power. Those are values, culture, and foreign policy (Nye 2008: 95), although the list of the so-called soft power resources is much wider. They can include migrations, tourism, culture, the presence of a country in the media, technology, science, education, development aid, regime, foreign policy, etc. According to Kaneva (2011: 117-118), Melissen (2005: 4-5) and Dinnie (2016: 13), most of the modern states are aware of the need to build and improve their soft power, manage and shape its international image, and spread positive perceptions, which as a result can contribute to their political, economic, and cultural interests. According to Joseph Nye (2004), soft power has an international meaning and is supposed to contribute to the way a certain state is perceived by the foreign public. However, soft power can have an internal meaning as well, where it can contribute to the level of social support or even trust in the government. It can also favour unity and social solidarity.

Despite having a rather positive tone, soft power, or more generally, making certain attempts to strengthen the international image of a country can also have a negative impact on a state and its reception by the foreign public. Therefore, in this research, the main focus is put rather on whether the state's soft power in certain conditions can weaken and as a final effect, impact negatively its international position reflected by different treatment by other EU member states' authorities. Nye himself noticed that when a state's culture, foreign policy, or promoted values are not universally attractive, they will not be able to contribute to soft power (Nye 2008: 95). This view has been further developed by Paul M. Brannagan and Richard Giulianotti (2014), who introduced the term of soft disempowerment. This specific concept is supposed to explain how a state's international image can suffer eventual losses resulting from an attempt to enhance its image through sports. Using the example of the World Cup in Qatar 2022, they have outlined, how a state can suffer the reputational risk of staging a sports mega event. If the hosts are unprepared for global attention and scrutiny, they may receive negative publicity and as a result "lose more than they can gain in terms of destination image" (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2014:706). In terms of COVID-19 pandemic, political decisions made by certain politicians can result in similar reputational risk and image loss. In case of crisis situation and crisis management, the aspects of potential soft disempowerment being a result of implemented decisions is not the central issue for decision makers. However, soft disempowerment can be also perceived as a side effect, occurring independently from the decisions made. In case of Sweden, taking different strategy on combating pandemics was not made with the aim of strengthening or not its soft

power, however those decisions could have had its effect on Sweden's disempowerment and the way it was perceived by international actors.

When trying to find a common ground for both concepts of soft power and soft disempowerment, media can serve as an example. Since we live in information era, media play a significant role, both as a soft power tool and asset in the sense that media can to some extent decide on the agenda – they decide what and how they broadcast (Nye 2011:92). In terms of soft disempowerment media also play a role in highlighting potential negative aspects related to a country that is under scrutiny. Therefore, information in media can contribute to the way a state is perceived and if negative reportings occur, it can undermine state's reputation or credibility. Sweden during pandemic became subject to a significant international media attention, which at some stage put in doubt the up to date image of Sweden as a responsible and reliable actor.

Analysing how Sweden's different decisions on combating COVID-19 resulted in different treatment by other EU states' authorities based on at least temporarily changed perceptions of that state, it is vital to elaborate the field of public diplomacy and nation branding. Public diplomacy is about shaping reputation and desireable perceptions of a country abroad (Anholt 2007:4). It is directed at foreign societies (Gilboa 2008:58) with the aim of influencing their perceptions and attitudes to a certain country (Szondi 2008:79). Countries make an effort to foster their image, reputation, and international perceptions to provide themselves with better visibility, international positioning, and bigger political influence (Widler 2007:146). Public diplomacy has a relational character, aimed at two-way communication, dialogue and building mutual relations (Zaharna 2011:209-210). In doing so, public diplomacy constructs this dialogue on the basis of certain assets or values perceived as attractive. Therefore, public diplomacy rely strongly on soft power resources. Following Nye's (2008) soft power concept, all states want to use their attractive assets and softly influence other actors and encourage them to follow their lead. Public diplomacy serve the same goals by supporting foreign policy of a state.

Another significant term is nation branding. Nation branding and public diplomacy are perceived to share at least some of the elements (Szondi 2008:14) and sometimes are even used as synonyms (see van Ham 2001). What is accepted is that nation branding serves obtaining different goals placed rather within economic than political ones. While public diplomacy is about building relations on the basis of some common ground with foreign societies, nation branding is rather focused on one-way communication aimed at marketing of a state (Melissen 2005:19-20). Eytan Gilboa (2008:67) suggest that nation branding is about linking states with specific and characteristic features which make it unique and more distinct from other states. International position of a state in the context of its brand reflects how this state is perceived by external recipients in comaprison to other states (competitors) (Ahn and Wu 2013:159). A common denominator for public diplomacy and nation branding is shaping a desireable external image and perceptions. In Sweden, being the main subject of analysis in the following research, nation branding and public diplomacy seem to be integrated and treated as one (Cassinger et al. 2016:183) in correspondence

to the one of five different understandings of public diplomacy and nation branding correlation presented by Szondi (2008).

The main challenge to the state's soft power and effective public diplomacy is when its actions are not consistent with declared values. In such a situation, the credibility and reputation of a state can be undermined and actions undertaken by a state to strengthen soft power can be simply perceived as propaganda and manifestation of hypocrisy. As will be demonstrated in the latter part, during the COVID-19 pandemic Sweden suffered from such a phenomenon and attracted a lot of negative attention from foreign media highlighting inconsistency between the existing image of Sweden and its actual actions in the face of the pandemic. Some media even straightforward wrote about the tarnished country image because of the mistaken decisions made by Sweden and faulty crisis management in times of COVID-19 pandemic. Sweden's crisis management, described in the latter part, do not include the aspects of international perception and is rather dictated by the security concerns. However, as already indicated, holding to a significantly different manner of tackling the crisis situation in comparison to the most of the other countries, regardless of Swedish intentions could have had contribute to soft disempowerment effect. According to the report presented by the Swedish Institute, Sweden's openness during the most strict lockdowns in other European countries attracted a lot of international interest (Andersson, Aylott, 2020:1).

SPECIFIC MODEL OF REACTION TO COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON SWEDEN

The strategy of how to react in case of a pandemic is usually based on prediction models, which are built upon input data concerning similar cases in the past. During COVID-19 pandemic those prediction models are based on previous experiences of such epidemics like Ebola or SARS and data from Italy and China from the early stage of the outbreak. Therefore, input data is rather of poor quality and it makes it almost impossible to predict how the ongoing pandemic will look like (Sweden under fire 2020). In terms of the following research, it is however vital to understand what different models of counteracting the pandemic were implemented by EU member states in general, with special regard to the Swedish model and how they relate to the aspects of soft power, soft disempowerment, public diplomacy or nation branding.

The first European case has been reported from France on 24 January 2020, then on 22 February Italian authorities reported the first cases in Lombardy, Piedmont, and Veneto. Later on, new cases started spreading at high speed influencing more and more states. Until 25 March all EU/EEA countries and 150 countries worldwide were already affected by COVID-19. On 11 March the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (ECDC 2019). Most of the countries decided on using both containment and mitigation activities to prevent cumulation of cases, to avoid overloading the hospitals and protecting the high-risk groups, especially elderly and people with comorbidities. Undertaken measures vary between states in reference to

many factors like the number of hospital beds, ventilators, protective masks, estimated numbers of patients, etc. (Bedford 2020:1016).

Most of the EU member states decided rather on early response introducing lockdowns in their countries e.g. Poland, which introduced one of the most restrictive measures early in the middle of March, even before the spread of the disease. Also Spain decided on many restrictions on a nationwide scale, however, in the case of Spain the countermeasures were not that early (European Commission 2020d). Italy, which response can be perceived as late, decided on a rather strict lockdown, however adjusting introduced measures to the regional situation. Thinking about COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to counteract new challenges and threats related to it, rather hard power solutions come to mind. Most of the decisions and measures influence mostly economies of the states – the lockdown introduced in European countries resulted in visible decrease in economic growth, however Sweden, which did not decide on introducing very strict limitations is expected to experience economic slowdown in the second quarter of 2020 as well (European Commission 2020b). At the same time, some measures can relate to soft power aspects. Again especially by the example of Sweden we can observe that most of the measures have a soft character. While most of the legal and formal restrictions in Sweden refer to freedom of movement and encompass suspending non-essential travel to Sweden from countries outside EU (Krisinformation 2020), ban on events over 50 people (The Local 2020), common in other EU member states legally binding restrictions like the duty to wear a mask in public spaces were not implemented. Sweden decided on following liberal strategy, designed by state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, which was criticized in some media as herd immunity strategy (Korhonen and Granberg 2020). It did not decide on implementing a full lockdown – did not close shops, restaurant, or gyms did not close schools for under 16-year-olds. The core of the strategy was to base the actions on voluntary compliance with recommendations suggested by the Public Health Authority (Franssen 2020). Those recommendations included working from home if possible, self-isolation and social distancing, especially for persons above 70 years old, avoiding public transportation. The Swedish authorities highlighted the fact, that the strategy of combating COVID-19 pandemic should be implemented in a long term basis, therefore all the restrictions and measures should be acceptable by the citizens in a long term perspective (Zhang et al., 2020:4).

Many recommendations were based rather on suggestions appealing to social responsibility. The model of crisis management itself is based on the notion of responsibility, which is manifested by that all the institutions responsible for tackling certain issues in normal circumstances are at the same time responsible for doing so during a crisis (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020). In the official statement the crisis management strategy was declared to reduce the pace of the disease spread, ensure the availability of medical care resources, limit the impact on critical services like health care, communication, energy and food supply, limit the impact of the pandemic on society and economy, provide social calmness by providing information and adjust measures to current pandemic situation (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020). All

the measures and aims referred to in the strategy suggest rather mitigation than combating the pandemic, while other countries took more forceful measures, probably with the hope of fast eliminating the new disease.

Another significant element and a characteristic of Swedish crisis management is substantial participation of citizens in the process. This refers to cooperation between government, which provides transparent information for citizens to make best decisions, while citizens act responsibly and with trust towards the state and its institutions (Petridou, 2020: 8). Therefore, Swedish citizens were encouraged to social distancing and staying home if possible, especially in the case of the elderly (WHO 2020). Such crisis management characteristic refers to specific Swedish historically embedded quality, like strong civil society in this country (see Kobierecka 2018). Sweden decided on following recommendations and believing in social discipline, which is a cultural-led attitude. Sweden is well known for its high level of social trust, especially in terms of institutions like the police, but healthcare, monarchy, or parliament as well (Statista 2019). Other cultural factors that can explain the Swedish strategy is the high priority given to children's' rights who are entitled to schooling. Closing schools would have undermined those rights. What is more, schooling is one of the fundamental institutions in Sweden providing equality – another value crucial in Swedish culture. Schools provide equality for all children, those disadvantaged as well, and what is more, they serve working and low-earning parents (Trägårdh and Özkırımlı 2020). Such a strategy stems from strong legal fundaments as well, providing citizens with freedom, especially freedom of movement. The Swedish acts comprising the constitution do not allow introducing restrictions within the freedom of movement (Franssen 2020) and general laws on communicable diseases in Sweden are based on voluntary measures (Andersson, Aylott, 2020:4). A significant factor determining the shape of Swedish crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic refers to other legal limitations as well. The Swedish constitution do not allow imposing state of emergency and centralising power during peacetime (Petridou, 2020: 8). It is worth noting, that at least at the beginning, the Swedish strategy might have occured a little bit chaotic. For example, at first, epidemiologist Anders Tegnell declared low community transmission of the disease and denied the need to work from home, however changed his mind later on. He also denied the need to close the borders at the beginning of March only to change the decision and stop non-necessary travels to Sweden few days later (Andersson, Aylott, 2020:3).

Another aspect of the Swedish crisis management is decentralisation and substantial level of regional autonomy. Crisis management is also one of the areas where municipalities are responsible for its preparation and implementation. This makes it additionally difficult for the central government to impose on all the municipalities uniform regulations in case of crisis situation. This referes to some significant basic rules of Swedish governance – already mentioned responsibility, where all the institution conduct their actions both in times of peace and war, and the principle of proximity, where all the threats should be handled at the lowest possible level of the government (Petridou, 2020: 5-6). What is also worth mentioning, is that political

institutions or political parties rather distanced themselves from the process of managing the pandemic crisis. Instead, professionals, leading national agencies took the responsibility for crisis management. Press conferences in the spring of 2020 were held almost every day by the Public Health Agency and Tegnell was the face of Swedish crisis management (Andersson, Aylott, 2020: 6).

The current pandemic is not the only circumstance when specific patterns of behavior are observed in Sweden. According to Lawler (1997:567), the idea of particular Nordic way of doing things was a central point in constructing national identity. This country has a long and strong branding tradition based on Nordic model of exceptionalism, highlighting such aspects as a role of the whole Nordic region in peacebuilding or being bridge builders (Browning 2007:27). The idea of a Nordic perspective is still evident in the branding efforts of the Swedish government, especially such aspects as Swedish openness, trust, sustainability, compassion or tolerance (Browning 2018:8). This feeling of exceptionalism fosters Swedish branding, its own feeling of pride and self-esteem (Browning 2018:7). However, according to Nye's concept, such exceptionalism sometimes can fail to attract. In terms of different strategy towards COVID-19, this might be the case. What is more, Sweden is often perceived in categories of a brand – attractive product, however the most interesting thing is that what matters in such situation is what such brand stands for (Browning 2007:29). In case of Sweden wide social security provided by the country, which is supposed to be a protector from cradle to grave is what Sweden as a brand stands for (Government Offices of Sweden 2020). In terms of the pandemic, many comments concerning the failure of the state in procteting those most vulnerable – elderly occur in international media and in national discourse as well (Erdbrink 2020a; Ohlin, Bas-Wolhert 2020).

It is difficult to unequivocally assess whether the Swedish strategy was correct. A much higher mortality rate than in other countries could be one argument against it. One of the arguments given in favor of this strategy is the institutional structure in Sweden, where specialist health institutions are the ones responsible for the decisions within counteracting COVID-19. Those are the Public Health Agency of Sweden and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency. Therefore, in Sweden, political decisions are based on professional expertise. It is said that similar institutions in other EU member states made the same recommendations to remain the schools opened, just like the Swedish agencies. However, due to differences within political and legal systems, they were outvoted by the politicians (Franssen 2020). This could suggest, that most of the governments made certain political decisions which "looked better" but were not necessarily needed. However, Sweden is widely discussed by international media because of its different attitude towards COVID-19. The influence of such coverages on brand, image and perceptions of a state are not fully clear. It seem legitimate to perceive that negative comments in international media can result in negative perceptions by foreign public. According to J. Nye (2011:84), international media, governments, societies and international organisations they all influence soft power. What is more, in information era, international media not only decide what they broadcast, but also decide on how they broadcast

and what emotional meaning certain information will be given, which has been discussed in the previous section. Therefore, information in media can undermine state's reputation or credibility (Flew 2016:286). On the other hand, as previous research shows, crisis situation like terrorist attacks, in spite of attracting much media attention do not necessarily have a long-term impact on the brand image, especially in terms of states with strongly established positive images and perceptions (Anholt 2006:23-24). Even more complicated relation between crisis, media interest and the image has been investigated by C. Cassinger, J. Eksell, M. Mansson and O. Thufvesson (2018) who researched how "Last night in Sweden" influenced the image of Sweden. Although the whole situation was related to Malmö, which according to the authors is relatively unknown, the dynamic of media narratives resulted in engagement of the government and has been tackled on a national level. It was perceived as a potenatial challenge to Sweden's brand, image and perceptions. However, similar situation with Stockholm terrorist attack, owing to its high recognition and well established image did not cause that much concern (Cassinger et al. 2018:492). This results can suggest that strong brands may be more resistant to negative outcomes of media criticism or at least, negative effect has a short-time dimension. Sweden, at some point of the pandemic, might be another evidence of at least temporal influence of crisis situation and different stance on it than the majority of states on state's position and perceptions.

METHOD

The research, in principle, refers to the international restrictions that have been implemented in attempts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been pursued in reference to the EU member states, an integration organization that Sweden is a member of. EU member states are strongly interconnected, with developed ties, open market, and in most cases no borders. Restrictions between such countries are more difficult to impose and bring more undesired consequences, they can, therefore, be assumed as the last resort solutions. Consequently, if such decisions are not based entirely on epidemiologic and therefore objective indicators, they say a lot about the perception of countries treated with extraordinary caution. The pandemic attracts a lot of attention of both global society and international media. In correspondence to what has been presented in literature review part, such attention can result in negative outcomes such as soft disempowerment and weakening of soft power. Sweden, which builds its image and perceptions for decades now, is trying to present itself as, among others, caring (Cassinger et al. 2016:182). However, some criticism occuring in international media can undermine such image. According to the main research question, the analysis should provide an answer whether Sweden belongs to countries, that because of controversial strategy of combating the pandemic, can be subjected to wider range of international restrictions imposed by other states.

The research consisted of several interconnected steps. Firstly, we attempted to generally assess the state of epidemics in all EU member states. Since this is not a medial research, only basic information has been included, which will be explained below. However, this step is crucial as it allows to relate the current state of epidemics with implemented restrictions, especially within freedom of movement and requirement of additional testing and quarantining. The most accurate data to verify whether the restrictions related to objective reasons is the trend in the number of active cases. Accurate data concerning the number of actual active cases is not provided by Swedish authorities though. As a result, other data had to be taken into consideration. Therefore, numbers of new confirmed cases in Sweden and other EU member states were included from the period of 25 July – 7 August 2020. The two-week timescale has been chosen on the basis of methodology used by most of the EU states, which decided on updating the restrictions based on specific data on a weekly or two-week basis. The aim of the research was to capture a specific time and include current range of restrictions imposed on all EU member states in reference to the current state of the pandemic. Broadening the time scale would make the research much more complex, especially in terms of identifying some trends. The situation during the pandemic is highly dynamic and what is more, the negative effect of media reportings have only temporal influence on how certain state is perceived (according to Anholts research discussed above). Providing narrower time scale therefore allowed us to identify EU countries that were most severely hit by COVID-19 in the given period and relate it somehow to the restrictions imposed and further, potential soft disempowerment phenomenon. The timescale has been chosen at the time of conducting the research. This was a holiday season where potentially higher numbers of travellers occur, which might be perceived as a distortive factor. However, on the other hand, after many weeks of significant restrictions within freedom of movement, due to holiday season many countries, especially those, depending on tourism industries were more willing to open their borders again. In spite of this willingness, some of the restrictions were still in force in that time.

The analysis includes data from a single day from 25 July till 7 August 2020, a two-week sum from this period, the ratio of two week new cases per 10 000 inhabitants. This method has been based on guidelines suggested by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control on how to count the indicator of new cases. Data collected by ECDC encompasses new cases from 14 days as per 10 000 inhabitants. A similar method has been used in the indicated time in Poland for identifying regions with the highest numbers of new cases and the biggest risk of COVID-19 cluster occurrence (TVN24 2020). The author based on collected data distinguished the group of „high-risk” countries with the new cases per 10 000 inhabitants factor equal to or higher than Sweden. Sweden is taken as an indicator, since the research aims to assess how its different stance on the EU's common challenge influences the way it is perceived by other member states and whether it makes it more isolated.

We decided not to include the total number of cases in reference to the population as this data might be confusing. It can be explained in the example of Italy, in which the total number of cases is very high, suggesting the need of imposing restrictions on this state. However today the number of cases in Italy is one of the lowest and therefore, it is not perceived as a high-risk country. The same doubt can refer to the total number of deaths per population.

As the second step, data concerning restrictions imposed on Sweden and others classified as high-risk countries is presented in the time of conducting the research. All restrictions are as of 10 August 2020. Where no current data was available, the most recent in force restrictions were taken into consideration, e.g. Austria provides information concerning the suspension of civil flights that was in force until 31 July 2020 but no current data is provided. In such a case, the author decided to include such restrictions in the tables. The aim was to observe what scale different restrictions are implemented and in which countries. The presented restrictions were grouped into categories: the necessity of presenting a PCR test proving negative result (negative tests), border controls, quarantine requirements, suspended flights, no entry possible. Sources used in obtaining information concerning the range of restrictions imposed within EU member states come from mostly ministerial pages (ministries for foreign affairs, ministries of interior), reports conducted by the EU member states' governments or EU information webpages providing information on freedom of movement restrictions imposed on every member state. Such sources provide reliable and current data, with small exceptions were the information was not updated regularly.

The acquired method does not include extended content analysis of international media, as the main focus is put rather on more objective data of assessing the state of pandemic and the scope of imposed restrictions. However, some reference to media reportings has been made in the discussion and conclusion part as it is directly related to the soft power phenomenon. This serves only as an example of international reception of Swedish different strategy of combating the pandemic and the occurrence of negative comments on Sweden can be related to at least temporal soft disempowerment.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the numbers of daily new cases in all EU member states, a two-week sum of new cases, and the number of new cases in a two-week timeline per 10 000 inhabitants. On that basis, high-risk countries whose indicator of new cases within two weeks per 10 000 inhabitants was equal or higher than Sweden's were selected. Luxembourg is the country with the highest indicator within the examined two week period. Other countries with the score that was worse than Swedish include Spain, Romania, Malta, Belgium, and Bulgaria. This was a starting point for further analysis of potential restrictions imposed by other EU member states on those countries, which numbers of new cases in past weeks were the highest in reference to its population.

Table 1

The state of epidemy in European Union member states as of 7 August 2020 (2 week sum of new cases per 10 000 inhabitants)

Member state	Population	25 Jul	26 Jul	27 Jul	28 Jul	29 Jul	30 Jul	31 Jul	01 Aug	02 Aug	03 Aug	04 Aug	05 Aug	06 Aug	07 Aug	2 week sum	2 week sum per 10 000 inhabitants
Austria	9 010 176	124	134	86	119	173	105	175	82	92	81	96	85	130	141	1623	1,801
Belgium	11 593 364	352	528	299	402	234	673	671	745	651	447	465	334	510	858	7169	6,183
Bulgaria	6 944 274	189	115	194	250	284	265	270	146	119	204	255	303	297	195	3086	4,443
Croatia	4 103 265	77	65	24	41	71	78	67	86	36	34	24	58	28	62	751	1,830
Cyprus	1 207 998	6	4	3	7	13	10	29	5	26	5	25	15	13	14	175	1,448
Czech Republic	10 710 478	132	115	195	275	278	278	37	291	101	208	278	243	202	329	2962	2,765
Denmark	5 793 723	-	-	109	30	57	91	64	-	-	207	77	112	121	136	1004	1,732
Estonia	1 326 603	5	1	-	4	4	9	13	8	7	1	11	22	11	9	105	0,791
Finland	5 541 370	8	5	5	6	10	9	9	11	10	13	17	29	20	22	174	0,314
France	65 284 371	1019	1018	514	725	1392	1377	1346	-	2820	556	1039	1695	1604	2288	17393	2,664
Germany	83 803 959	372	409	638	572	860	842	1012	412	385	858	760	1024	1106	1104	10354	1,235
Greece	10 419 057	31	27	34	52	57	65	76	110	75	75	118	119	145	151	1135	1,089
Hungary	9 658 452	26	11	13	8	9	19	21	21	9	9	9	11	33	24	223	0,230
Ireland	4 941 694	24	12	11	37	13	85	38	44	53	46	45	50	69	98	625	1,264
Italy	60 454 987	273	252	170	181	289	382	379	295	238	159	190	384	401	552	4145	0,685
Latvia	1 884 502	1	13	-	1	4	4	3	7	5	3	3	8	18	6	76	0,403
Lithuania	2 719 151	15	7	11	8	16	19	13	18	17	10	17	10	24	23	208	0,764
Luxembourg	626 674	133	83	49	54	158	83	79	98	62	9	53	90	66	40	1057	16,866
Malta	441 631	-	14	1	7	12	94	10	21	15	14	16	36	20	49	309	6,996
Netherlands	17 137 723	137	214	205	223	247	342	338	431	366	372	485	426	601	519	4906	2,862

Poland	37 843 430	584	443	337	502	512	615	657	658	548	575	680	640	726	809	8286	2,189
Portugal	10 194 402	263	209	135	111	203	255	204	238	153	106	112	167	213	290	2659	2,608
Romania	**19 227 511**	**1284**	**1120**	**1104**	**1151**	**1182**	**1356**	**1295**	**1225**	**1075**	**823**	**1232**	**1309**	**1345**	**1378**	**16879**	**8,778**
Slovakia	5 459 843	23	38	2	23	41	20	27	45	7	10	14	49	63	43	405	0,741
Slovenia	2 078 960	14	16	5	14	14	24	17	15	9	1	9	18	15	10	181	0,870
Spain	**46 756 155**	**2121**	**2120**	**2120**	**1828**	**2031**	**2789**	**3092**	**2514**	**2974**	**3044**	**5760**	**2953**	**4088**	**4507**	**41941**	**8,970**
Sweden	**10 103 878**	**139**	**42**	**71**	**300**	**309**	**316**	**263**	**303**	**38**	**165**	**335**	**426**	**378**	**41**	**3126**	**3,093**

Source: own elaboration on the basis of data retrieved from www.wordometers.info/coronavirus

Bold text – group of high risk states with the new cases per 10 000 inhabitants factor equal or higher than Sweden (3,093

Since the middle of March 2020, most of the countries in EU decided on lock-down of their countries – closing external borders of Schengen area and some of the national borders as well (with some exceptions for own citizens, humanitarian aid, etc.), suspending flights, closing school facilities and unnecessary shops, canceling all events. However, after the first and most strict stage, the EU developed a plan of gradual reopening. On 11 June the European Commission recommended all Schengen Member States to lift internal borders from 15 June (Timeline of EU member 2020). Since that day, all member states decided individually when and which of their borders should be opened. However, because of the still ongoing pandemic, some restrictions towards particular states remained. This concerns mostly the third countries not being members of EU or EEA, however Sweden and several other states is also subject to some restrictions.

Tables from 2 to 8 present the range of restrictions imposed on Sweden and the rest of 'high risk' as of 10 of August. Restrictions included in the tables below were the most frequently implemented ones. Those restrictions were: negative tests, border controls, quarantine requirements, suspended flights, no entry possible.

Table 2

Restrictions towards Sweden in EU's member states (as of 10 August 2020)

Member state	Restrictions in traveling from Sweden	Negative test	Border controls	Quarantine requirements	Suspended flights	No entry possible
Austria	Yes				+	
Belgium	No					
Bulgaria	Yes	+				
Croatia	No					
Cyprus	Yes	+		+		
Czech Republic	No					
Denmark	YEs					+
Estonia	Yes			+	+	
Finland	Yes		+	+		
France	No					
Germany	No					
Greece	No					
Hungary	Yes			+		
Ireland	Yes			+		
Italy	No					
Latvia	Yes			+		
Lithuania	Yes			+		
Luxembourg	No					
Malta	Yes			+		

Netherlands	Yes			+		
Poland	Yes				+	
Portugal	No					
Romania	Yes				+	
Slovakia	Yes				+	
Slovenia	Yes			+		
Spain	No					

Source: own elaboration based on European Union and states' ministerial sources

Table 3

Restrictions towards Belgium in EU's member states (as of 10 August 2020)

Member state	Restrictions imposed on Belgium	Negative test	Border controls	Quarantine require-ments	Suspended flights	No entry possible
Austria	No					
Bulgaria	No					
Croatia	No					
Cyprus	Yes	+				
Czech Republic	No					
Denmark	No			+		
Estonia	Yes			+	+	
Finland	Yes		+	+		
France	No					
Germany	Yes	+		+		
Greece	No					
Hungary	No					
Ireland	Yes			+		
Italy	No					
Latvia	No			+		
Lithuania	No					
Luxembourg	N					
Malta	No					
Netherlands	Yes			+		
Poland	No					
Portugal	No					
Romania	No					
Slovakia	No					
Slovenia	Yes			+		
Spain	No					
Sweden	No					

Source: own elaboration based on European Union and states' ministerial sources

Table 4

Restrictions towards Bulgaria in EU's member states (as of 10 August 2020)

Member state	Restrictions imposed on Bulgaria	Negative test	Border controls	Quarantine require-ments	Suspended flights	No entry possible
Austria	Yes				+	
Belgium	Yes			+		
Croatia	No					
Cyprus	Yes	+		+		
Czech Republic	No					
Denmark	Yes					+
Estonia	Yes			+	+	
Finland	Yes		+	+		
France	No					
Germany	Yes	+		+		
Greece	Yes	+				
Hungary	Yes					
Ireland	Yes			+		
Italy	Yes			+		
Latvia	Yes			+		
Lithuania	Yes			+		
Luxembourg	No					
Malta	No					
Netherlands	Yes			+		
Poland	No					
Portugal	No					
Romania	No					
Slovakia	Yes			+		
Slovenia	Yes			+		
Spain	No					
Sweden	No					

Source: own elaboration based on European Union and states' ministerial sources

Table 5

Restrictions towards Luxembourg in EU's member states (as of 10 August 2020)

Member state	Restrictions imposed on Luxembourg	Negative test	Border controls	Quarantine requirements	Suspended flights	No entry possible
Austria	No					
Belgium	No					

Bulgaria	No					
Croatia	No					
Cyprus	Yes	+		+		
Czech Republic	No					
Denmark	Yes					+
Estonia	Yes			+	+	
Finland	Yes		+	+		
France	No					
Germany	Yes	+		+		
Greece	No					
Hungary	No					
Ireland	Yes			+		
Italy	No					
Latvia	Yes			+		
Lithuania	Yes			+		
Malta	No					
Netherlands	No					
Poland	Yes				+	
Portugal	No					
Romania	Yes			+		
Slovakia	Yes				+	
Slovenia	Yes			+		
Spain	No					
Sweden	No					

Source: own elaboration based on European Union and states' ministerial sources

Table 6

Restrictions towards Malta in EU's member states (as of 10 August 2020)

Member state	Restrictions imposed on Malta	Negative test	Border controls	Quarantine require-ments	Suspended flights	No entry possible
Austria	No					
Belgium	No					
Bulgaria	No					
Croatia	No					
Cyprus	No					
Czech Republic	No					
Denmark	No					
Estonia	Yes			+	+	

Finland	Yes		+			
France	No					
Germany	No					
Greece	Yes	+				
Hungary	No					
Ireland	Yes			+		
Italy	No					
Latvia	No					
Lithuania	No					
Luxembourg	No					
Netherlands	No					
Poland	No					
Portugal	No					
Romania	No					
Slovakia	No					
Slovenia	No					
Spain	No					
Sweden	No					

Source: own elaboration based on European Union and states' ministerial sources

Table 7

Restrictions towards Romania in EU's member states (as of 10 August 2020)

Member state	Restrictions imposed on Romania	Negative test	Border controls	Quarantine require-ments	Suspended flights	No entry possible
Austria	Yes				+	
Belgium	Yes			+		
Bulgaria	No					
Croatia	No					
Cyprus	Yes	+		+		
Czech Republic	Yes	+		+		
Denmark	Yes					+
Estonia	Yes			+	+	
Finland	Yes		+	+		
France	No					
Germany	Yes	+		+		
Greece	Yes	+				
Hungary	Yes			+		
Ireland	Yes			+		

Italy	Yes			+		
Latvia	Yes			+		
Lithuania	Yes			+		
Luxembourg	No					
Malta	No					
Netherlands	Yes			+		
Poland	No					
Portugal	No					
Slovakia	Yes				+	
Slovenia	Yes			+		
Spain	No					
Sweden	No					

Source: own elaboration based on European Union and states' ministerial sources

Table 8

Restrictions towards Spain in EU's member states (as of 10 August 2020)

Member state	Restrictions imposed on Spain	Negative test	Border controls	Quarantine require- ments	Suspended flights	No entry possible
Austria	Yes	+				
Belgium	Yes			+		
Bulgaria	No					
Croatia	No					
Cyprus	Yes	+				
Czech Republic	No					
Denmark	Yes					+
Estonia	Yes			+	+	
Finland	Yes		+	+		
France	No					
Germany	Yes	+		+		
Greece	No					
Hungary	No					
Ireland	Yes			+		
Italy	No					
Latvia	Yes			+		
Lithuania	Yes			+		
Luxembourg	No					
Malta	No					
Netherlands	Yes			+		

Poland	No					
Portugal	No					
Romania	Yes			+		
Slovakia	No					
Slovenia	Yes			+		
Sweden	No					

Source: own elaboration based on European Union and states' ministerial sources

Table 9 is a summary of more detailed data of imposed restrictions. It presents summed up figures which decided on imposing restrictions on the high-risk countries, the number of those that did not decide to do that, and the number of countries which decided on imposing specific types of restrictions.

Table 9

Restrictions towards high risk countries as of 10 August 2020

Country (number of new cases per 10 000 inhabitants)	Countries which imposed restric-tions	Countries which did not impose restric-tions	Negative tests	Border controls	Quar-antine require-menta	Suspen-ded flights	No entry possible
Luxembourg (16,866)	12	14	2	1	9	3	1
Spain (8,970)	13	13	3	1	10	1	1
Romania (8,778)	17	9	4	1	13	3	1
Malta (6,996)	4	22	1	1	2	1	0
Belgium (6,183)	7	19	2	1	8	1	0
Bulgaria (4,443)	16	10	3	1	12	2	1
Sweden (3,093)	16	10	2	1	10	5	1

Source: own elaboration.

Sweden because of its unique approach towards COVID-19 attracted much inter-national attention. Some research already suggest that voluntary measures rather than strict legal measures can result in higher death numbers and intensive care units de-mand (Shina et al. 2020:1). Sweden within European Union member states has one of the highest death rates, however, Belgium, UK, Spain, and Italy outnumbered Sweden in this category (as of 3 August 2020) (Worldometers 2020). Because of rather contro-

versial in the opinion of other EU member states' strategy of reacting to COVID-19 pandemic, Sweden faced many restrictions within the freedom of movement, which was visible since the slow reopening of EU's borders began in the middle of June.

The research showed that in the current stage of pandemic (25 July – 7 August), Sweden is not the highest risk country in terms of the potential of spreading the disease. Sweden's score, taken as a starting point, showed that there are several other countries with a significantly higher number of new cases in the analyzed timeline. Those were Bulgaria, Belgium, Malta, Romania, Spain, and Luxembourg. When the indicators of new cases reached by those countries are compared to the range of restrictions imposed on them by other EU member states, it seems that Sweden, despite not having the highest score, faces the most numerous restrictions. 16 EU member states decided on limiting the freedom of movement. 10 countries decided on implementing quarantine restrictions and 5 decided on suspending flights as well. Similar restrictions in a similar range were imposed on Bulgaria, which score was second-lowest in the selected group of high-risk countries. On the other hand, Luxembourg, which reached the highest score faced difficulties in the free movement to 12 other EU member states, nine of which decided on imposing quarantine requirements and three decided on suspending flights. Malta, with an average score, faced limitations only from four other EU member states despite having twice as high indicator of new cases than Sweden. These results show, that Sweden faces more restrictions than other countries, which have currently a higher number of new cases. Of course, restrictions are imposed based on objective reasons (like high number of cases, high risk of spreading the disease, etc.), however, imposing stricter and wider limitations than in terms of countries in a worse situation than Sweden can suggest that those restrictions derive not only from objective reasons but subjective as well.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As it has been proved earlier, in the context of international COVID-19 restrictions Sweden is treated more severely than countries that might be in a more difficult epidemic situation. We argue that the main reason for this is the Swedish policy on tackling the coronavirus which was different from average. Of course, there are several possible reasons for imposing or lifting international restrictions, such as different political or economic relations as well. The higher interconnections between states, the smaller restrictions should be. However, in terms of Sweden, this regularity may not be a case. When Nordic countries, whose ties are very strong and historically founded, started considering to reopen borders with each other, Sweden's inclusion has been discussed due to a higher number of COVID-19 fatal cases. Finland, which introduced border restrictions until 14 June especially voiced its concern about the far worse situation during the outbreak in Sweden than in other Nordic countries (Sweden says exclusion… 2020).

The aspects of subjective perception of a distinct Swedish strategy is also visible in other countries and reflected in international media. The „New York Times" called Swe-

den Scandinavia's "pariah state" because of its softer attitude towards COVID-19. As proof, other Nordic states' closed borders for Swedes are evoked. The data shows that Sweden's „famous" refusal to implement strict lockdown similarly as other Scandinavian and EU member states resulted in twice as many infections and five times as many deaths comparing to other Scandinavian countries altogether. Swedish decision-makers comment such attitude as stigmatization and defend their strategy as more efficient in terms of providing better immunity for the future. Asa Lindberg, the „Aftonbladet" reporter, said about the closed borders in the Scandinavian region that „*We [Swedes] are supposed to sit here in our corner of shame, and the worst part is that you're savoring it*" (Erdbrink 2020a). Another information portal also describes Sweden's ruined reputation because of COVID-19. Sweden is presented here as having until now a strong reputation, especially in the field of gender equality or human rights, however nowadays suffering a visible weakening because of a softer approach towards handling coronavirus pandemic. Ewa Lagerqvist, the head of Visit Sweden national tourism organization notices the threat that such bad press regarding Sweden's way of handling pandemic affected already its image abroad and limited interest in tourism in Sweden can be observed (Ohlin and Bas-Wohlert 2020). Also on the BBC, it can be read that „*The unusual strategy has attracted global criticism, with even some of Dr Tegnell's early supporters saying they now regret the approach.*" (Savage 2020). Some remarks are also made in reference to Sweden's international reputation which is believed to have suffered because of such a liberal attitude towards combating COVID-19. World Health Organisation also voiced its concern about the situation in Sweden and labeled it as a country with a special risk of a coronavirus resurgence due to high numbers of new cases. A similar classification has been made concerning 11 other European countries (Armenia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and Kosovo) (Edwards 2020).

Such a bad international press can influence the strength of the Swedish nation brand and may change its international perceptions and image. First symptom of this is the fact that Sweden, although not at the worst point of its pandemic at the turn of July and August, suffered from more severe or at least the same extent of restrictions like other EU member states with higher indicator of the two week sum per 10 000 inhabitants. What is more, in line with bad international press, Swedes themselves notice that the image of a high-quality life providing high standards in health care and elderly care, as well as a humanitarian superpower, has been tampered and after the pandemic, Sweden will have to work hard on rebuilding its reputation (Savage 2020). The designer of the Swedish strategy, Anders Tegnell, admitted that Sweden could have done more to protect itself from the pandemic (Wise 2020), hence agreeing that the death toll in Sweden is too high. On the example of the COVID-19 pandemic and the case of Sweden, the research showed that this country faced many limitations and restrictions despite not being the highest risk country. Therefore, it can be assumed, that those restrictions were not only due to objective reasons (however the death rate and new cases indicators may have suggested implementing some restrictions towards Sweden). Since Sweden suffered

from worse treatment that suggests that in that specific time (turn of July and August 2020) when the world struggled with the first stage of the pandemic, Sweden's soft power decreased as a result of controversial decisions that faced criticism in international media and among EU member states' governments, making the country less credible and raising suspicions against Swedes. Going against the mainstream in such a vital issue as public health is associated with a high risk of losing prestige and credibility unless such policy turns out to be correct.

Yet, it is still impossible to clearly indicate if in fact to what extent this image, brand, and perception were changed and whether this influence will have durable or only momentary character. It is mostly probable that previous research conducted by Anholt will stay valid in this specific situation, confirming already known potential influence of crisis situation on a nation brand. Sweden as a strong brand, according to Anholt (2006) will be less prone to suffer from misinformation or negative international media coverages in a long-term perspective. Nation Brand Index published a report assessing 50 countries in terms of their response to crisis situation – the COVID-19 pandemic. Sweden is ranked 15 with almost 40% respondendts assessing positively how Sweden dealt with the major health crisis and only 16,9% respondents assessing it negatively (Swedish Institute 2020). This report shows that Sweden, although suffered from current soft disempowerment manifested by wider range of restrictions imposed by other EU member states, did not suffer in terms of tarnished image or nation brand. However, Europe is facing the second wave of the pandemic and Sweden, which seemed to be less affected than other EU member states, in recent weeks is also experiencing significant rise in the number of new cases (Worldometers 2020). Together with the second wave, new coverages occur, pinpointing how the Swedish strategy is different than in other EU member states (see: Beswick 2020; Erdbrink 2020b; Ehl 2020).

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ABSTRACT

The occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges for the governments. Those challenges refer to many different areas, among others related to aspects of a country's image. The main research problem relates to whether making different decisions than the majority of governments impacts the perception of a state and whether it makes it a "pariah state". In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, a focus is put on Sweden, which decided to implement solutions far different from the majority of EU member states. Since Sweden is a widely recognized state, it is an interesting case to be analyzed.

The main stress is put on how Sweden's different stance on COVID-19 influences the way it is perceived by other member states and whether it makes it subject to wider restrictions. The research question refers to whether decisions made by the Swedish decision-makers during the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the way Sweden is treated and perceived by other EU member states. The research is strongly embedded in the concept of soft power and soft disempowerment.

The research is based on a comparative method where data referring to both the stage of epidemics in all EU member states and the scope of implemented restrictions are confronted.