

A RAINBOW FLAG WORTH DEFENDING?

Swedish Armed Forces' Pride Campaigns 2017-2022

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Keywords

Critical military studies, homonationalism, rainbow flag, LGBTQ rights, Swedish Armed Forces

Summary

Recent decades have seen an increased mobilization of LGBTQ rights in the creation and maintenance of national(ist) identities. One example is how Sweden has been cast as exceptionally progressive with regard to gender equality and LGBTQ rights, in line with earlier notions of 'Swedish exceptionalism'. Simultaneously, military institutions across a number of countries have attempted to mobilize issues around gender and sexuality in efforts to broaden recruiting and to re-define their societal relevance as security organizations. Since 2017, the Swedish Armed Forces have published a yearly Pride campaign, usually scheduled to coincide with Stockholm Pride, Sweden's largest Pride festival. Drawing on a combined analysis of visual and textual campaign material, this article firstly looks at the ways in which LGBTQ rights are employed to ascribe meaning to the SAF as an organization and secondly at how this justifies the increasing rearmament and reterritorialization of Swedish defense in the face of growing anti-gender mobilization in Eastern parts of Europe and Russian aggression against Ukraine. By exploring boundary-making moves around LGBTQ rights in the SAF Pride campaigns, it thirdly reflects upon how sexual minorities are made intelligible within the context of these campaigns, and discusses the implications this may have for LGBTQ movements and their fights for LGBTQ rights.

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I artikeln undersöks hur hbtq-rättigheter används för att tillskriva försvarsmakten mening som organisation och hur detta motiverar den ökande upprustningen och re-territorialiseringen av det svenska försvaret i sammanhanget av den växande anti-genusmobiliseringen i Europa och den ryska aggression mot Ukraina. Genom att utforska förhandlingar om hbtq-rättigheter i försvarsmaktens Pride-kampanjer, reflekterar artikeln över hur sexuella minoriteter görs begripliga inom ramen för dessa kampanjer, och diskuterar konsekvenserna detta kan ha för hbtq-rörelser och deras kamp för hbtq-rättigheter.

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Introduction

Recent decades have seen an increased mobilization of LGBTQ rights in the creation and maintenance of national(ist) identities. Both in domestic and foreign policy discourses, state actors have used their stances on LGBTQ rights in order to position themselves either as "good" states in support of these rights (Rao 2020) or as defenders of "traditional family values", challenging LGBTQ rights (Edenborg 2023). One arena in which this has happened is military recruiting and information campaigns. Military institutions across a number of countries have attempted to mobilize issues around gender and sexuality in efforts to broaden recruiting, to re-define their societal relevance as security organizations, to justify geopolitical interventions, and to re-arm and re-territorialize their national defense (Bulmer 2013; Strand and Kehl 2019; Spade and Belkin 2021; Baker 2023; Dolan and Danilova 2023).

Sweden has been portrayed as exceptionally progressive with regard to gender equality and LGBTQ rights (Alm et al. 2021; Martinsson et al. 2016). The Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) have often been cited as a forerunner for expanding its recruiting strategies and running campaigns on gender and sexuality in the last ten years (see Gray 2022 for overview). This process is on the one hand closely related to the shift from conscription to voluntary service in 2012-2018. On the other hand, it has been connected to a trend to re-territorialize Swedish defense, not least in the context of growing anti-gender mobilization in parts of Europe, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 and the consequent move by the Swedish government to apply for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

As part of their overall communication strategy around gender and sexuality, the SAF started publishing a yearly Pride campaign in 2017, usually scheduled to coincide with Stockholm Pride, Sweden's largest Pride festival. The central symbol for the representation of LGBTQ rights in all of these SAF Pride campaigns is the rainbow flag, which appears in different forms in every one of the campaign visuals. Drawing on a combined analysis of visual and textual campaign material, this article first looks at the ways in which LGBTQ rights are employed to ascribe meaning to the SAF as an organization as well as to justify the increasing rearmament and reterritorialization of Swedish defense in the face of anti-gender mobilization across Europe, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the increasing militarization of European defense discourses. Secondly, the article analyses the various ways in which the Pride campaigns perform a certain kind of 'Swedishness' (that is, a normative understanding of who belongs and who does not belong to an imagined Swedish nation) through conveying a specific image of the SAF. Finally, the article reflects upon how LGBTQ people are made intelligible within the context of these campaigns, and the possible implications this may have for LGBTQ movements and their fights for LGBTQ rights.

(Homo)normative sexualities and genders in military organizations

Feminist scholars have analyzed how normative notions of gender and sexuality are central to the creation and delimitation of nation states and the communities of belonging that underlie them (Stern 2006; Yuval-Davis 2006). Within these boundary-making processes, military institutions occupy a very particular and crucial position as the dedicated defenders of nations/states and, thus, the guarantors of their continued existence. There is also a well-established link between service in the armed forces and normative (if potentially contradictory) notions of masculinity and (hetero)sexuality (Belkin 2012; Bulmer 2013; Welland 2013; Henry 2017). However, as discussed by previous research, several notions of 'equal opportunities' military are increasingly called upon in Western European defense

discourses, partially due to countries moving from conscription armies to professionalized armed forces with a focus on military service as a career. Within the context of armed forces as career-building social institutions, rather than draft-based organizations, the need to attract individuals interested in pursuing military careers has meant a broadening of recruiting campaigns beyond specific cohorts of young white men (Strand and Berndtsson 2015; Stengel and Shim 2022; Baker 2023).

Attempts to attract non-traditional recruits not only include female soldiers in all branches of military service, it increasingly also positions LGBTQ soldiers as serving openly and proudly as defenders of their respective countries (Montegary 2015; Mandelbaum 2018; Baker 2023). While this could be easily dismissed as a straightforward illustration of (homo)nationalist political projects, the increased visibility of the LGBTQ soldier as a subject position cannot simply be approached through the binary understandings of co-optation versus subversion. Bulmer's analysis of the decision to allow LGBTQ troops to participate in uniform in London Pride in 2008 shows how LGBTQ soldiers are made visible as subjects who subvert patriarchy and heteronormativity hegemony within the British military, which further triggers an intense debate and heteronormative reactions among military personnel (Bulmer 2013). This incident uncovered how the military institution and its identity is "always already heterosexual," constituted and haunted by the ghostly homosexual Other (Bulmer 2013: 145). In an analysis of UK Armed Forces recruiting campaigns, Baker argues that while "the British Army now offers some queers a home in the military, that is not the same as a queer military home" (Baker 2023: 16). Instead, Baker identifies a specific kind of queerness that is considered acceptable within military context, closely connected to normative forms of domesticity and family-formation as well as whiteness as a major signifier of belonging (Baker 2023).

Similarly, Strand and Kehl have argued that the recent utilization of LGBTQ imagery in several of the SAF's marketing campaigns tend to superficially challenge hierarchies regarding gender and sexuality in Sweden, while such campaigns at the same time externalize and hide existing norms (Strand and Kehl 2019). Thus, even when rendered visible and available, representations of the LGBTQ soldier can contribute to the reproduction of military institutions as patriarchal and heteronormative. Along with Bulmer, we might therefore approach the mobilization of LGBTQ identities in defense discourses as potential sites of both "resistance and co-optation" (Bulmer 2013: 150). In the Swedish case, these campaigns also (re)produce specific notions of Swedishness as whiteness, similar to other historical and contemporary constructions of Swedishness (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012; Andreassen and Vitus 2015; Mulinari and Neergaard 2017).

The rainbow flag which appears as the central symbol for the representation of LGBTQ rights in all of the SAF Pride campaigns analyzed here, has its own

contested history. Designed in the 1970s in San Francisco, the flag spread beyond the United States of America in the wake of an increasingly professionalized and transnational activism for LGBTQ rights in the 1990s (Picq and Thiel 2015). The commercialization of Pride as an event has meant that in the 2020s, we see the flag not only as an activist symbol, but also hoisted outside government buildings, banks and multinational businesses. However, as ethnographic research indicates, beyond its market values, the rainbow flag also maintains its meaning as a crucial symbol of resistance, activism, and belonging for queer communities across various national contexts (Alm and Martinsson 2016; Klapeer and Laskar 2018). On a global geopolitical stage, the rainbow flag continues to be a marker of so-called deviant and dangerous others by states such as Russia or Turkey, who claim to defend 'traditional values' by ostracizing and persecuting LGBTQ people (Edenborg 2023; Çağatay et al. 2022). This fluidity and diversity of what the rainbow flag means to people globally, therefore, provides an important backdrop to my own analysis of what the rainbow flag 'does' in SAF marketing campaigns.

Method and material

In this article, I examine all six campaigns that were specifically released by the SAF in July or August 2017-2022 to coincide with Stockholm Pride, as well as a campaign by the organization Homosexuals, bisexuals and transgender people in the Armed Forces (Homo-, bisexuella och transpersoner inom Försvarsmakten – HoF) from 2015 which precedes the SAF's official Pride campaigns. I analyze both the visual representation of LGBTQ rights and LGBTQ people in/as part of the military and the textual messages that accompany the picture. While these yearly campaigns could be seen merely as part of the SAF's overall communication strategy, they tend to create a recurring public debate about LGBTQ rights and the role of the 'political' in relation to the military and other state institutions. Specifically, I treat the yearly campaigns as separate discursive events, to better understand the role of LGBTQ rights in ascribing meaning to national(ist) boundary-making processes, the SAF as an institution as well as the rearmament and reterritorialization of Swedish defense. My analysis is driven by Ahmed's "ethnography of text" (Ahmed 2006: 105) as well as an understanding of how images and words create intertextual meaning by 'doing things' discursively (Hansen 2011; Adler-Nissen, Andersen and Hansen 2020). I combine the analysis of text-based and image-based meaning-making under the umbrella of post-structural engagements with how we make sense of the world (Bleiker 2018). Processes of (re)presentation and (in)visibility create conditions of (im)possibility, and analyzing these processes can show the power that comes with the normalization of certain regimes of representation (for example by

continuously combining a rainbow flag with military iconography (Hall 1997; Altermark and Edenborg 2018). Additionally, I use Ahmed's notion of non-performativity (Ahmed 2006) to account for the ways in which symbols such as the rainbow flag can become stand-ins for the promise of political change in an organization (or a nation), rather than actual change. While present and visible on the outside, they become non-performative with regard to the cause they are a symbol of, externalizing issues such as racial, sexual, or gender discrimination. Following Ahmed's encouragement to "follow" signs around different contexts (Ahmed 2006: 105), I engage with the question "What does a certain image-text-combination do as part of a specific campaign?" In this case, the rainbow flag is the central visual key signifier that I follow around the different campaigns to see what it is 'doing' in particular contexts of meaning-making, combined with an interpretation of the accompanying captions. Crucially, this combination enables me to look at the evolution of the campaign from concerns regarding equal-opportunities employment towards more militaristic messages of threat and protection. With the exception of the slogan published as part of the 2018 campaign (which was originally in English), all quotes were translated from Swedish by me. Wherever the campaigns are still accessible online, I have provided links.

The right to serve openly: LGBTQ and SAF until 2017

The history of LGBTQ personnel serving in the SAF is closely connected to the history of the classification of homosexuality and transgender identities as mental illness. Up until the 1960s, there was an exemption from military duties based on military medical policies concerning homosexuality. This was contested by the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Rights (Riksförbundet för homosexuella, bisexuella, transpersoner, queeras och intersexpersoners rättigheter – RFSL) in the 1970s, and subsequently, the regulations for homosexual and transsexual service members were revised (Sundevall and Persson 2016). However, homosexuality remained a formal diagnosis within the SAF which could be used to exclude gay men from service till 1989, ten years after the classification was removed from the Swedish Classification of Diseases (Sundevall 2014; Sundevall and Persson 2016). The 1990s saw the arrival of Swedish anti-discrimination legislation based on sexual orientation in the workplace and in 2001 the organization HoF was founded by active service members to organize LGBTQ personnel in the SAF. In 2005, the SAF as an organization participated in Stockholm Pride for the first time, and since 2008 individual service members have been allowed to march in Pride parades dressed in full uniform. Since 2013, the commander-in-chief has

been attending Stockholm Pride every year, as part of the SAF's work towards diversity and anti-discrimination.

In 2015, the rainbow flag became visible for the first time in the SAF public image beyond the limited physical space of the actual Pride parade in central Stockholm. This happened in two ways. On the social media platform Facebook, the SAF replaced their profile picture, usually showing a shield of armor against a white background, with the same shield of armor against a rainbow-colored background. Several hours after its publication, the picture was removed and replaced by the original shield of armor again. Communication officer Jesper Tengrot stated that this was because "the shield of armor should not stand for anything else [...] and should look the same way at all times". According to him, this did not mean that the SAF did not stand behind Pride, but that the shield of armor as a symbol already included the values symbolized by the rainbow flag (Carlsson 2015). Around the same time, HoF also released a poster campaign with the slogan "Some things you should not need to camouflage" (Ottosson 2015). The poster was displayed prominently across Stockholm and distributed through various SAF social media channels. It shows a person in camouflage jacket and hat, with their face covered in camouflage paint, standing against a camouflage-patterned background. Two things stick out from the green-and-beige pattern: The person's blue eyes, and the rainbow flag stitched onto the right arm of the camouflage jacket, the place where the uniform insignia would sit otherwise. The text underneath reads as follows:

Equality is an important part of a democracy. In the Swedish Armed Forces, we treat each other with respect and see each other's differences as a strength. We are an inclusive organization where everybody who belongs and contributes to our operation should feel welcome and respected. (Ottosson 2015)

This advertisement creates the image of an equal opportunities employer who demands and promises respect for the LGBTQ soldiers. The message is communicated through a prominent placement of the rainbow flag in a visual setting that is otherwise clearly read as military. However, by implying that LGBTQ people might camouflage their identity outside of the SAF, it also strongly reproduces the idea of LGBTQ-people as inherently closeted and in need of coming out (see also Baker 2023). Much of the early debates on LGBTQ people in relation to the SAF revolve around questions of discrimination in the workplace. This positions the Swedish Armed Forces in line with other public employers – the *HoF* campaign mirrors this focus on LGBTQ people within the SAF and their right to serve openly and safely. While no Pride-related campaign was released

in 2016, my analysis indicates a clear shift in the message that accompanies the campaigns in connection to Stockholm Pride in the years since 2017.

This shift coincided with several larger information and marketing campaigns disseminated by the SAF between the years 2016-2018 which drew on sexuality and gender as ways to ascribe meaning to the SAF, and by extension to the rearmament and reterritorialization of Swedish Defense. Campaigns like "Though young, though free" (in reference to the national anthem "Thou old, thou free"), "How many reasons do you need", "Come as you are" and "We let Sweden be at peace" featured, to an unprecedented degree, non-normative representations of gender and sexuality, including same-sex kisses, and gender-non-conforming expressions (Strand and Kehl 2019). They were also decidedly "de-militarized", showing few classical components of military marketing (such as tanks, uniforms, or soldiers in the field). Instead, they centered on everyday life, civilian clothing, and domestic sceneries from Sweden "at peace". They also took up questions of religion and non-normative body types, and included a spectrum of bodies racialized as non-white in an attempt to "create relevance" and relatability, to de-mystify and de-homogenize a military institution that was in need of re-branding itself as much as it was in need of recruits (Strand and Berndtsson 2015). In the following sections, I highlight that despite the use of the rainbow flag in all the Pride-related campaigns, they remain much closer to classical military iconography than the larger campaigns, and further also invoke a rather limited register of diversity. Below, I analyze the six SAF Pride campaigns published between 2017-2022 chronologically in the order of their publication.

Protect and defend: Pride campaigns 2017 - 2020

The 2017 Pride campaign image centers a pair of army boots, laced up with rainbow shoelaces accompanied with the message:

We are ready to walk as far as it takes. It is our task to defend your right to live as you want to, as the person you want to be and with whom you want to.
(Försvarsmakten 2017)

While the picture combines military field equipment with a rainbow detail (as in the *HoF* campaign from 2015), the shift in the communicated message is quite striking. Now the campaign addresses an individual "you" and their rights to be who and with whom they want to be, from the position of a collective "we" promising to defend these rights. The campaign thus moves away from the language of anti-discrimination and equality at the workplace, as

discussed above, which portrayed the SAF as an inclusive and safe organization for its LGBTQ employees according to Swedish democratic values and anti-discrimination legislation. Instead, here, the narrative shifts towards a discourse of the defense of LGBTQ rights as part of the duty and mission of the SAF. LGBTQ people are now called upon as rights holders (Weber 2016), normalized as citizens and thus explicitly included in the nation that should be secured and protected by the SAF.

Not least the reference to walking "as far as it takes" indicates that this protection is not only aimed at internal challenges within the organization (or even the country), but instead directed towards an external enemy and threat – even when this enemy is never explicitly named nor specified. As discussed earlier, the notion that there are certain progressive Swedish values, ideas and freedoms which are considered extreme in the eyes of others is an integral part of how boundaries around Swedishness are constructed discursively (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016; Agius and Edenborg 2019; Strand and Kehl 2019). Following established patterns of threat and protection, Sweden is ascribed meaning in relation to (sometimes not so) distant, but always dangerous Others. The message of this campaign thus aligns with other statements that perform Sweden as an exceptionally progressive, tolerant and inclusive nation-state. LGBTQ rights and, by extension, LGBTQ individuals serve as the markers of its value-based boundaries. Arguably, this also means that the rainbow flag as a symbol of LGBTQ liberation acquires meaning beyond the earlier message of anti-discrimination, and is entangled in notions of protection and defense connected to national(ist) understandings of Sweden and its borders.

The campaign posters from the following year, 2018, continued to reinforce rights-based discourse expand the notion that LGBTQ rights and LGBTQ people need to be defended at and beyond Swedish borders. In 2018, the SAF Pride campaign was published exclusively in English. Since Stockholm Pride was also the venue for the 2018 Europride Festival (a pan-European international event, hosted by a different European city each year), campaigners perhaps anticipated an international audience. The main campaign visual consists of two individual photos of soldiers in uniform, one with long hair in a braid across the shoulder, the other with short hair. Both of them are white, blue-eyed and blond-haired, thus living up to a very specific embodiment of Swedishness. They are photographed and filmed in the process of covering their faces in paint, but instead of the camouflage paint used in the 2015 campaign created by *HoF*, this time they don the rainbow colors. Both of them look at the camera defiantly as they smear the colors across their faces. The campaign slogan for these images reads

We don't always march straight. But no matter where or when we march, we always stand up for your right to live the way you want with whoever you want. Read more about how we work to protect freedom and the right to choose the way we live at forsvarsmakten.se. (Volt 2018)

Several of the messages from the previous year are repeated in the 2018 campaign. The notion of the "right to live the way you want and with whoever you want" re-appears, as does the SAF as the protector of that right and the freedoms associated with it. The idea of marching is even more central to this campaign, not least because of the slogan's play on words with the term "straight", referring both to the straight marching line of soldiers, and heterosexuality as straightness. The campaign depicts the SAF soldiers as open and proud LGBTQ people, but they are also dedicated defenders of LGBTQ rights in their professional role as soldiers. This clearly troubles the traditional binary understandings of who is in need of protection (the LGBTQ person) and who is the protector (the masculinized soldier) (Bulmer 2013; Duncanson 2015).

At the same time, the two soldiers' camouflage outfits, complete with combat vest and ammunition, reproduce established militarized iconography to the same extent that their blue-eyed blonde exterior reproduces established notions of white Swedishness. Defending LGBTQ rights might be a task conducted by LGBTQ people in uniform, but in these campaigns it is as if this is exclusively by white people. This resonates with the presumptions that white people have to protect racialized LGBTQ people from their own racialized communities and families, as analyzed across a number of contexts (Haritaworn 2015; Kehl 2020; Hiller 2022). It also indicates that the diversity presented in these campaigns might apply only to one minority position – the soldiers portrayed do not challenge or disturb any social norms beyond them being LGBTQ in the context of a traditionally heteronormative institution. This approach to diversity becomes clearer as more campaigns are launched, which I address below.

The 2019 campaign was the first one to use a full-page ad in major Swedish daily newspapers. Among others, it was published on the first page of *Svenska Dagbladet*, one of Sweden's more conservative news media, a publication strategy that has since been maintained. The picture features a table with a multistorey wedding cake on top, decorated with roses, hearts and camouflage icing in a grey color scale that strongly resembles the camouflage pattern of Swedish naval vessels. A piece has been cut out at the top to reveal a layered rainbow sponge cake inside. There is, no pun intended, a colorful rainbow underneath the camouflaged exterior. The slogan says "To the defense of love" and the caption reads as follows: "It is our task to defend your right to be who you are, live how you want to, with

whom you yourself chose.” (Axbom 2021). The message is familiar and reiterates: the individual ‘you’ and their right to be who they want to be, to live with whom they chose as a part of the mission and duty of national defense.

The elaborate wedding cake hints at the progressive legislation which allows same-sex marriage, one of the not undebated achievements that Sweden has prided itself (Rydström 2011). Sweden was among the first countries to recognize same sex couples under civil law in 1995 and in 2009, Sweden legislated a fully gender-neutral marriage law – exactly ten years prior to the release of this campaign. This law also features prominently on the SAF website, as part of a timeline of Swedish progressiveness in relation to gender equality and LGBTQ rights. The year 2009 is referred to as ”a decisive year for your right to live how you like, with whom you like” (Strand and Kehl 2019: 13). At the same time, the right to marry is frequently called upon as a hallmark of homonormativity by both activist and scholars, critiqued as a building block for queer assimilation into the social institutions of heteronormativity and achieved at the cost of other social reforms (Duggan 2002; Wilkinson 2017). The focus on love in the campaign slogan also indicates a de-politicized understanding of queer movements’ fight against gender and sexuality norms on the part of the SAF. Here, this fight is merely portrayed to be about love and acceptance, rather than the discrimination and stigmatization of non-normative gender and sexual identities in various legal, social and institutional arenas. As LGBTQ activists and academics in various national contexts have pointed out, this depoliticized love is accessible primarily to those parts of LGBTQ communities who otherwise occupy privileged positions in society based on their ethnicity, citizenship status, and economic situation (Haritaworn 2015; Bacchetta 2017; Wilkinson 2017; Tschalaer 2020). Interestingly, the promise of protecting LGBTQ people’s ‘right to be who they are’, which reappears as a discursive pillar throughout all the campaigns, can be seen as contributing to this depoliticized message in its own way. The focus on protecting rights implies that these rights are already well-established in Sweden, which in turn suggests there is no need for a continued political struggle.

In 2020, the SAF Pride campaign shows a group of soldiers pictured from behind, standing at ease in uniforms surrounded by sunlit nature. As the person closest to the camera has their hands folded behind their back, we can see that the nails of all ten fingers are painted in different colors, forming the colors of the rainbow flag. The slogan reads:

Our strength consists of our differences. We are proud to stand up for all people’s equal worth. Together we defend Sweden, our freedom and the right to live as we ourselves chose. (Axbom 2021)

This picture connects some of the earlier messages: it alludes to the strengths of the equal-opportunities organization while also linking the defense of Sweden as a nation to the defense of certain sets of values and the freedom to choose a particular way of life. Interestingly, the language has once more shifted in this campaign: instead of addressing an individual "you" whose rights are defended by a collective SAF "we", the "we" has now become more all-encompassing. "We" are defending "our" freedom and "our" rights; which again relates back to LGBTQ soldiers being part of the forces defending these rights. However, even in this group the four soldiers who are visible are white, and the majority of them is, yet again, blonde. Even here, the "differences" (or diversity) that the campaign alludes to seem to stretch only so far.

Rainbow under arms: Pride campaigns 2021 - 2022

While the campaigns in 2017-2020 all featured camouflage patterns and uniforms, the 2021 campaign introduces an additional aspect of classical military iconography: for the first time, it shows fully armed soldiers. This may simply be a reflection of what Swedish defense agencies argue to be a deteriorating security situation in Europe at large. However, it can also be interpreted as part of a slow and steady normalization of placing the rainbow flag next to military equipment. In the campaign image released in July 2021, four soldiers in field uniforms, helmets and combat vests, with camouflage-painted faces and carrying rifles, are pictured walking across a landscape with bushes and small trees. While the three soldiers in the background hold their rifles in a way that indicates they are on patrol, the one closest to the camera carries a large rainbow flag twice the soldiers' height. The flag-bearing soldier in the front looks at the camera with a determined expression. The slogan across the picture reads "A flag worth defending" and the caption claims that "We defend human rights, everybody's equal worth and our right to live as we ourselves chose to" (Axbom 2021).

While the presence of weapons diverges from the earlier visual ads, the figure of the flag-bearer marks the most prominent display of the rainbow flag in all the campaigns so far. The significance of positioning it in the center of the picture, as well as the fact that the campaign slogan explicitly refers to it, elevates the flag's role as an important symbol, representing a variety of things. The caption equates it with human rights, the equal worth of all people, and the right to live as they chose to. The flag is also equated with the defense of Swedish values and, eventually, Swedish borders. Defending the rainbow flag, and all that it stands for means defending Sweden. While the portrayal of Sweden being synonymous with LGBTQ rights has been present in various discourses across the political

spectrum, the ad statement that this flag is worth defending through the use of weapons and (implicitly) by the loss of Swedish soldiers' lives, elevates the message to a new level. In the context of existing research on the promotion of Sweden's feminist foreign policy and the increasing escalation of geopolitical conflicts framed as being (among other things) about "traditional values", this statement positions Swedish military force in opposition to countries such as Russia and Hungary (Agius and Edenborg 2019; Bergman Rosamond 2020; Edenborg 2020, 2021). The imagery connected to this statement suggests that, for the SAF, the defense of LGBTQ rights is about a territorial defense, and one that is increasingly orienting itself towards an outward threat coming from the East.

As discussed above, research has shown that marketing campaigns run by organizations such as armed forces which use LGBTQ identities might challenge gender binaries and heteronormativity superficially (Bulmer 2013; Strand and Kehl 2019; Baker 2023). However, they also make discrimination against LGBTQ more difficult to address by repeating, reinforcing and stabilizing the notion of a gender-exceptional Sweden. These campaigns portray "the right to be who you are" as something that needs to be protected, rather than achieved through political action, as if it was already present for each and every member of LGBTQ communities across Sweden. Discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation is discursively externalized from Swedish borders in these campaigns, while the continued LGBTQ-phobia, discrimination and harassment within Swedish society (and within institutions like the SAF) remain concealed. Despite this, the wider reception of the SAF ad campaigns which make use of LGBTQ people, LGBTQ rights, and symbols illustrate the continued existence of anti-LGBTQ sentiments and attitudes. The Pride campaign from 2021 is no exception. While the message in the caption itself might not seem controversial for a state institution in the Swedish context, the prominent placement of the flag and the claim that it is "worth defending" sparked a heated debate across social media. Voices were raised both in favor of and against the use of the rainbow flag as a symbol. One of the main oppositions was that the rainbow flag is a "political" symbol and that the Swedish national flag should be the only one featured in SAF campaigns. Contrary to 2015, when the rainbow flag was removed from Facebook post after criticism, in 2021 the SAF did not back down on the campaign. Instead, the Commander in Chief referred to a statement he made in 2020:

Our participation in Pride means we are actively taking the stance for the equal value of all human beings, which is also a natural part of our responsibility as

employer [...] The SAF are simply confident of their values. (Försvarsmakten 2020)

This statement was republished on social media in the Pride-related SAF campaign in August 2022. In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent move by the Swedish government to apply for NATO membership, the campaign's slogan was stated to be "More important now than ever". Its byline reads: "Unsafe times do not mean we stop defending human rights, everybody's equal value and your right to live as you are. That is why we are participating in Pride – even this year" (Axbom 2021). Its release was accompanied by press statements from the PR company that created the campaign, claiming that:

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February made it painfully clear that we cannot take our rights for granted. It therefore feels particularly important this year to emphasize why the SAF are participating in Pride. We should be proud to have armed forces that defend all inhabitants, no matter who you are. (Price 2022)

The campaign image itself shows six soldiers standing in a field in a V-formation, each of them holding a different-colored smoke grenade in one raised hand. Together, the colorful smoke clouds create a rainbow plume over the group of fully armed and camouflaged soldiers. The angle of the photograph, shot from below, and the dark and seemingly stormy sky against which they are positioned creates a powerful, almost threatening atmosphere. The picture is one of a military unit ready to engage in combat, while the high-visibility smoke grenades allude to them having no reason to hide. Instead, they are openly signaling their support of LGBTQ people, visible from a distance.

On their website, the SAF anticipate some of the expected and usual critique against this campaign by stating that:

"When the world is in an unsafe state, it is easy to pitch rights against each other. There are those who claim that the SAF have more important things to do right now than waving Pride-flags. Rights are pitched against rights, and you ask yourself what is more important: A strong defense or everybody's equal value? For us, these are no opposites. SAF's duty is to defend Sweden, everybody who lives here, our democracy and our rights. For, in the end, it's the person without rights who stands without protection". (Kardelo 2022)

Though, as research shows, there are LGBTQ people in Sweden who are quite clearly not being included in the "duty to defend". This includes LGBTQ

asylum seekers, who frequently experience that Sweden is indeed *not* a country protecting the rights of all LGBTQ people within its borders, as they are being subjected to invasive migration interviews, questioning of their sexual identities, and, eventually, may face deportation (Jungar and Peltonen 2017; Akin 2019; Hedlund and Wimark 2019; Wimark 2019, 2020). To them, this final reference to "the person without rights who stands without protection" might sound almost cynical.

Conclusions

The SAF's yearly Pride campaigns could merely be seen as part of a wider attempt of the organization to aid recruitment. However, in their close connection to Pride and the specificities of their messages these campaigns are distinct discursive events, creating a recurring debate about LGBTQ rights, anti-discrimination, and the role of the 'political' in relation to the military and other state institutions. Throughout, the messages conveyed in the slogans and the captions imply certain key signifiers: the right (eventually described as human right) to be who you want to be and with whom you want to be, the defense and protection of these rights by the SAF, as well as the marching and standing up in defense of these rights wherever it is needed. Starting from the initial image of SAF as an equal opportunities employer, who demands and promises respect for LGBTQ soldiers, the military organization has now become the face of the guarantor of LGBTQ rights in Sweden (and potentially beyond). Simultaneously, the LGBTQ soldiers are portrayed as important, capable and self-evident part of the forces defending those rights. In the context of the Pride event, the SAF appear as both participants, potential employer, and defenders, in the face of growing anti-gender mobilization in Eastern parts of Europe and Russian aggression against Ukraine (Petö and Kováts 2017; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Korolczuk 2020).

It becomes apparent that even with the rainbow flag present in all of them, the explicitly Pride-related campaigns stay very close to classical military iconography, much closer than other campaigns drawing on sexuality and gender identity during the same time span (Strand and Kehl 2019; Stern and Strand 2021). While the rainbow flag is in different ways used as the re-appearing visual marker of LGBTQ rights and identities, elements like camouflage patterns, military uniforms, and increasingly also combat equipment and weapons are present to "ground" the rainbow representation. They connect it visually to the military organization that is the SAF. The soldiers pictured in the campaigns present seemingly conventional notions of masculinity and femininity in the context of military employment. Beyond that, they are exclusively white, predominantly

blond, and blue-eyed, representing a military institution that rests on (and in this case actively reproduces) racialized conventions about ‘Swedishness’ as whiteness. As Baker points out in her analysis of similar campaigns by the British Armed Forces, such representations can “evidently only cope with one axis of diversity at a time” (Baker 2023: 8).

In the SAF’s Pride campaigns, it appears as if the presence of the rainbow is considered sufficiently controversial, and sufficiently symbolically powerful, to raise attention and convey the message of the SAF being the defenders of LGBTQ rights within and outside of Swedish borders. While creating some kind of LGBTQ representation, they thus fail to effectively challenge normative assumptions about gender and sexuality beyond specific kinds of acceptable ‘queerness’, which rests on normalized intersections of race, binary gender and socially sanctioned forms of monogamy. As the narrative in the campaigns shifts towards a discourse of the defense of LGBTQ rights as part of the duty of the SAF, the rainbow flag as a symbol acquires meaning beyond earlier messages of anti-discrimination, and becomes entangled in notions of protection and defense connected to national(ist) understanding of Sweden and its borders. As part of these defense discourses, discrimination of and dangers for LGBTQ people are externalized from the Swedish territory and (dis)placed in distant locations and external threats. Despite this externalization of discrimination, the openly homo- and transphobic opinions voiced by right-wing commentators in reaction to SAF’s Pride campaigns every year reflect Sweden’s contradictory environment towards LGBTQ rights. The SAF’s promise of defending and protecting LGBTQ people’s rights implies that these rights are already well-established within Sweden, foreclosing the need for a continued political struggle towards the recognition and protection of all members of LGBTQ communities.

At the same time, these recurring campaigns normalize the visual proximity of the rainbow flag and camouflaged, uniform-wearing, gun-bearing military professionals. Following the campaigns chronologically makes this increasingly clear, as the rainbow flag, accompanied by the “the right to be who you are” becomes one of the established visual-discursive pillars that justify the continued existence, financing and staffing of a military organization. If LGBTQ rights are equated with Swedish progressiveness and these campaigns position the SAF as the defender of this continued progressiveness, LGBTQ symbolism contributes to the military preparedness and renewed focus on securing Sweden’s geographical borders by providing legitimacy. My analysis suggests that the use of these symbols also justifies a military defense of the Swedish territory, casting Sweden’s ongoing rearmament and reterritorialization policy as progress in the face of potential external aggression. When called upon in these campaigns, the

figure of the LGBTQ rights holder (and the LGBTQ soldiers) therefore becomes part of a "reinvigorated militarism [...] that is arguably more palatable to the Swedish public than previous appeals" (Stern and Strand 2021: 4). Flying the rainbow flag, in other words, enables the SAF to appear both progressive and reassuringly militaristic, while doing rather little to challenge the limitations that normative understandings of gender and sexuality put on the livability of LGBTQ people's lives in Sweden.

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Nyckelord

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