



GÖTEBORGS  
UNIVERSITET

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

# SMALL STATE BEHAVIOR TOWARDS AUTOCRACIES

A study of Sweden's criticism of autocratic Gulf states between  
2010-2023

**Josefine Kruse**

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Bachelor's Thesis	15 credits
Programme	Bachelor's Programme in Political Science
Level	Bachelor
Year	Spring 2026
Supervisor	Ann-Marie Ekengren
Wordcount	11 845

## **Abstract**

In international politics Sweden is considered a moral frontrunner and a strong advocate of democratic values. However, there are instances that suggest that this image is not always consistent, as Sweden, as a small state, must balance normative commitments with strategic interests. This thesis examines Sweden's public criticism of democratic shortcomings in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Bahrain between 2010 and 2023, and whether the content and intensity of such criticism vary depending on the level of bilateral trade. The empirical material consists of Swedish parliamentary interpellations, which are analyzed using both a qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The findings suggest that Sweden's criticism toward the four Gulf states is limited and generally low in intensity, with human rights constituting the dominant category of criticism. The results do not support the expectation that lower trade levels lead to stronger criticism, as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates received comparatively more attention. Instead, criticism appears to be largely event-driven pointing towards a more reactive rather than proactive foreign policy.

*Key words: Small-state, criticism, autocracy, democracy, trade*

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# 1. Introduction

Over the past decades, research has shown that the world is experiencing a gradual decline in democracy, often described as a third wave of autocratization (Nord et al., 2025). This development differs from earlier periods of democratic breakdown, where coups and sudden power shifts were common. Today, democratic decline has occurred slowly through processes of undermining democratic institutions, pressure on independent media, or reduced space for civil society, all while elections are formally kept in place. This subtle form of autocratization has made it harder to clearly identify when democracy is being undermined as well as providing fewer opportunities for international actors to react (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Waldner & Lust, 2018).

During this same period, several long-standing autocratic states in the Gulf region have gained greater economic and political influence, through actions such as major foreign investments, greater international partnerships, and global events (Davidson, 2024). This development signals that autocratic states are advancing in the international arena.

Yet, relations with these countries remain complex. Reports of severe violations of human rights and democratic values in the region persist, and authoritarian practices continue to shape their political systems, making engagements politically sensitive (Amnesty International, 2024). Democratic states therefore face the challenge of balancing their commitment to defend democracy while still maintaining stable economic cooperation with such countries. For a country like Sweden, this balancing act is particularly interesting given its strong dependence on trade as well as long-standing international identity as a moral forerunner.

Sweden is often described as a normative moral actor with a long tradition of promoting human rights, democracy, and international law in its foreign policy (Dahl, 2006; Carlson-Rainer, 2017). In 2019 the Swedish government launched “Drive for democracy”, an initiative aiming to respond to autocratization and defend democracy (Leininger et al., 2025). Scholars have many times pointed out that the Nordic states frequently act as “norm entrepreneurs”, that seek to influence global standards through diplomacy and public statements (Ingebritsen, 2002). However, this normative influence of when to speak up has

been selective. Dahl (2006) describes these inconsistencies, noting that the Swedish government has at times strongly criticized some states while remaining silent on serious human-rights abuses committed by autocracies.

Furthermore, Sweden is a highly export-oriented economy, with exports continuously accounting for nearly 50% of GDP each year (World Bank, 2024). The Swedish foreign policy therefore inevitably involves maintaining economic stability through stable relationships with important trading partners, regardless of their regime type. This creates potential tension with Sweden's normative commitments. Leininger et al. (2025) show that Swedish democracy promotion is increasingly shaped by shifting priorities between democracy, trade, and security. Responses to autocratization often become more indirect when other interests are involved. These insights suggest that public criticism may vary when economic or political costs are at stake. The authors further note that more research is needed on how democracies react to autocratization.

Merkel and Lührmann (2021) also note that there is a lack of studies examining how well-performing democracies, such as Sweden, maintain their democratic values in times of global autocratization. Existing research tends to focus on specific instruments such as development aid, democracy promotion programs or on responses to sudden events such as coups. While public statements and rhetorical criticism against democratic shortcoming or stable autocracies receive less systematic attention (Leininger et al., 2025; Merkel & Lührmann). Although many studies discuss Sweden's role as a value-driven actor (e.g., Dahl, 2006; Simons & Manoilo, 2019; Ingebritsen, 2002), there is still limited knowledge about how small well performing democracies adapt their foreign policy against autocracies when economic interests are involved.

Hence the aim of this study is to analyze Sweden's public rhetoric against four Gulf states during 2010 and 2023 with a focus on if the amount of bilateral trade affects the decision to criticize democracy violations. This thesis contributes to filling the research gap of Sweden's image as a moral actor in times of autocratization.

The study uses a most-similar systems design and a mixed-methods approach. A quantitative method will be used to identify instances of criticism against four Gulf countries. This will be used in combination with a qualitative content analysis that will work to analyze the language and categorize the criticism intensity as well as contents. In this study Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Oman will be analyzed, where the first two have large trade with Sweden and last two have small trade, allowing the result to be systematically compared.

The chosen time period is 2010 to 2023. It covers a period of continued autocratization and a period in which the Middle East region recorded the lowest continued democracy score in the world (Nord et. al, 2025). The starting point coincides with the Arab spring, which increased international attention to democratic governance in the region. It also captures a period during which Sweden's relationship with the Gulf states undergoes both diplomatic tension as well as phases of stability (Eriksson & Rosén 2015; Hallsenius, 2024).

By examining how criticism varies across states with different economic importance for Sweden, the thesis provides new empirical insight into how a normative, trade-dependent small state balances values and interests in its foreign policy. This helps clarify whether Sweden's self-image as a defender of democratic values is reflected consistently in its public rhetoric.

The research question is:

*Does Sweden criticize stable autocratic countries for violations of democratic values, and does the content and intensity of such criticism vary depending on the level of bilateral trade?*

## **2. Sweden and the Gulf**

The Gulf Monarchies (United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait) are among the world's most autocratic states, who continuously receive low scores on democracy indices. Their political systems restrict and violate civil liberties and concentrate power to the ruling elites (Nord et al. 2025). In the Gulf states, non-citizens

constitute a large part of the population, roughly between 40-85% depending on the state, and as political rights are largely reserved for citizens, participation in public life is structurally limited to a relatively small segment of society (GulfMigration, 2020).

Across the Gulf monarchies, limitations of democratic rights and civil liberties are woven into everyday political life. Political power remains concentrated within hereditary ruling families, while formal political institutions lack meaningful authority. Media are heavily restricted across the region, and in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Oman this has contributed to widespread self-censorship within civil society as individuals want to avoid legal repercussions. Outspoken criticism or organized political opposition is frequently met with legal consequences. In Saudi Arabia, political parties and opposition movements are not permitted at all, and legal frameworks further restrict civic action (Freedom House, 2024b; Freedom House, 2024c).

Women, migrant workers and other minority groups face formal barriers to equal rights. Women's legal status remains shaped by male guardianship provisions, in the UAE this includes requirements for approval from a male guardian in matters such as marriage (Freedom House, 2024d). Migrant workers often lack the same legal protections as citizens. In Bahrain, reports have documented their vulnerability to labor exploitation and limited avenues for legal redress (Freedom House, 2024a). In these states, democratic and political shortcomings are persistent and institutionalized features of governance rather than temporary responses.

Simultaneously, the Gulf constitutes some of the most resource-rich economies due to their oil and gas revenues. This has made them central actors in global energy markets and attractive trading partners. Although historically heavily reliant on these revenues, the Gulf states are actively trying to pursue economic diversification, creating demand for foreign expertise and international collaboration. Several cities in the Gulf are global hubs for tourism, finance and innovation and the state's international engagement has strengthened their global visibility and attractiveness (Bogetic et al., 2024). The Gulf's economic attractiveness, as well as the region's own economic interests in partnerships, creates a strategically interesting relationship for states around the world.

Sweden's ties with the Gulf states have been relatively strong since the 1980s, when the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) established a cooperation framework on trade and investment issues (European Commission, 2025). Although negotiations on a free trade agreement between GCC and EU were started they never concluded (Kommerskollegium, 2021). The region is seen as one of the more important trading partners for the EU, and consequently important for Sweden as well, and the Swedish business community is well represented all over the region (Regeringskansliet 2022).

In this study, four of the six Gulf countries will be examined. Presented below is Sweden's average total trade with the selected states Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Bahrain during the period of 2014-2023. Trade data was retrieved from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), an online platform compiling bilateral trade statistics based on UN Comtrade data (Simoes & Hidalgo, 2011). The table does not include trade between 2010-2013 as the data was not available. However, when reviewing other sources, such as Business Sweden or Trading economics, the data does not suggest that the relative trading pattern should be different during those previous years.

**Table 1:** *Average Trade between Sweden and the concerned Gulf states between 2014-2023, in million USD*

Country	Sweden's export	Sweden's import	Average total trade
Saudi Arabia	\$1539	\$137.74	\$1676.74
UAE	\$10185	\$71.41	\$1089.91
Bahrain	\$78.59	\$5.1026	\$83.6926
Oman	\$107.71	\$14.322	\$122.032

Saudi Arabia and the UAE account for most of the Swedish trade with the Gulf. The trade with Oman and Bahrain is significantly smaller although remains constant. The Swedish export to the region mainly consists of electronics, ores, slag and ash, machinery, iron, steel and pharmaceutical products. While the import mainly consists of mineral fuels, oil, plastics and distillation products (Simoes & Hidalgo, 2011).

The Swedish government has multiple times expressed a positive attitude toward an increased partnership with the region, emphasizing the positive impact such cooperation could have on trade, the economy and environmental issues. That said, the Swedish government has simultaneously emphasized the importance of democracy and increased respect of human rights within such partnerships (Regeringskansliet, 2010; Regeringskansliet, 2022). This illustrates that Sweden's relationship with the Gulf states has two sides. One which is concerned with the economic interest in the states and deepening the cooperation, and the second which is the simultaneous commitment to uphold its moral democratic image.

The relationship between Sweden and the Gulf has not been without challenges. The diplomatic crises with Saudi Arabia in 2015 which resulted in Saudi Arabia recalling their ambassador. As well as the Quran burnings in Sweden during the 2020's prompting strong reaction across the Gulf, illustrating two moments of political tension (Eriksson & Rosén 2015; Hallsenius, 2024). Furthermore, Sweden's close relationship with the region has not gone without its criticism internationally and domestically. For many years Sweden exported extensive amounts of arms to Saudi Arabia and the UAE which received criticism because of the receiving state's authoritarianism and involvement in conflicts (Eriksson & Rosén). The strong cooperation despite controversies shows how other interests, such as economics, can constrain a normative voice (Simons & Manoilo, 2019).

This combination of deep authoritarianism, strategic resource wealth, and substantial economic ties makes the Gulf region analytically valuable for this thesis. For a small state, like Sweden, which relies heavily on trade and soft-power diplomacy, the Gulf constitutes a setting where the tension between normative commitments and economic interests becomes particularly salient. The region's oil and gas wealth, together with Sweden's significant export volumes, creates strong economic incentives to maintain stable relations and minimize criticism. At the same time, the Gulf monarchies' systematic democratic deficits create normative pressure for Sweden to speak out in line with its foreign-policy identity. By comparing Sweden's behavior toward Gulf states with different levels of trade, the study investigates whether the willingness to criticize increases when there are less economic interests in a state and decreases when we have more economic interests in a state.

### **3. Theory and Previous Research**

This section introduces criticism in the foreign policy context. Furthermore, it discusses small states in the international context, along with interdependence theory. Lastly, theoretical expectations are presented for this thesis.

#### **2.1 Criticism as a Foreign Policy Tool**

Criticism is a common and important instrument in foreign policy, especially for smaller states. It is a form of soft power that allows states to express their political positions and defend values through pointing out perceived shortcomings or assessing other states behavior. Criticism can serve several purposes and may be used to signal a state's moral stance, seek to influence another state's behaviour or support strategic foreign-policy goals (Bjereld, 1992).

The Nordic states are well-known examples of using public statements to promote human rights and international law. The Scandinavian countries have been described as “norm entrepreneurs” that seek to influence international behaviour by advancing norms and values, and by criticizing states that do not live up to them (Ingebritsen, 2002).

A related strand of literature which examines the effectiveness of such public criticism is the concept of “naming and shaming”. In this perspective, condemnatory language, most commonly in regards to human rights, is used to publicly expose violations. By affecting a state's international reputation, public denunciation can impose political costs that governments seek to avoid, thereby creating incentives for behavioural change (Squatrino et al., 2019).

Historically, Sweden has not hesitated to criticize states. During the Vietnam war Sweden openly criticized the United States involvement and the country has been described as more outspoken than many other neutral states (Bjereld, 1992). A more recent example is the diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia in 2015. When former Foreign Minister Margot Wallström openly condemned the Saudi regime's human rights practices and described the sentencing of blogger Raif Badawi to lashes as “medieval”. The statement led to immediate diplomatic repercussions both from Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, Sweden was barred from addressing the Arab League, and bilateral relations deteriorated. It also affected

Sweden's relationship with its EU as allies distanced themselves and adopted a notable lower diplomatic profile (Carlson-Rainer, 2017; Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016).

Research frequently highlights Sweden's achievements in democracy promotion and its consistent rhetorical commitment to human rights. Initiatives such as the Drive for Democracy, opposition to apartheid and long-standing engagement in UN peacekeeping all contribute to this image. At the same time, other studies point to clear contradictions between what Sweden says and what it actually does (Leininger et al., 2025; Simons and Manoilo, 2019).

There are several situations where Swedish behaviour conflicts with itself as a humanitarian and feminist actor. These include participation in NATO's intervention in Libya, which challenged Sweden's neutral identity and reputation of peaceful conflict resolution, Swedish ministers wearing the hijab during official visits to Iran, which led to accusations of hypocrisy in relation to the feminist foreign-policy agenda, and continued arms exports to Saudi Arabia despite well-documented human-rights concerns (Simons & Manoilo, 2019). Dahl (2006) also highlights earlier inconsistencies, such as Sweden's reluctance to criticize the Soviet Union during the Cold War despite being outspoken toward democratic allies such as the United States.

Taken together, these studies point to long-standing tensions within Sweden's moral identity and raise questions about the credibility of its normative foreign-policy profile. The idea of Sweden as a moral superpower has increasingly been challenged, and several authors argue that it has become more difficult to maintain a coherent normative image when behaviour and values do not fully align. In "Kritiker eller medlare" (1992), Bjereld predicted that the Swedish foreign policy in the twenty-first century would be shaped by a balancing act. One side would be the economic dependence on international partners, and on the other strong public criticism of states that violate human rights or democratic norms. Simons and Manoilo (2019) argue that this balance has become harder to maintain and that the gap between Sweden's stated values and its concrete actions is becoming more visible.

### **3.2 Small State Theory**

Small states have been defined in many ways. Central to most definitions are limited access to resources and material power that reduce a state's ability to influence international politics. The concept of "small" in the literature is often described as subjective. Some scholars use absolute thresholds based on population size, domestic market, GDP or military capability, while others argue that smallness should be understood in a more relative way (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017; Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020).

While Sweden is clearly smaller than states such as China, Russia or the United States, it is larger than states such as Iceland or Oman. Sweden has greater economic and institutional capacity than very small states, but it still shares the vulnerability and reduced ability to influence that small state research describes. Sweden has a small domestic market and therefore heavily relies on external trade to sustain growth.

Research on small states shows that trade often constitutes a larger share of GDP in small states compared to larger ones and that their overall stability is closely linked to the openness of the global economy. This economic structure creates a specific kind of vulnerability where small states need an open international economy because they depend on low barriers to trade to sustain high levels of welfare (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017). Carlson-Rainer (2017) describes Sweden as "exceedingly vulnerable to global economic trends and conflicts" and interprets Sweden's strong engagement for peace and human rights partly as a defensive strategy by a small state whose interests rely on a stable and predictable international environment. For export dependent small states, relationships with economically important partners, including autocratic ones, become politically sensitive because a crisis can have significant domestic costs.

A central insight from small state research is that small states compensate for their limited material resources by using soft power. This is the ability to influence others through values, norms, legitimacy and reputation rather than through military or economic strength. It is an essential foreign policy instrument for small states that lack coercive capabilities and rely on predictable international environments (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017). For Sweden this strategy has historically taken the form of a normative policy that promotes democracy,

human rights, peace building and social welfare. These commitments are described as a cornerstone of Swedish foreign policy (Dahl, 2006; Simons & Manoilo, 2019). However, raising attention to such issues can strain ties and jeopardize fragile relationships (Carlson-Rainer, 2017).

As a way to reduce vulnerability to individual trading partners, small states often seek shelter in international institutions or alliances (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017). Such shelter can reduce a state's exposure to external shocks as well as provide economic benefits. Sweden's EU membership has provided economic shelter and access to larger and diversified markets, thereby reducing dependence on individual trading partners. By reducing structural vulnerability, shelter can provide small states with greater autonomy in foreign policy, including the possibility to voice criticism of autocratic partners (Brommesson et al., 2023; Dahl, 2006).

Yet as small state theory suggests, soft power strategies are shaped by vulnerability. Small states are dependent on external markets and stable political relationships in order to sustain growth. Although Sweden often aspires to uphold a consistent normative voice, contradictions can occur.

### **3.3 Interdependence**

This thesis examines foreign policy and criticism in relation to trade volume. Theory on such economic relationships often refers to interdependence. Interdependence is defined as a situation of mutual dependence between states where both are affected by flows of trade, capital or resources from one another (Keohane & Nye, 1973). Sweden is an export dependent country and therefore has incentives to adapt its foreign policy in ways that enables stable trade. This does not mean that Sweden is dependent on the Gulf states, but it does mean that the relationship contains elements of interdependence.

Interdependent relationships are rarely symmetrical. One actor typically depends more on the other. This creates an asymmetric vulnerability that can influence political behaviour (Keohane & Nye, 1973). For small and trade dependent states this asymmetry adds another layer of vulnerability to foreign policy decisions. The level of dependence is not only about the volume of trade but also about the type of goods exchanged. Essential goods create

greater strategic dependence than non-essential goods. A commonly discussed example is Qatar's role as one of the EU's largest gas suppliers. Even if Sweden exports more to Qatar than it imports in monetary terms, dependence on energy gives Qatar a strong strategic position in the relationship (Davidson, 2024; Simoes & Hidalgo, 2011).

This complexity is visible in Sweden's trade with the Gulf states. As shown in Table 1, Sweden's trade with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates is significantly larger than with Bahrain and Oman. While larger trade volumes do not automatically imply structural dependence, they may increase the potential economic and political costs of diplomatic tension.

This thesis focuses on bilateral trade volume. It could have been relevant to include foreign direct investments (FDI) or other forms of capital flow due to the Gulf state's global investments strategies. However, trade is systematically monitored by governments directly and as well systematically collected which makes it analytically preferable.

### **3.4 Theoretical Expectations**

Based on previous research on small states, Swedish normative foreign policy and interdependence, three theoretical expectations could be drawn:

**1. Large trade volume will be associated with less extensive criticism.**

Sweden is an export-dependent small state, and therefore vulnerable to disruptions in economic relationships. Since Sweden heavily relies on trade the political cost of confrontations is higher when trade volumes are large. Conversely, when trade is limited, criticism is less costly and may occur more frequently or forcefully. The criticism is therefore expected to be more extensive against Bahrain and Oman and less extensive towards Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

**2. The intensity of criticism will be stronger when trade is small.**

Sweden has a strong normative identity and often speaks about democracy and human rights. When trade is small, there is less vulnerability in the relationship for Sweden. Therefore criticism is expected to be larger towards Bahrain and Oman. However, as

Sweden has a strong moral image, criticism is still expected towards Saudi Arabia and the UAE, it will however be softer.

**3. Human rights will be the category with the most extensive critique as well as the most intense criticism.**

Human rights are deeply rooted in the Swedish international image. It is the subject on which Sweden traditionally has spoken up the most against violations and been the most influential. It is the category where the Swedish normative self-image is the clearest and therefore is the expectation to react the largest as it should be hard to compromise on.

## **4. Method**

This section presents the research design and methodological approach. It first outlines the comparative Most Similar Systems Design and the mixed qualitative and quantitative method. Thereafter the case selection is presented, the operationalization of criticism, the subject categories, intensity will be described and finally the empirical material.

### **4.1 Research Design and Method**

This thesis uses a most-similar systems design (MSSD) through a qualitative and quantitative analysis. The purpose of this design is to isolate the role of trade, in explaining the variation in Sweden's public criticism toward the four autocratic Gulf states. A MSSD is appropriate when the independent variable is known in advance, while the variation is expected in the dependent variable (Essaiasson et al., 2024). In this thesis the independent variable is the trade volume between Sweden and each Gulf state and the dependent variable is the extent and intensity of criticism found in official foreign-policy statements.

The four selected Gulf states are similar in several central aspects, which makes them suitable for a MSSD. They are all autocratic monarchies with low scores on democracy indices and share regional, cultural and institutional characteristics (see section 4.2) (Nord et al., 2025). These similarities allow important background factors to be held constant, while the cases differ on the independent variable. This minimizes the risk that the background factors are

alternative explanations to any differences in Sweden's criticism against four states (Essaiasson et. al., 2024).

The use of both a qualitative and quantitative method is to enable both a close and detailed analysis as well as a systematic comparison between the cases. The approach builds on Ulf Bjereld's (1992) method for analyzing criticism in foreign policy, but is adapted to fit the purpose of this study.

A qualitative approach is suitable because it allows for an interpretive understanding beyond what it explicitly stated. Language used in debates that involve taking a stance are often well thought out and can be indirect and require interpretive reading to understand the tone and nuance of value-laden statements (Essaiasson et. al, 2024). It allows the study to identify how Sweden expresses criticism, the issue focus and the intensity.

The quantitative approach is used to measure the extent to which criticism occurs. It will be done by counting the number of critical statements for each state, as well as under which categories they fall under. The number of cases in this study is small and the dependent variable requires qualitative interpretation that cannot be captured through quantitative measures alone. The quantitative component adds another layer of analysis by making it possible to compare the number of critical statements across cases but alone it cannot generate any conclusions. Therefore, the mixed method is preferable (Essaiasson et. al, 2024).

#### **4.2 Case selection**

The case selection focuses on stable autocracies that are not undergoing sudden political change. The MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region is the most autocratic region in the world. Part of this region are the Gulf states, who all share a long tradition of autocracy and are among some of the world's most politically stable authoritarian states (Nord et al., 2025). Despite differences in size and to some extent political structure, they share several regime characteristics: limited political pluralism, concentration of power, constrained civil society, and restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and political participation (Nord et al., 2025; Regeringskansliet, 2022).

The Gulf region also represents a strategically valuable economic partner for Sweden. With Swedish exports established across the region, and with trade relations showing signs of increasing (Regeringskansliet, 2022). The region is analytically suitable for isolating the role of trade volume when examining Sweden's criticism of democratic violations.

Only four of the six Gulf monarchies are included in this thesis. Kuwait and Qatar fall into a middle-range category in terms of Sweden's bilateral trade intensity (see table 2). In one sense, Kuwait and Qatar could have contributed by providing a nuanced intermediate comparison. However, including middle-range cases would reduce the contrast in the independent variable, as variation in trade volume would become less distinct. This would weaken the ability to isolate trade volume as the explanatory factor within a Most Similar Systems Design (Esaiasson et. al, 2024). In addition, Kuwait's displays a comparatively higher degree of liberal democracy which weakens regime similarity. To maintain analytical clarity and keep the study manageable these cases were excluded.

In table 2 the Gulf states' records on regime type, average trade, democracy, and GDP per capita are presented. The democracy index used is V-dem liberal democracy index. The V-dem measurement is broad and captures many aspects of democracy. Since criticism in Swedish foreign policy often concerns human rights, democratic institutions and legal safeguards using an index that includes both democratic procedures and constitutional protections offers a more complete picture than a measure that focuses only on electoral aspects (Coppedge et al., 2025). The table shows a clear division between trade volume for the four chosen cases while the other statistics show similar values.

**Table 2:** *Gulf states statistics (World Bank, 2024, V-dem, 2025)*

	<b>Strong economic relationship</b>		<b>Weak economic relationship</b>		<b>Neither weak or strong economic relationship</b>	
Country	Saudi Arabia	UAE	Oman	Bahrain	Qatar	Kuwait
Regime Type	Closed autocracy	Closed autocracy	Closed autocracy	Closed autocracy	Closed autocracy	Closed Autocracy
Total Trade Average in million USD	1676.74	1089.91	122.032	83.6926	483.21	177.409
Liberal democracy index 2010-2024	0.04-0.05	0.08-0.08	0.13-0.14	0.08-0.05	0.1-0.08	0.29-0.27
GDP per capita (in thousands) (2023)	\$36.157	\$49.201	\$34.075	\$29.290	\$80.2	\$20.972

### 4.3 Operationalization

In this section criticism will first be operationalized. Secondly the analysis scheme is explained as well as the content categories and lastly intensity is operationalized.

#### 4.3.1 Criticism

How criticism is defined affects how it is understood. In *Kritiker eller medlare* (1992), Bjereld discusses the word and its meaning. In a narrow sense, criticism refers to pointing out flaws and faults. It highlights violations, abuses and failures and is clearly a negative judgement. In a broader sense, criticism can mean any form of judgement, either positive or negative. This includes comments, reflections and evaluations. In this broad meaning, it is essentially a form of assessment. Since this thesis examines how Sweden responds to and stands up against democratic violations, the narrow definition of criticism is used as defined by Bjereld: “A negative judgement about an actor’s actions, goals, or conceptions of reality”. A statement is therefore coded as criticism if it assigns responsibility, expresses disapproval, or calls for change.

There are discussions on whether criticism should include situations where states simply disagree in their understanding of events. When two states interpret reality differently, it is considered a neutral and descriptive statement rather than a normative one (Bjereld, 1992). In line with earlier research, this thesis does not classify mere disagreements or differing interpretations as criticism unless they contain a negative judgement or a call for change. This form of response will however be marked under *problematization*. These are instances when the existence of problems, shortcomings, or challenges are acknowledged but without assigning responsibility or directing demands for change toward the concerned state. Such statements frame the issue as an area for improvement or a mere disagreement and are almost only descriptive.

Along with the *problematization* three other types of responses are operationalized: *explicit criticism*, *indirect criticism* and *avoiding response*.

*Explicit criticism* refers to a statement that contains a clearly expressed negative judgement against a specific country. In these cases, the country in question is mentioned explicitly and the response contains normative language. Explicit criticism corresponds most closely to Bjereld's original definition.

*Indirect criticism* is responses that express normative concerns without explicitly naming the country concerned. This includes general references to "all states" or "countries in the region". In these cases, criticism is formulated in general rather than being directly targeted. However, it should be clear that the concerned state is being discussed. It is also distinguished from explicit criticism due to it being more diplomatic.

*Avoiding* criticism refers to a situation where the respondent does not address the criticism towards a state raised by others in the discussion or refrains from expressing any normative judgement toward the country concerned. These are instances when a response is expected, asked or pushed for but not answered. Yet, just because the state is not mentioned in the response does not mean that it is automatically avoidance of criticism. It should be clear that the respondent is refusing to answer or take a stance.

Each identifiable instance of criticism is counted as one marking, following Bjereld's (1992) procedure. A marking refers to a distinct issue raised in relation to a specific country, rather than to every individual formulation. This means that a marking can vary in length, but a longer statement does not necessarily indicate greater intensity that is based on wording and formulation. If a debate concerns more than one issue, each issue is counted as a separate marking. Therefore, more than one marking may appear in a single document. For example, "We condemn country X violations of human rights" is one marking, while a subsequent sentence stating "We are deeply concerned about country X role involvement in the war in country Y" is counted as a second marking.

#### **4.3.2 Subject Categories (Analysis Scheme)**

The content will be analyzed based on four categories: *Human Rights, Ideology, Security, and International law*. The categories are based on those used by Bjereld in his coding of criticism in "Kritiker eller medlare" (1992). They also correspond with previous research on Sweden's foreign policy identity, which has focused on human rights, promoting international and humanitarian law, peace and peaceful solutions, social welfare and democracy (Dahl, 2006; Simons and Manoilo, 2019; Carlson Rainer, 2017; Ingebritsen, 2002). They are also areas in which Sweden has shown inconsistencies with their standpoint against other countries (Dahl, 2006).

The categories will be defined as followed and is the scheme that will followed for the analysis:

##### *Human Rights*

This category includes criticism that refers to shortcomings or violations of internationally recognised human rights norms, as defined by the UN Declaration of Human Rights and relevant UN conventions. Statements placed in this category concern issues such as torture, discrimination, the death penalty, restrictions on the rights of women, abuse of migrant workers or limits on freedom of expression when the wording clearly frames these limits as rights violations. Human rights will be used when the emphasis is on violations against specific groups or persons.

This category does not include criticism that relates to general democratic shortcomings such as restricted political participation or the absence of free elections. Those statements fall under the *ideology*. Although some areas have potential to overlap, for example freedom of expression which appears both in human rights frameworks and in broader democratic definitions, human rights remain their own category. The reason is that human rights have a special normative status in Swedish foreign policy. Sweden presents these rights as universal standards that should not be compromised. They are also governed by clear international rules (Bjereld, 1992).

#### **Example of a human rights statement**

- *“We condemn the discrimination against women in country X”.*
- *“We are worried about harassment minorities continue to face in country X”.*

#### **Example of a statement that is not regarding human rights**

- *“We continue to see limited political influence for the people of country X”.*  
→ This statement is neither critical nor does not belong in the category (ideology).

#### *Ideology*

This category includes criticism that addresses the political system and democratic norms. It concerns issues linked to the principles of liberal democracy as defined by V dem. This includes criticism of democratic institutions, the organisation of political power, the functioning of elections, limits on political participation and concerns related to the rule of law.

The V-dem definition is broad and includes elements such as freedom of expression and association, which also appear in human rights frameworks (Nord et al., 2025). To avoid overlaps between the categories the coding in ideology focuses on when the statement concerns political structures or systemic limitations.

#### **Example of a Ideology statement**

- *“Restrictions on expression in country X are undermining democratic participation.”*

### **Example of a statement that is not regarding ideology**

- *“Journalists in country X continue to face harassment and detention, this has to change.”*  
→ This statement focuses on a group of individuals and therefore belongs in the human rights category.

### *Security*

This category includes criticism that refers to actions or developments that threaten regional or international peace and stability. It covers military escalation, increased militarisation, involvement in ongoing conflicts, and activities that risk destabilising the surrounding region. The focus is on security consequences rather than legal principles or behavior.

This category does not include criticism of violence against individuals which belongs to human rights. It also does not include criticism of military actions framed as violations of international law which belongs to the category of international law.

### **Example of a security statement**

- *“Sweden is concerned that the growing militarisation in country X contributes to instability in the region.”*
- *“Country X’s actions in Country Y are threatening regional stability.”*

### **Example of a statement that is not regarding security**

- *“We condemn country X’s unlawful use of force in country Y.”*  
→ This statement would fall under international law.

### *International law*

This category includes criticism that refers to violations of obligations under international law. It covers breaches of the UN Charter including unlawful use of force, violations of international humanitarian law in armed conflicts, breaches of international criminal law such as crimes against humanity, and failures to respect binding treaty obligations.

The focus in this category is legal principles and responsibility based on international rules. The emphasis is on the legal status of the action. It does not include criticism that centers on harm to an individual's human rights nor criticism about broader political or democratic systems which belong to ideology.

#### **Example of an International law statement**

- *“Sweden urges state X to stop the unlawful use of force in state Y.”*

#### **Example of a statement that is not regarding international law**

- *“We are concerned that recent actions by state X risks undermining order in the region.”*

→ This concerns security rather than international law.

Although some categories have potential to overlap this should not pose a methodological problem. The categories are defined with different focal points and the separation makes it possible to code borderline cases in a consistent way. An alternative would have been to merge similar categories (e.g human rights and ideology), but doing so would remove important nuances. Keeping the areas separate allows the analysis to better reflect how Sweden refers to different types of norms in its foreign policy.

#### **4.3.3 Intensity**

The qualitative analysis examines the wording and intensity of the criticism. The purpose is to identify whether the strength of the statements differs between the four cases and whether certain categories of criticism tend to be formulated more strongly or more weakly. The aim is therefore not only to determine if and what Sweden criticises, but also how the criticism is expressed.

Intensity is understood as a dimension, following the logic in “Metodpraktikan”, where statements can be placed on a scale ranging from weak criticism to strong criticism (Essaiasson et al., 2024). To make coding clear the statements will be placed in either strong, medium or weak criticism. Political statements are carefully formulated and deliberate, the choice of wording is therefore an important indicator of how forcefully Sweden expresses its position.

Strong criticism includes wording that signals clear blame, explicit disapproval or direct demands for behavioural change. These statements assign responsibility and contain a strong normative judgement. Examples of such wording include *condemn*, *unacceptable*, *we strongly denounce*, *must*, or *cannot be tolerated*. Weak criticism includes wording that signals concern, discomfort or expectations of improvement. These statements are more diplomatic and vague in their normative judgement. Examples of such wording include *concerned*, *worried*, *regret*, *encourage*, or *expect*. A critical statement can also be set in the middle ground coded as medium, that is when strong words such as “*unacceptable*” or “*very serious*” are used, but without any ultimatums or demands.

#### **4.5 Material**

The empirical material consists of interpellations from the Swedish parliament between 2010-2023. An interpellation is a direct question from a member of parliament directed at a minister in the government. These questions are then answered both in debate orally and in writing. The analysis will focus on the provided answers from the members of government throughout the debate, not on the questions asked or input from other individuals. The reason for this is that a member of parliament does not represent the Swedish foreign policy in the same way as a member of government does. The government member represents the governing party/parties and therefore has more at stake when speaking about trading partners. The interpellators have less to lose and are more likely to criticize more explicitly, so including their input would lead to a misleading result.

The Swedish government's yearly statements of foreign policy and the yearly United Nations General assembly speeches were also considered as analytical material. They were however not relevant for this study as the selected cases were not mentioned. Therefore, interpellations are the more reasonable choice. While many interpellation debates concern domestic issues, which will result in exclusions, foreign policy is also addressed. Nevertheless, it constitutes a setting in which ministers/politicians are required to respond directly, making them suitable for identifying criticism.

The search words Oman, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain generated 172 interpellations. After removing duplicates the number was slightly reduced. A substantial number of

interpellations were excluded based on their relevance. Many of the retrieved documents only mentioned the country in passing, for example in discussions about domestic energy policy, Swedish companies operating abroad, or religious matters within Sweden. As a Gulf state was not the focus of the debate nor were their actions discussed more than briefly these interpellations were excluded.

The analytical time frame is 2010-2023. It provides a period during which the Gulf region has remained politically stable, which strengthens the logic of a Most Similar Systems Design. Furthermore, it captures a time period in which the Swedish relationship with the region undergoes many stages, as described in the introduction. A time period which involves different stages ensures that the analysis is not limited to a single political period, thereby allowing for the identification of broader patterns. The 13 year period captures levels of development, and is manageable for a bachelor thesis.

#### **4.6 Methodological Limitations**

Coding criticism involves a degree of subjectivity as one's interpretation of a statement can be different from another. This reduces the reliability of the study. Deciding whether a statement contains a negative judgement can be difficult in borderline cases. The analysis scheme aims to reduce this uncertainty by providing clear definitions of types critical statements and by specifying the meaning of each category (Esaiasson et al., 2024). A similar challenge exists when assessing the intensity of criticism. While strong and weak wording is defined in advance, some expressions may still be open to interpretation. A detailed and transparent analytical scheme should, however, ensure that the process remains as consistent as possible (Esaiasson et al.).

Secondly, the study includes a small number of cases. This limits the generalizability of the findings since the results cannot be assumed to apply to all small states towards all autocratic partners. The advantage of a small set of cases within a MSSD is that it increases the internal validity. The controlled comparison allows the study to examine the mechanisms in greater depth and to identify patterns within a coherent context (Esaiasson et al., 2024).

## 5. Results

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative results. Firstly, the quantitative categorical results are presented, thereafter the qualitative results with the general patterns and example of quotes.

### 5.1 Categorical Results

**Table 3:** *Number of critical statements in Swedish parliamentary interpellation responses between 2010 - 2023 concerning the chosen Gulf states*

Country	Explicit	Indirect	Avoiding	Problematization	Summary
Saudi Arabia	4	5	4	5	18
UAE	1	2	1	2	6
Bahrain	1	0	0	0	1
Oman	0	0	0	0	0
Summary	6	7	5	7	25

Table 3 presents the distribution of critical statements across the four types of criticism for each state. In total, 25 markings were identified across all cases. Saudi Arabia accounts for the largest share with 18 identified markings all distributed relatively equally across all four types of criticism. The United Arab Emirates received six markings which is significantly less, but still the second most frequently mentioned state. The UAE were mentioned in explicit criticism and avoiding formulations once respectively, while indirect criticism and problematization are identified twice respectively. Bahrain received one marking in total in the explicit category and Oman were not identified in any critical statements in the material.

**Table 4:** *Number of critical statements in each content category*

Country	Human Right	Ideology	Security	International law
Saudi Arabia	9	2	2	1
UAE	3	1	1	0
Bahrain	1	0	0	0
Oman	0	0	0	0
Summary	13	3	3	1

Table 4 presents the distribution of critical statements across the four content categories. In total 20 statements were coded across all categories. Human rights was the content category with the most markings, accounting for 13 statements. Ideology and security were the second most commented categories with three statements each. International law received only one statement.

All states follow the same pattern, with most markings in the human rights category, and thereafter a few in the other categories. Saudi Arabia received nine markings in the human rights category, two markings respectively in the security and ideology category, as well as one under international law. The UAE is associated with three human rights-related statements and one statement each in the ideology and security categories. Bahrain received one human rights-related statement. Oman was not mentioned.

**Table 5:** *Distribution of the intensity of critical statements in interpellation responses in the Swedish Parliament 2010-2023 (N)*

Country	Weak	Medium	Strong	Without weight
Saudi Arabia	6	2	1	5
UAE	3	0	0	2
Bahrain	0	1	0	0
Oman	0	0	0	0
Summary	9	3	1	7

Table 5 presents the distribution of the intensity of critical statements. In total, 20 statements are coded across all cases. Of these, nine are coded as weak, three as medium, one as strong and seven as without normative weight. Saudi Arabia accounts for 13 of the markings, with six statements coded as weak, two as medium, one as strong and five without normative weight. The UAE is associated with three weak statements and two statements without normative weight. Bahrain is associated with one statement coded in the medium intensity category. This result shows that criticism usually comes in statements that are weak or without normative weight.

## 5.2 Intensity of Criticism, General Patterns and Examples

The qualitative section analyzes the variation in wording and whether patterns can be found in the responses intensity. In this section these patterns will be illustrated with quotes from the material.

Across the material, statements concerning the selected countries were predominantly characterised by restrained language. A large share of material consisted of weak or descriptive formulations. Oftentimes when countries were coded in this category states were mentioned collectively or in generalized expressions such as “those countries” or “all parties” which reduced the specificity of the statement. When encouraging for change the parties involved were often not explicitly mentioned, their involvement was however clearly described throughout the debates, but generalized in the response.

*"Sweden calls on all parties to the conflict to respect and comply with international humanitarian law and human rights."*<sup>1</sup>

Strong and condemnatory wording was very rare. The states were often referred to as part of broader international developments, conflicts, or discussions concerning Sweden's foreign policy and business relations, rather than the primary objectives. In many instances, their actions were mentioned within a wider geopolitical context rather than being directly assessed on their own terms. This sort of brief mentioning in regards to involvement resulted in weak indirect statements.

*"That's a good description of the battlefield that Syria has become. There are a range of countries and interests that are using this as their playing field."*<sup>2</sup>

Only once were strong explicit normative language used. This was in relation to Saudi Arabia when the word “condemn” was used. This word is what distinguished it from other statements and made it fall under the strong intensity category. It was unique as it did not occur in any other interpellation. Furthermore, responsibility is implicitly assigned in this

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<sup>1</sup> Own translation: “Sverige uppmanar alla parter i konflikten att respektera och följa den internationella humanitära rätten och de mänskliga rättigheterna” Sveriges riksdag, 2016a).

<sup>2</sup> Own translation: “Det är en bra beskrivning av det slagfält som Syrien har blivit. Det är en rad länder och intressen som använder detta som sin spelplan” (Sveriges riksdag, 2016b).

statement through the explicit identification of Saudi Arabia as committing human rights violations, which was not very common either.

*“That is what, for example, means that even though Saudi Arabia continues to commit human rights crimes... there are still a lot of human rights violations that we must continue to condemn.”<sup>3</sup>*

Descriptive problematizing statements often occurred. These were often formulated in the context of discussions concerning Sweden’s bilateral relations, particularly in relation to business ties. Rather than directly addressing the democratic shortcomings of the states, the focus was placed on continued engagement and cooperation as the appropriate way to address them. With emphasis on maintaining dialogue often using a more diplomatic tone rather than judgmental. Such formulations were especially common when the debate concerned Swedish companies operating in the region or a Gulf state’s involvement in business activities or communities in Sweden.

*“We want to safeguard and develop this relationship. We want to have a straightforward and respectful dialogue also on issues where we have different views, not least when it comes to human rights.”<sup>4</sup>*

In this statement, which is regarding women’s rights and the Swedish feminist foreign policy, the violations are not put in a negative way but rather spoken about in a diplomatic manner. Emphasis is elsewhere rather than on the human rights violations and short-coming. It is more used to manage tension while still problematizing the issue.

The Interpellation questions were often raised on specific issues, such as women’s rights, war involvement, or trade relations with the Gulf states. These questions were frequently prompted by particular political developments or events rather than addressing broader patterns of systemic violations. However, these issues were rarely addressed directly in the

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<sup>3</sup> Own translation: "Det är det som till exempel gör att det, trots att Saudiarabien fortfarande begår förbrytelser mot mänskliga rättigheter... Sedan pågår det ändå väldigt mycket brott mot mänskliga rättigheter som vi måste fortsätta att fördöma." (Sveriges riksdag, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Own translation: "Vi vill slå vakt om och utveckla denna relation. Vi vill ha en rak och respektfull dialog också i de frågor där vi har olika syn, inte minst vad gäller mänskliga rättigheter" (Sveriges riksdag, 2015b).

responses. Instead, respondents tended to generalize the topic to broader themes, such as the overall human rights situation or mentions of shortcomings, often using diplomatic language and acknowledging shortcomings in general terms rather than taking a clear position on the specific issue raised.

*“We are aware that these countries do not look like Sweden and that they are challenging markets that have not come as far in all areas as Sweden. In several of these countries there are also violations of human rights and among other things.”<sup>5</sup>*

Of course, there were times when specific issues were discussed, but more often these were discussions about Swedish presence in business markets or as seen in previous quotes in relation to conflicts in the region and the effect it has on the people in the states. However, an example of when a specific issue actually was mentioned is the Arab spring protests in Bahrain. It is also one of the instances when worry is expressed explicitly. It includes a mixed intensity of expressions and does not assign any clear blame. Which gives a good example of even though this criticism is clear it is still not completely clear every time on how things should be coded.

*“The government is concerned about developments in Bahrain and the human rights situation in the country. The demonstrations...were met with unacceptable violence.”<sup>6</sup>*

This statement combines terms associated with different levels of intensity, such as concerned and unacceptable. Although unacceptable signals a stronger normative judgement, the statement does not include any ultimatums or explicit demands for behavioural change, which motivated its classification as medium rather than strong intensity criticism. Furthermore, while reforms are mentioned elsewhere in the interpellation, responsibility for the violence is not explicitly assigned to any actor. This absence of responsibility attribution further supports its classification as medium. Unlike many other interpellations in the

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<sup>5</sup> Own translation: "Vi är medvetna om att dessa länder inte ser ut som Sverige och att de är utmanande marknader som inte har kommit lika långt på alla områden som Sverige. I flera av dessa länder förekommer också kränkningar av mänskliga rättigheter och annat" (Sveriges riksdag, 2015a).

<sup>6</sup> Own translation: "Regeringen ser med oro på utvecklingen i Bahrain och situationen för de mänskliga rättigheterna i landet. De demonstrationer som inleddes i Bahrain den 14 februari 2011 bemöttes med ett våld som var oacceptabelt" (Sveriges riksdag, 2012a).

material, this interpellation focuses primarily on Bahrain itself rather than using the country as an illustrative example

Overall, the results indicate consistently careful and restrained formulations. A recurring feature was a shift in focus from the actions of the mentioned states to Sweden's own policies, practices, and international engagement in improving democracy or human rights in the world. In many interpellations, the minister emphasized Sweden's strategies or participation in international initiatives, rather than explicitly evaluating or assigning responsibility to the states concerned. Attention was also frequently directed toward other foreign policy issues, with the selected Gulf states involvement often appearing as contextual references rather than as primary objects of critique.

## **6. Analysis and Discussion**

This section first presents the analysis of the results, followed by a discussion of their implications

### **6.1 Analysis**

The results imply that Sweden's normative criticism of autocratic states is very limited. This goes across all cases. This does not support the first two theoretical expectations, which anticipated a difference depending on the trade volume, with more frequent and intense criticism when trade is weak.

**H1:** Large trade volume will be associated with less extensive criticism

**H2:** The intensity of criticism will be stronger when trade is small

Criticism was not more extensive or intense toward Oman and Bahrain despite their smaller trade volumes with Sweden. Instead, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates received the majority of the identified critical statements, despite their larger trade volumes. However, the criticism directed at Saudi Arabia and the UAE was predominantly implicit and low in intensity. In this sense, the findings partly align with parts of the second expectation. That

Sweden would express criticism toward all states, but in a milder form toward important trading partners.

While higher levels of trade create incentives to avoid open confrontation, Sweden's strong normative identity and its history of publicly expressing its values indicate that some level of criticism should still occur, even toward economically important partners (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Carlson-Rainer, 2017; Bjereld, 1992). In this sense, the results for Saudi Arabia and the UAE are not entirely surprising. While these states received more criticism overall, the criticism remained cautious and indirect, implying an attempt to balance normative commitments with the economic interests.

However, the criticism pattern becomes more difficult to explain in relation to Oman and Bahrain, which were barely mentioned despite Sweden having relatively limited economic vulnerability in these individual relationships. One possible explanation is that Sweden's overall behaviour reflects a cautious strategy consistent with small state logic. As a small state, Sweden may have more to lose than to gain from initiating criticism without a clear political trigger. Meaning, that public criticism tends to occur primarily when political events require a response, such as the Arab Spring protests in Bahrain. In the absence of such triggering events, criticism may be perceived as unnecessary or politically costly. Since Oman and Bahrain have not been associated with the same type of politically contentious events internationally or in Sweden's bilateral relations, there has been little pressure to publicly address them.

Furthermore, Oman and Bahrain are closely tied to the broader Gulf region, for example through their membership in the GCC. Criticizing these economically less important states therefore carry broader diplomatic costs than relations with just the two states alone. The caution could be explained as a way to avoid jeopardizing the larger relationship with the region. As well as a way to keep Sweden's international surroundings stable in order to sustain their welfare as a small state depending on their trade (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017; Carlson-Rainer, 2017).

In this sense, this pattern can not be understood as an effect of different trade volume alone, but as a result of a lack of event driven pressure to respond and a prioritization to focus on other foreign policy issues. It also further shows that Swedish foreign policy appears more reactive than proactive when expressing public criticism in these cases.

Human rights did dominate within the categories of criticism across the material compared to the other categories, which supports the third hypothesis.

**H3:** Human rights will be the category with the most extensive critique as well as the most intense criticism.

This corresponds to previous research which highlights human rights as central components of Sweden's long-standing normative foreign policy profile (Dahl, 2006; Carlson-Rainer, 2017; Ingebritsen, 2002). It also aligns with Sweden's relationship with the Gulf region, in which human rights has been discussed as something that needs continued emphasis and improvement (Regeringskansliet, 2010; Regeringskansliet, 2022).

However, the statements rarely translated into strong or confrontational criticism. Instead, when criticism was expressed it was cautious, this was similar within all category groups. Another way which the human rights focus was clear was that the respondent oftentimes shifted or emphasized Sweden's own actions in international politics, such as involvements in human rights organisations or other normative initiatives. Thereby redirecting attention away from direct criticism of autocratic states, but still allowing the issue to be acknowledged while avoiding the risks and potential costs that can come with confrontations. So, while the diplomatic restraint is evident, human rights still seems to be the normative area in which Sweden is least willing to remain silent on.

## **6.2 Discussion**

The overall limited criticism raises questions about criticism as a foreign policy instrument in the Swedish context. Previous research emphasizes Sweden's strong normative identity as a norm entrepreneur, these findings suggest a more cautious and situational use of criticism which confirms previous research showing the inconsistencies in the normative identity

(Ingebritsen, 2002; Dahl, 2006). Criticism does not appear to be systematically linked to economic interdependence, but rather to specific political contexts.

An alternative explanation as to why Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates received more attention is their greater international presence. Both states are more visible in international conflicts, more frequently covered in media, and more deeply integrated into global economic networks (Bogetić, 2024). Sweden also has stronger business ties with these states, which may increase domestic political attention. In this sense, the higher number of statements may reflect their international visibility and involvement in event driven triggers that call for a response or acknowledgement rather than economic importance.

This could explain why earlier studies often focused on criticism during major political events, such as coups or armed conflicts. In such situations, political attention is high and a response becomes necessary. By contrast, the persistent and structural shortcomings of stable autocratic regimes may be perceived as enduring conditions that do not require continuous explicit criticism, as it could affect the bilateral relationship.

The one statement concerning Bahrain was linked to the Arab Spring protests, while many of the references to Saudi Arabia and the UAE were connected to their involvement in regional conflicts, periods of heightened diplomatic tension, or moments when Sweden's relationship with these states was questioned due to domestic developments related to business activities. Oman, which maintains a comparatively low profile in international politics, does not generate similar moments of political attention.

The choice to focus on stable and economically important autocratic states in the Gulf region creates a special case. These countries are characterised by long standing political systems and limited internal change, which means that there are fewer triggering moments that call for direct criticism as the democratic shortcomings are part of everyday life. It is therefore possible that countries undergoing clearer political change, while still maintaining strong economic ties to Sweden, would show different patterns of criticism.

Finally, the small number of critical statements identified in a large body of parliamentary interpellations does not suggest a lack of concern for democracy. Rather, in this case, it suggests that Sweden uses criticism selectively and rather emphasizes broader policy efforts, than pointing fingers at a specific state. It should in this case be understood as a broader strategy to balance normative commitments with diplomatic and economic interests.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study finds that Sweden does criticize stable autocratic states for democratic shortcomings, but such criticism is generally very limited, restrained and low in intensity. Furthermore, the results do not indicate that the content or intensity of criticism varies systematically with the level of bilateral trade. Democratic values, and especially human rights, clearly constitute an important part of Sweden's foreign policy identity, but these values are primarily expressed through references to Sweden's own engagement or in context to major international events.

The inconsistencies that were described in previous research are prominent in these results as well, which seem to connect back to the small state characteristics and vulnerability. As a trade-dependent state, Sweden has strong incentives to keep relationships stable and predictable. Direct and confrontational criticism can increase diplomatic tension, and normative commitments are therefore more often expressed through general references which can be seen as a precaution. Weak formulations regarding other countries democratic limitations can therefore be understood as a strategy to balance strategic relationships with diplomatic stability, suggesting that it is not a lack of normative concern but rather an aware use of normative voice.

The results do not provide enough evidence that trade volume alone affects the level of criticism. While the results show that stronger trade leads to more criticism, which is contrary to what was expected in regards to the theory, the criticism was still limited. An alternative explanation to this is that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have greater international presence than Bahrain and Oman. The identified instances of criticism were often connected to specific events that one could argue require an official response, such as regional conflicts or matters related to Swedish economic engagement. These "triggers" appear to generate the occasions

for criticism, which suggests a Swedish foreign policy that is reactive rather than proactive in regards to standing up against democratic shortcomings.

The analytical framework was useful in identifying patterns in the material, although the limited amount of actual criticism made it difficult at times to distinguish between different types when the criticism was very vague. Despite this, the categories functioned well. A key finding is the one regarding event-driven criticism. However, a limitation of the study is that it does not sufficiently account for differences in the states' international visibility and activity. Future studies would therefore benefit from systematically controlling for international presence in the Gulf cases or selecting cases with more similar levels of international visibility, rather than focusing primarily on geographical or cultural similarity.

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## **AI Declaration**

Ai has been used for synonym suggestions, spelling control and grammar checks, to structure the reference list, and assisting in finding sources.