

The Return of the Nordic Voice at the United Nations

Katie Laatikainen, Adelphi University, USA

Karen E. Smith, London School of Economics, UK

Abstract

Since the mid-2010s, the Nordic voice at the United Nations has grown louder, reversing a period of relative quiescence over the previous two decades. Nordic diplomats, often joined by Baltic diplomats, are issuing more joint statements than ever before, both in New York and in the Human Rights Council in Geneva. The return of the Nordic voice at the UN is, fittingly, well explained through the insights contributed by Nordic International Relations in the literatures on communities of practice and ontological security, much of which has been published in *Cooperation and Conflict* over its 60-year history. This article contributes to the special issue by empirically demonstrating changes in the practices of Nordic and Baltic diplomats and explaining these changes through insights derived from studies of ontological security. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis, it argues that changes in Nordic diplomatic practice are a response to ontological insecurity arising from the crisis of multilateralism within and outside the EU which threatened the Nordic identity as champions of UN multilateralism. Nordic and Baltic diplomats have responded by voicing their own distinctive identity and upholding the Nordic narrative via group statements within the UN.

Key words: Nordic group, Nordic-Baltic group, communities of practice, ontological security, United Nations

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Introduction

Since the mid-2010s, the Nordic voice at the United Nations (UN) has grown louder, reversing a period of relative quiescence over the previous two decades. After the 1994 accession of Finland and Sweden to the European Union (EU), the Nordic Group's visibility dropped dramatically at the UN, as this journal detailed (Laatikainen 2003). An active and vocal group at the start of the 1990s, by the late 1990s the Nordic practice of issuing joint statements was substantially curtailed at the UN. With three of the five Nordic states (Denmark, Finland and Sweden, not Iceland or Norway) enveloped by the EU's growing common foreign and security policy, joint Nordic diplomacy went almost silent - though Nordic diplomats continued to meet as a group and cooperate in less visible ways. 'The focus of continued Nordic cooperation is not to present a cohesive, autonomous Nordic position to the rest of the world, but to work together informally to find ways of influencing European policy within the UN' (Laatikainen 2003: 435). Now, however, Nordic diplomats, often joined by Baltic (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) diplomats, are issuing more joint statements than ever before, both in New York and in the

Human Rights Council in Geneva (see figures 1 and 2). How can we understand this change in practice?

This article offers an explanation of how and why communities of practice may change their practices by drawing on insights from the growing scholarship on ontological security. It does so by considering how changes in the external context can unsettle the ontological security of members of a community of practice (Nordic and Baltic diplomats in this case) and lead them to change their practices. The substantial change in the practice of issuing Nordic and Nordic-Baltic statements is connected to the emergence of ontological insecurity arising from perceptions that the crisis of multilateralism from the mid-2010s threatened the Nordic identity as champions of UN multilateralism. Their identity as committed multilateralists in a liberal international order was threatened within and outside the EU, and ‘the denial of recognition of distinctiveness can lead to the experience of ontological insecurity’ within communities (Greve 2018: 878). The response by Nordic and Baltic diplomats has been to voice their own distinctive identity via group statements within the UN.

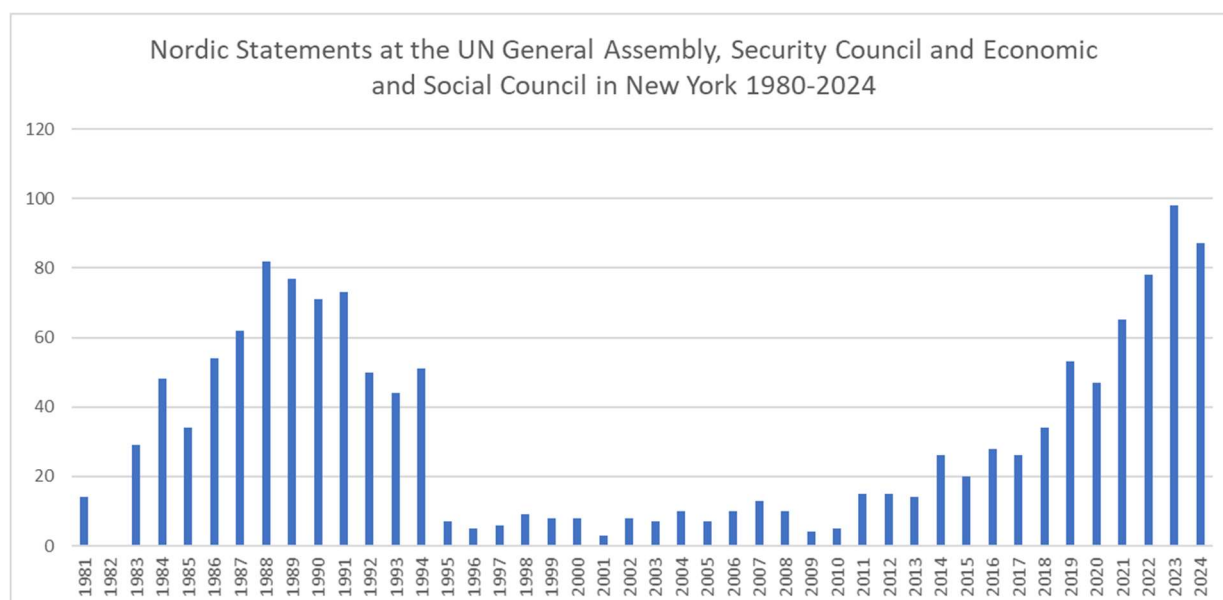


Figure 1 Sources: Author's compilation data retrieved from the UN Digital Library and the webpages of the Permanent Missions of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden to the United Nations.

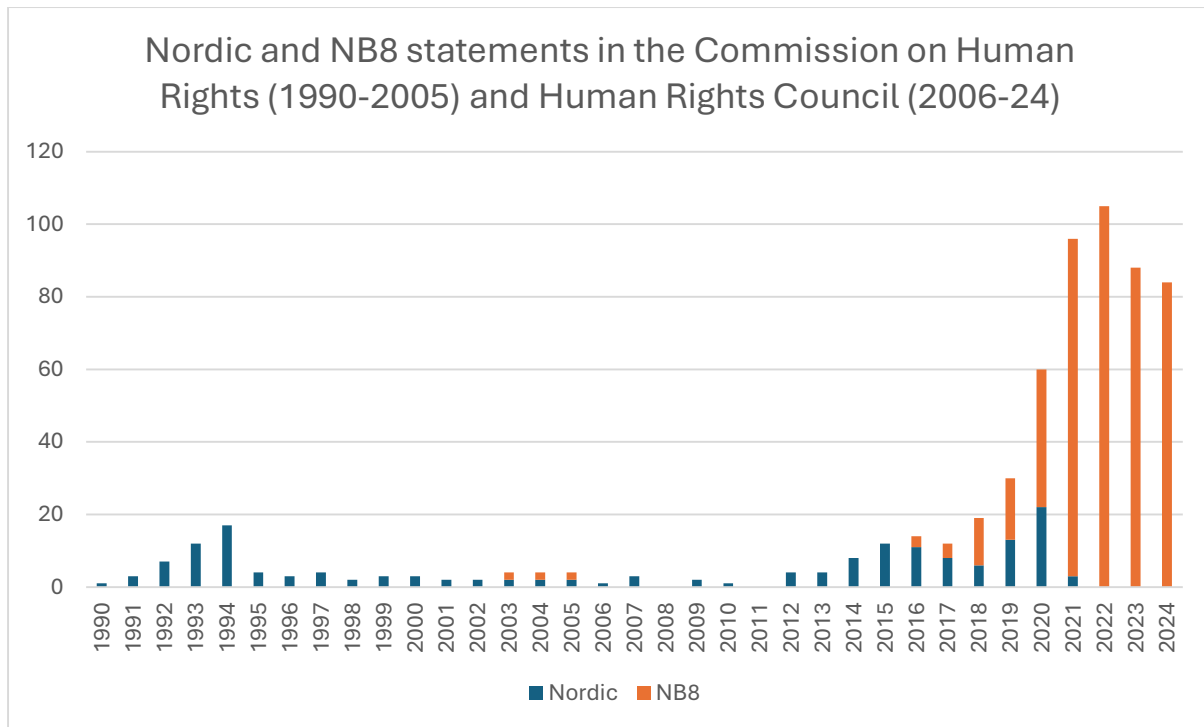


Figure 2 Sources: Author's compilation from UN CHR annual reports; UN HRC extranet¹

The first section of this article briefly summarises the literature on communities of practice in International Relations and notes that it does not yet sufficiently account for changes that may occur in the practices of such communities. In the next three sections, we note the presence of intersecting communities of practice at the UN, describe the Nordic community of practice at the UN, and argue that championing multilateralism has been central to the identity of both the Nordic and EU communities of practices. We then illustrate the return of the Nordic voice at the UN since 2014. To explain this striking change, we draw on the literature on ontological security, which is first summarized in a section and then applied to the case of the Nordic voice. We argue that traditional security concerns are not sufficient to explain the changes in Nordic practices at the UN, and instead show that ontological insecurity stemming from the crisis of multilateralism over the last decade does. In the conclusion, we suggest that ontological insecurity could also help to explain increased activity by other European groups at the UN, such as the Benelux grouping (composed of Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands).

To explore the Nordic community of practice and the narratives surrounding ontological insecurity, we have primarily used the method of interviewing the diplomats involved. Between 2004 and 2023, we interviewed 24 diplomats, all based at permanent missions in New York or Geneva, from the Nordic and Baltic states, the EU, Belgium, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom (see appendix 1). Nineteen of those interviews took place from 2019. Interviews were conducted in person and online. As Pouliot and Cornut (2015: 308) argue, the qualitative method of interviewing 'grants much value to the practitioners' point of view... Practices exist, first and foremost, in the eyes of practitioners.' Interviews help to 'reconstruct patterned rules of

¹ The Commission on Human Rights met once a year, for six weeks. The Human Rights Council meets three times a year, for no fewer than 10 weeks total. Despite the difference in formats, the number of yearly Nordic statements remained steady in the 1990s and 2000s. The Nordic Group also issued statements at five of the HRC's 36 special sessions on urgent matters between 2012 and 2021, while the NB8 has issued statements at another five since 2021.

the game and practices' (Ibid). In the case of Nordic cooperation at the UN, interviewing is the only viable way to uncover the community of practice, as there are few official documents, and hardly any academic publications, about the Nordic Group at the UN (see Jakobsen 2017; Laatikainen 2003; Metzger and Piasecki 1991; Tuominen and Kronlund 2023). While Beuger and Gadinger argue that participant observation is the ideal methodology to uncover practices and that interviews may merely provide 'post-hoc rationalizations' by practitioners, issues of access to Nordic missions by non-Nordic scholars limited the ability of the authors to engage in participant observation (Beuger and Gadinger 2014: 89). Given the temporal and diplomatic constraints, we took care in structuring our interviews to ensure that diplomats were recounting the practices related to the reactivation of the Nordic voice. Each semi-structured interview with Nordic and Baltic diplomats asked them to reconstruct how the Nordic community of practice operates in New York and Geneva. Each semi-structured interview with other diplomats focused on their perceptions of the practices of Nordic and Baltic diplomats, and, in the case of Belgian and Luxembourgish diplomats, on their own practices at the UN. We have also examined the statements issued by Nordic and Nordic-Baltic states at the UN General Assembly and Security Council in New York, and the Human Rights Council in Geneva. Unlike the European Union which serves as a repository for all EU statements at the UN, Nordic statements remain on the websites of the Nordic and Baltic Mission to the UN in New York or Geneva that presented the statement which is itself an interesting Nordic practice. Statements at the HRC can also be found on the HRC extranet for each day's meetings (<https://hrcmeetings.ohchr.org/Pages/default.aspx>). Older Nordic statements are accessible from the UN Digital Library.

Communities of Practice

The 'practice turn' in International Relations calls on scholars 'to focus on the practical aspects of international politics, that is, on what people actually do and on what patterns of action can be identified' (Bicchi, 2021: 242). It is one of the areas in which Nordic International Relations has made a significant contribution. Scholars based in the Nordic region, such as Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Niklas Bremberg, Nina Graeger, and Iver Neumann, have produced many of the path-breaking publications on practice in International Relations (see, for example: Adler Nissen 2016; Bremberg 2015; Graeger 2016; and Neumann 2012).

Practices can be defined simply as 'ways of doing things' (Pouliot and Cornut 2015: 301). 'Practices are knowledge-constituted, meaningful patterns of socially recognized activity, embedded in communities, routines and organizations that structure experience' (Adler, 2008: 198). Graeger (2016: 480) emphasises the routinised characteristic of practices: they are 'patterns of (inter)action that are iterated over time and triggered by shared values, interests, and habits among practitioners that are intrinsic to their profession.'

There is a clear affinity between the study of diplomacy and the study of practices, as discussed in a Special Issue of *Cooperation and Conflict* in 2015 (see Pouliot and Cornut 2015). Neumann's work, for example, has looked in depth at what diplomats actually do within the Norwegian foreign ministry (Neumann 2012). Diplomacy itself is a bundle of practices – an activity rather than an outcome – and there have been numerous studies applying practice theories to diplomacy, many within the context of international organisations (Pouliot and Cornut 2015: 303).

An important strand of the practice turn looks at 'communities of practice' (CoPs), and again here, the contribution of Nordic International Relations is clear (for example, see Bremberg, Danielson, Harding and Michalski 2021). Communities of practice are 'like-minded groups of

practitioners who are informally as well as contextually bound by a shared interest in learning and applying a common practice' (Adler 2008: 196). Wenger, an educational theorist whose work on communities of practice has heavily influenced IR scholars, identified three key elements of them:

- Members of a community of practice are bound by a sense of joint enterprise;
- Members build their community through mutual engagement, interaction with each other;
- Communities of practice have produced a shared repertoire of resources such as routines, sensibilities and stories (Wenger 2000: 229).

Adler (2008: 201) contends that practitioners' 'engagement in a common practice makes them share an identity and feel they are a "we"'. As Adler notes, there is overlap with the concepts of epistemic communities (networks of professionals with knowledge and skills in a particular area) and security communities (a region where there are dependable expectations of peace), but these concepts do not specifically focus on practice (Adler 2008: 199). It is the focus on practice and identity in CoPs that enables a deeper exploration of what happens within groups and what can bind members of groups together: within a CoP, participants share a practice and identity (Bicchi 2022: 26).

Do the practices of a CoP change? Hopf (2018) argued that the practice turn in IR has a problem with explaining change. Practices are stable – they are iterated patterns, as Graeger (2016) contends; they are considered to reproduce themselves, and while they may transform over time, they do so only at the margins and incrementally (Pouliot and Cornut 2015: 306). There can be contestation within a CoP, which can result in the evolution of practices as practitioners reflect on them and learn (Adler, Bremberg and Sondarjee 2024: 2; see also Bremberg, et al 2022). A change in background knowledge, such as a change in the understanding of post-Cold War security (Adler 2008: 213), or the adoption of new technologies such as diplomats' use of WhatsApp (Cornut and Blumental 2022) can contribute to the evolution of practices, but these transform and adapt rather than replace old practices. In crisis situations, established knowledge may not be suitable for guiding policy actions, but any 'change seldom takes the form of a clean break from the past but rather as a creative shift of the baseline of possibilities negotiated among groups of practitioners' (Adler, et al, 2024: 5). As Davies notes, 'a practice approach suggests that radical change can only occur in moments of extreme social dislocation' (Davies 2016: 227). Hopf (2018) suggests that the practice turn return to its original consideration of conscious reflection during ongoing practice: practitioners can reflect on their practices and change them; they can change what they are doing (Hopf 2018: 692). He sets out scope conditions for such reflection, which include exogenous shocks and productive crises, though the resulting new and innovative practices still have to be synchronous, a good fit, with the past. He cites examples of such reflection-inducing crises that have been discussed in the literature (2018: 703-4), including the failure of diplomacy to prevent World War I (Pouliot and Cornut 2015: 306), the collapse of the Soviet Union (Neumann 2002), and violent attacks on peacemakers (Autesserre 2014: 43).

Intersecting Communities of Practice at the UN

There is a rich variety of diplomatic interactions at the UN, and one notable characteristic of these is that diplomatic efforts in the intergovernmental forums such as the UN General Assembly and UN Human Rights Council are often channelled through groupings of member states (Smith and Laatikainen 2020). Such groups include the Africa Group, the EU, the G-77, cross-regional groups, and single-issue 'Friends of' groups. More formal groups typically

constitute a distinct community of practice with their own routines and habits of interaction; 'Friends' groups also reflect practices and routines of cross-regional consensus building in multilateral negotiations, though their single-issue focus and typically shorter life-span mean that participants do not generally develop a common identity reflective of communities of practice.

Diplomats work together in these groups to exchange information, coordinate positions and often present statements and resolutions on their behalf. Groups are patently visible in the records of debates, with top speaking slots taken up by states speaking on behalf of groups of other states. Any individual UN member state is concurrently a member of multiple diplomatic groupings at the UN. This is certainly the case for individual Nordic states who participate in a variety of Friends groupings, in the Nordic CoP (and its recent extension as the Nordic-Baltic grouping), and, for those Nordic and Baltic states that are EU members, in the EU CoP with its distinct coordination process.

Of the many groups active in UN diplomacy, the EU is widely seen as one of the most powerful, not least because it is highly organised with a concerted effort to develop a shared identity and single voice in multilateral affairs (Smith 2006). In the 1993 Maastricht Treaty, the EU member states agreed that they 'shall coordinate' their action in international organisations. In the 2009 Lisbon Treaty they strengthened the mechanisms for coordinating and representing their common positions, giving the EU Delegations to international organisations more power to chair meetings and represent the EU. In the UN General Assembly, the EU has obtained enhanced observer status which means the EU Delegation presents the EU's agreed positions. The strong commitment by EU member states to act collectively in the United Nations is a hallmark of the EU community of practice, which is characterised by the practice of intensive consultations among EU member state diplomats (multiple EU coordination meetings take place almost daily in both New York and Geneva), agreement on hundreds of statements each year expressing EU positions, sponsoring of dozens of resolutions, and attempts to ensure that the member states vote the same way on UN resolutions and decisions (Laatikainen 2015; Panke 2017).

The Nordic Community of Practice at the UN

Nordic - and often Baltic - diplomats at the UN in New York and the Human Rights Council in Geneva constitute another distinct community of practice. The Nordic community of practice reflects long standing routines developed in New York and Geneva; at its centre are the practices of frequent consultation and 'intensified and institutionalized information-sharing' (Jakobsen 2017: 281), which are nonetheless looser, more flexible and more 'ad-hoc' compared to the EU coordination process (interviews, 8 July 2022 and 4 August 2022, New York). In both UN sites, the Nordic CoP has been extended to include diplomats from the three Baltic states, in a configuration now known as the 'NB8', though Nordic-only meetings continue to take place, as detailed further below.

The meetings are an important source of information sharing on draft resolutions under negotiation and the work and positions of cross-regional and 'Friends' groups on particular issues. Nordic and Baltic diplomats exchange information on current negotiations and determine how they can coordinate action in the wider discussions on the agenda. Such information sharing is also a way for non-EU Nordic diplomats to hear about EU initiatives (interviews, 26 May 2014, Geneva; 4 August 2023, New York).

In both New York and Geneva, one Nordic or Baltic delegation assumes the role of coordinator; in Geneva this rotates for each HRC session (there are three sessions per year), while in New

York it rotates annually. Coordinators host in-person meetings of the heads of mission (monthly in New York) and the deputy Permanent Representatives (weekly in New York), while human rights diplomats in Geneva meet before each HRC session. Nordic and Baltic diplomats at all levels are involved in information-sharing in an egalitarian fashion; the coordinating delegation does not have a hierarchical role. Day-to-day diplomatic communication occurs through constant communication via Whatsapp which is the dominant shared practice in New York and Geneva. This constant informal consultation often does not require in-person meetings (interviews, 9 and 10 April 2019, New York).

Baltic diplomats have been integrated into the Nordic community of practice, with some exceptions based upon institutional constraints and historical practices. That absorption into the older Nordic community reflects the long-standing integration of the Baltic states into a wide variety of Nordic communities of practice, for example in the institutionalisation of Nordic Council links with the Baltic states (Birkavs and Gade, 2010; Etzold 2024: 76-79). For the Baltic states, the Nordics 'are a model for us' (interview, 5 July 2022, New York) and the Nordic brand is a positive affiliation that 'generates a sense of status and self-esteem' (Browning and Joenniemi, 2017: 45). Both within and outside the EU, the 'Baltics are seen as Nordic' because they are so like-minded (Interview, 14 July 2022, New York).

In Geneva, the NB8 configuration is the dominant expression of Nordic identity. There are still occasional Nordic-only lunches (interview, 14 July 2022, Geneva), and Nordic diplomats exchange information about the other international organisations based in Geneva (the World Trade Organization, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Health Organization) based on long-standing Nordic-only routines. With respect to the HRC, however, it is the NB8 rather than Nordic-5 only that meets regularly, exchanging information but primarily focusing on the text of the joint statements they will make.

In New York, Baltic diplomats have become broadly integrated into the Nordic community of practice, but there are significant areas that remain Nordic-only. The five Nordic states have a decades old system of mutual support and rotation in standing elections for UN Security Council seats in the West European and Other group while the Baltic states continue to compete for UNSC seats through the Eastern European Group.² This institutional reality means that the Nordic and Baltic diplomats operate largely separately on UN Security Council membership issues. Nonetheless, Nordic and Baltic diplomats engage in a great deal of information-sharing (Haugevik et al 2021). For instance, there are additional weekly NB8 meetings when a Nordic or Baltic member state is serving on the Security Council (Estonia 2020-21; Norway 2021-22; Denmark 2025-26) to provide NB8-only briefings outside of similar EU heads of mission meetings. Nordic diplomats also coordinate exclusively on UN Funds and Programmes.

In contrast to other diplomatic communities at the UN, such as the EU, the Africa Group and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Nordic diplomats have not engaged extensively in the practice of putting forward resolutions in the General Assembly and its committees or the Human Rights Council. In New York, the Nordic states sponsor perhaps one or two resolutions a year, on issues such as extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, or support of the Report of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. In Geneva, Nordic and NB8 practices have deliberately not included jointly sponsoring resolutions, though individually some Nordic countries sponsor yearly or biannual resolutions on particular topics (for example, Denmark on torture; Sweden and Finland on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions). In Geneva,

² In New York, Nordic coordination does not extend to candidacies for the Human Rights Council (which are also approved by the General Assembly). Interview, 13 July 2022, Geneva.

there is agreement that putting forward resolutions would be ‘too western’, and the NB8 would prefer that there is cross-regional cooperation on sponsoring resolutions (interview, 6 July 2022, Geneva).

In sum, Nordic, and often now Baltic, diplomats at the UN engage in routines including exchanging information both in formalized meetings as well as through daily, near-constant contact. Diplomats interact with each other in lunch meetings and informal WhatsApp consultations. As new diplomats are posted to Geneva or New York, they learn to engage in these practices. Nordic and Baltic diplomats working in Geneva and New York thus clearly form a community of practice: in line with Wenger’s definition, they interact regularly with each other; they pursue a joint enterprise; and they share a repertoire, a way of doing things (Wenger 2000: 229). These long-standing practices have forged a shared Nordic identity at the UN. Nordic and Baltic diplomats share a ‘we-feeling’, an identity as a ‘principled’ community (interview, 26 May 2014, New York) centred on commitments to multilateralism, international law, conflict mediation, and progressive action on human rights and women’s rights (interviews, 13 and 14 July 2022, Geneva).

Shared Multilateral Identity in the Intersecting Nordic and EU Communities of Practice

In both the EU and Nordic CoPs, championing UN multilateralism has been central to their identity. Both communities have long supported multilateralism, particularly as practiced within the UN, as a central buttress of international order. For decades, UN multilateralism was a cornerstone of identity and ontological security for both the EU and Nordic communities of practice.

For Nordic diplomats, multilateralism is a long-standing element of their international identity. Nordic countries were ‘middle powers’, active in the UN since the Cold War, and consistent supporters of international law and the UN (Laatikainen 2006). As the Norwegian government has noted, ‘we have based our prosperity and much of our international influence on the multilateral system’ (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019: 6). A report commissioned by the Nordic Foreign Ministers, *Nordic Foreign and Security Policy 2020* (‘The Bjarnason Report’) called for strengthening and reforming the rules-based multilateral order, and invoked the ‘Nordic Brand’ which stems from their long-standing reputations as ‘committed multilateralists’ (Bjarnason 2019: 20).

Support for the UN became a defining feature of the EU’s identity in the early 2000s, during one of (many) crises of multilateralism. At the time, the Bush Administration in the US actively opposed the creation of the International Criminal Court, refused to ratify the Kyoto Treaty or join the Human Rights Council, and launched an invasion of Iraq without UN Security Council approval. In response, the EU agreed a ‘European Security Strategy’ in December 2003, which declared its commitment to ‘effective multilateralism’ and to supporting the UN (European Council, 2003). Those goals were reinforced in the EU’s 2016 Global Strategy which stated that ‘The EU will promote a rules-based global order with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its core’ (European Union 2016: 8). As the then EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, said: ‘For the European Union, multilateralism is not just part of our foreign policy: it is part of who we are; it is our DNA’ (Mogherini 2018).

In the 2000s, support for the UN was strong in both the EU and Nordic communities of practice, and meant that the Nordic community of practice nestled alongside and inside the EU community of practice. Norway and Iceland would align with EU statements, and the Nordic

EU-members directed their energy to supporting EU coordination and joint statements at the UN rather than continuing to issue Nordic statements. The EU was seen as an extension of the Nordic brand, precisely the prescription advocated by Göran Therborn, whose Scandinavian Europe would actively promote universal norms such as human rights and democracy within the UN (Therborn 2014).

Changes in the Nordic Community of Practice since 2014: The Return of the Nordic Voice

The most striking development since 2014 is that the Nordic voice is back: Nordic and Baltic diplomats are issuing joint Nordic or NB8 statements at a higher rate than ever before in New York and at the Human Rights Council in Geneva (see figures 1 and 2). This constitutes a significant transformation of the routines of coordination and consultation in the Nordic CoP: they now involve promoting a distinct Nordic voice as Nordic and Baltic diplomats increasingly issue joint statements.

The remarkable increase in the number of statements issued is more than just an incremental or evolutionary change, though it is a good fit with past practice. The first joint Nordic statement was recorded in the UN's Economic and Social Committee (ECOSOC) in 1981, and in the decade and half afterwards, the Nordic states produced joint statements at the UN General Assembly in New York with increasing regularity. From the early 1990s, Nordic diplomats also issued joint statements in the UN Commission on Human Rights (CHR) in Geneva, and then in its successor institution, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). As the EU's common foreign policy evolved after the mid-1990s and the EU sought to establish a single voice, joint Nordic statements dramatically declined as the number of EU statements grew. The EU also solicited support from non-EU member states by encouraging them to align with EU statements. Thus, not only were EU member diplomats from Nordic and Baltic states participating in the EU's intensive coordination practices in the EU CoP, but Norwegian and Icelandic diplomats began to align with EU statements. For example, Norway and Iceland aligned with one-quarter of EU statements on average between 2000 and 2014 in the UN General Assembly Third Committee (see Figure 4). In Geneva, Iceland often aligned with EU statements on human rights, but there is no tradition of Norway doing so (interview, 14 July 2022, Geneva).

The change in the practice of issuing joint Nordic or NB8 statements is deliberate – again an indication that the change is more fundamental than an evolution or gradual transformation over time. From the mid-2010s, it has been supported explicitly by capitals (interviews, 26 May 2014, Geneva; 6, 11, 13 and 14 July 2022, Geneva). At the end of 2020, the Nordic Heads of Missions (HOMs) codified the change in formal guidelines on expanding the Nordic profile in New York (interview, 5 July 2022, New York; Nordic Heads of Missions, 2020). The guidelines identified areas where there is strong Nordic consensus, including women's, youth, and gender rights, human rights generally, humanitarian affairs, and issues such as sustainable development, environment and or disarmament. The HOMs guidelines indicate that Nordic statements should be sought in those areas. The usual venues for presenting Nordic statements—the UN General Assembly and Security Council—should be expanded to include the Peacebuilding Commission where the Nordics have not traditionally delivered joint statements. Indeed, the UN Security Council is a new venue for Nordic statements as is the General Assembly 1st committee that deals with security issues, in addition to statements in the 3rd (human rights) and 6th (legal issues) committees (see Figure 3). Part of the explanation for the emergence of a strong Nordic voice at the UN Security Council has to do with the growth of Arria-formula meetings that are flexible and informal deliberations open to a wider variety of participants. Since the mid-2010s, there have been between 25-35 Arria-formula meetings of the Security Council each year; Nordic statements at the UNSC are often in such meetings. By

contrast, Nordic statements that were once common decades ago in other committees like the 2nd Committee (economic and financial affairs) on development are now nearly non-existent. In part this is because Nordic exceptionalism in the area of development assistance has eroded and like-mindedness with other progressive European donors has grown (Elgström and Delputte, 2015); consequently, different Nordic states have become attached to their own national ‘brands’ (Haugevik and Sending, 2020) and their ‘self-assumed roles as international leaders in the development field’ is ‘increasingly sought on an individual, national basis rather than a joint Nordic one’ (Engh, 2021: 128). While the bodies in which the Nordic diplomats have issued joint statements has changed over the years, the substance of Nordic statements are prominently on human rights considerations, particularly women’s, children’s, indigenous and gender rights, as well as Nordic statements on issues related to the rule of law, including civilians in armed conflict.

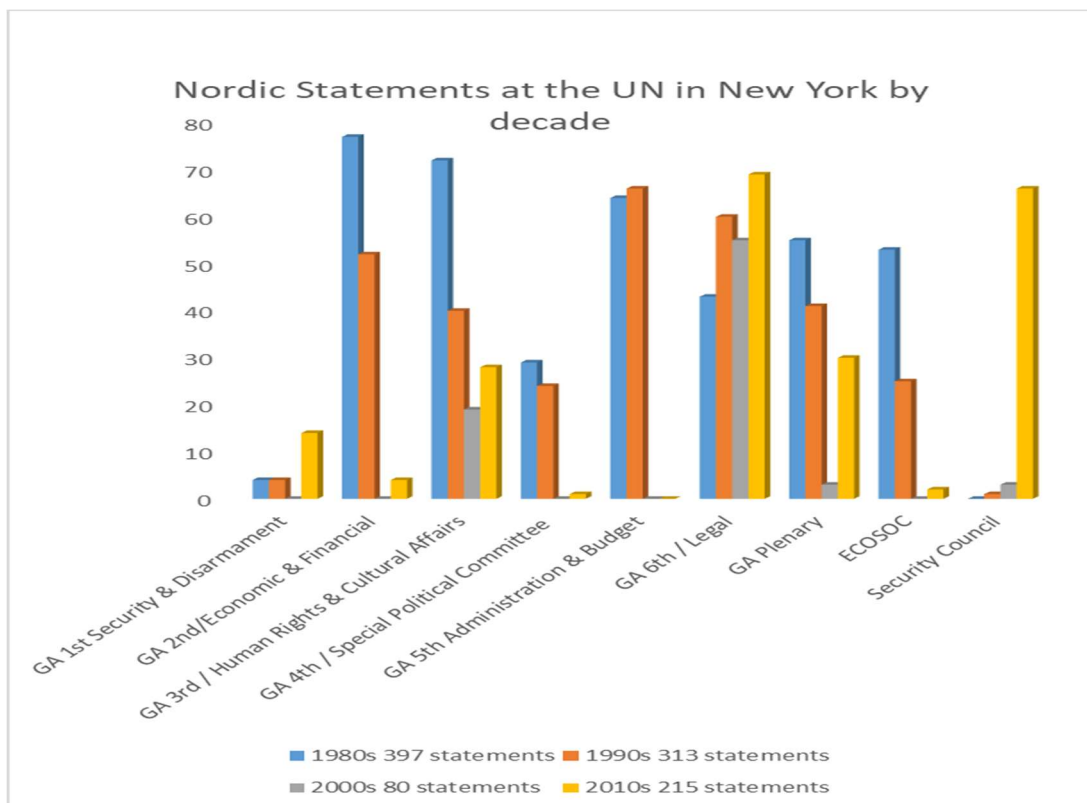


Figure 3 Author’s compilation from the UN Digital Library, Index of Speeches

Most intriguingly, the HOMs guidelines suggest that as a general rule Nordic statements would replace national statements unless specific conditions warrant additional voices (Nordic Heads of Missions, 2020). Finally, because group dynamics at the UN centre largely on the creation of cross-regional groups, the guidelines suggest that when one Nordic state is asked to support a cross-regional statement, coordination should occur to see if it is possible to support jointly as the Nordic countries rather than individually. The HOMs guidelines stand as a clear commitment to promoting the Nordic voice much more forcefully in New York.

In Geneva as well, the number of statements has mushroomed, a trend that became apparent already in 2014. Statements initially centred on indigenous peoples’ rights, the rights of minorities, refugees and displaced persons, and women’s and children’s rights. Since 2021, NB8 diplomats have been issuing over *eighty* statements a year in the HRC, on an even wider variety of human rights issues including country situations. In fact, the NB8 is now one of the most visible groups of states at the HRC, issuing almost as many statements as the EU does

(which speaks on almost every single agenda item in HRC sessions) and more than the other political and regional groups in the HRC.³ From 2022, the Nordic-5 has ceased to issue statements in the name of the Nordic states only, so that the diplomats involved in the growing practice of issuing Nordic-Baltic statements now regularly include all eight states.

The revival of and increase in Nordic and NB8 statements involves other changes in practices in the Nordic CoP in New York and Geneva. In New York, there is a two-week horizon screening process, for which diplomats plan the coordination of statements. There is a division of labour and burden-sharing for drafting joint statements (interview, 5 July 2022, New York) rather than simply information sharing. Diplomats from the Nordic and Baltic countries recognize that Baltic states would like to issue more NB8 statements in New York (interviews, 5, 8 and 14 July and 4 August 2022, New York), but that the 'Nordics have had a system in place' (interview, 14 July 2022, New York) for some time.

In Geneva, NB8 diplomats meet before each session of the HRC to decide a list of potential statements they will issue. Different NB8 states serve as 'pen-holders' and diplomats from that country draft statements and circulate them for comment, with reportedly little of the line-by-line discussion that there is in the EU. Pen-holders then present the statement to the HRC session. The coordination process is considered to be 'efficient' and 'smooth', and works well because NB8 diplomats trust each other and feel aligned with each other (interviews, 11, 13 and 14 July 2022, Geneva). NB8 diplomats learned that they 'agreed on more than they thought' (interview, 6 July 2022, Geneva), and that the practice of issuing joint statements was valuable. Capitals are sent draft statements for comment, and play a large role in coordinating and drafting the specific statement on the human rights situation in Syria (interviews, 6 and 7 July 2022, Geneva).

In sum, since 2014 there has been a significant change in the Nordic practice of issuing joint statements at the UN in both Geneva and New York. In the next sections, this article considers how exogenous crises can provoke ontological insecurity within a CoP, and lead to changes in practices.

Ontological Insecurity and Change in Communities of Practice

Why did the Nordic CoP of practice rather suddenly begin to issue joint statements in great numbers at the UN two decades after that practice was curtailed as a regular feature of its diplomatic repertoire? We suggest that the literature on ontological security helps to solve this puzzle. This is another area in which *Cooperation and Conflict* has made strong and path-breaking contributions (including Browning and Joeniemmi 2017; Croft and Vaughn-Williams 2017; Johansson-Nogués 2018; Kinvall 2017; Kinvall and Mitzen 2017; Steele 2017, 2024; and Zarakol 2017).

The defining attribute of ontological security theorization is the distinction between physical security and existential security (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). Ontological insecurity is 'not about physical destruction – it is an anxiety about the very being, the very sense of the self' deeply linked to questions of identity (Croft and Vaughn-Williams, 2017: 19). The ontological security scholarship has proliferated widely and has been applied to a broad variety of actors and

³ For example, at the 54th session of the HRC in 2023, the EU issued 53 statements, the NB8 issued 25, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation issued 15, the Arab Group and the Gulf Cooperation Council 10 each, while the Africa Group made 8 statements. All figures from the list of oral statements on the HRC's extranet.

contexts, from the security dilemma (Mitzen 2006) to the European Parliament (Diez and von Lucke 2024) to the Syrian civil war (Sharani and Çelik 2024).

As depicted in a 2017 special issue of *Cooperation and Conflict*, the core of the literature on ontological security focuses on how identity contributes to ontological security, emphasizing ‘the stories or narratives we tell ourselves about ourselves and our relations to others’ (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017: 5). Ontological security links agents not only structurally but through self-understanding, scripts, and schema in relation to others, and it ‘focuses attention on the relationship between uncertainty, anxiety and the capacity to maintain a stable sense of self’ (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017: 4-5). The fundamental ambiguity and fluidity of identity formation points to the importance of narrative processes as a means toward coherent identity. Neumann argues that identity emerges from ‘a narrative process whereby a number of identities that have been negotiated in specific contexts are strung together into one overarching story’ (Neumann 1999: 218).

A key division in the ontological security literature is whether identities and narratives are endogenously and auto-biographically crafted and brought to interaction with others (Steele 2008) or whether they emerge inter-subjectively through interaction and relations with others (Mitzen 2006). This dichotomy is also applied to collective actors when determining ‘whether the collective storyline of ‘us’ emerges as a product of mostly reflexive (intra-group) or relational (inter-group) narratives’ (Johansson-Nogués 2018: 530). Taking the relational approach even farther, Pratt argues that it is the social relations and interaction rather than the self (collective or individual) that are the object of ontological security because ‘actors are not trying to secure the coherence of the self, but rather the coherence and stability of their broader social context’ (Pratt 2017: 81). This analytical move allows us to apply ontological security theorization to communities of practice because in a relational approach, identity and narratives center not on particular actors or collectivities but on the relational practices themselves.

Identity narratives emerging from communities of practice therefore rest on positive forms of identification that generate ‘a sense of status, self-esteem, and ontological security’ (Browning and Joenniemi 2017: 45) from group membership. But communities can also become a source of ontological insecurity when a community realizes its narrated actions no longer reflect or are reflected by how it sees itself in relation to others. Events within or outside a community challenge self-narratives and present a ‘challenge to a community’s routines and practices’ and can lead to an ‘erosion of the basic trust system among community members’ that produce ‘anxiety as the coherence of the community’s narrative and practices are perceived as threatened and destabilized’ (Johansson-Nogués 2018: 531). In this way, being part of a community of practice may in fact threaten ontological security particularly in periods of contestation when cohesion is challenged (Greve 2018). While ontological security theorization highlights the role of routinization for identity preservation and therefore tends to focus on the status quo, Browning and Joenniemi note that ‘what is needed on occasion is not an ability to uphold stability...but the ability to cope with change’ in response to such trauma and loss of basic trust among community members (Browning and Joenniemi 2017:35).

One type of change in communities of practice seeking ontological security, therefore, involves reconfigured collective narratives in reaction to change in the broader environment or a gap in outsider and self-perceptions during periods of trauma (Johansson-Nogués 2018). Alternatively, broader narratives can remain intact, but ‘policy change brought on by the crisis is narratively explained by activating some elements of the broader narrative template and deactivating others’ (Subotić, 2016: 614). Recognition dynamics constitute another challenge that can prompt change in communities of practice. Greve identifies a tension between distinctiveness

and belonging in communities where members require the acknowledgment and legitimation of their distinctiveness' (2017: 878). Within groups and communities, failure to recognize distinctiveness can lead to ontological insecurity for some within the community (Ringmar, 2002). In such instances, regaining ontological security 'may depend less on somehow engineering a stronger "we-feeling" than on ensuring a struggle for recognition that provides, à la Albert Hirschman, avenues for "voice" and avoids having actors choose between "loyalty" or "exit"' (Greve 2017: 879).

In sum, shocks or traumas internal or external to a community of practice can be a source of ontological (in)security and prompt changes within it. In response, there can be a reconfiguration of narratives wherein a community of practice can reconsider the identity narrative in relation to others, members of a community can seek recognition of their distinctiveness from others within the community, or they can shift their narratives frames to maintain an identity relative to others in the midst of significant policy changes. As argued in the next section, the Nordic and Baltic countries re-activated the Nordic brand and its narrative of multilateralism in response to the broader crisis of the liberal international order and contestation within the EU community of practice regarding UN multilateralism. It is the ontological insecurity stemming from these crises that account for the activation of the Nordic narrative and the demand for recognition of the distinctive Nordic brand of multilateralism at the UN.

Ontological Insecurity and Activation of the Nordic Narrative

The Norwegian Foreign Affairs Ministry in 2019 articulated the rationale for embracing the Nordic narrative in the face of ontological insecurity quite clearly:

The Nordic countries share fundamental values and perspectives on the world and depend on a rules-based world order. In an unpredictable world, where liberal values are under pressure, Nordic cooperation becomes even more essential. A clear Nordic voice in the European debate can serve both Europe and the Nordic countries, not least in matters of democracy and rule of law. Continuing and further developing the Nordic cooperation also gives us greater influence in multilateral forums (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019: 75).

In the 2010s, the liberal international order was questioned and challenged like never before (Schutte 2024). There were blatant violations of the rule of law such as the Russian annexation of Crimea and its occupation of parts of eastern Ukraine in 2014. But there were also challenges by states considered to be at the heart of the liberal international order. The year 2016 symbolised the shift most dramatically, with the UK electorate voting to leave the EU, and the US electorate backing Donald Trump, with his 'America first' attitude and antipathy towards global institutions and rules. The first Trump Administration withdrew the US from the UN Human Rights Council in 2018, and moved to withdraw from the Paris climate change agreement and the World Health Organization (moves repeated in 2025 by the second Trump administration). Brexit and the Trump administration came to symbolize a retreat from multilateralism broadly. Norm contestation also increasingly characterized debates at the UN, with 'norm spoilers' such as 'conservative state and non-state actors' undertaking 'sustained efforts... to criticize, limit and roll back women's rights principles found in UN treaties, declarations and international policies' (Sanders, 2018: 271).

Within the EU community of practice at the UN, there were further challenges to its identity as a progressive champion of UN multilateralism. Backsliding on the rule of law became increasingly

evident in several EU member states. And in the mid-2010s, conservative EU states such as Hungary and Poland (the latter until 2023) began to resist progressive language on human rights, especially regarding gender equality. By 2019, Hungary was leading outright opposition to even using the term 'gender equality' in EU documents (Korolczuk and Graff 2018; von der Burchard 2020; Voss 2018). Hungary even refrained from voting with other EU member states to approve a 2019 HRC resolution renewing the mandate of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

These internal divisions with respect to gender equality were frustrating to Nordic and Baltic diplomats because the need for unanimity within the EU on the wording of statements in the UN waters them down. As Nordic diplomats repeatedly noted, 'EUMS [member states] have debates among themselves and their statements may be weaker' (interview, 8 July 2022, New York). That EU negotiations can be 'tedious' and therefore lead member states to state their own priorities in UN debates is acknowledged within the EU delegations to the UN (interview, 18 April 2023, Geneva).

For the Nordic and Baltic states, the EU therefore could not respond as robustly to the new crisis as it did in the previous crisis of multilateralism in the early 2000s. Further, the contestation both within the EU and outside it focused on those values that are central to Nordic identity. Within the Nordic community of practice in Geneva and New York, diplomats increasingly voiced frustration with Hungary, Poland and other conservative states, from as early as 2014 (interviews, 26 May 2014, 26 May 2014, 13 July 2022, 14 July 2022, Geneva; 10 April 2019, New York). In 2014, a Nordic diplomat posted to the HRC in Geneva reported that they have instructions from capitals to act within the Nordic Group where possible because the Nordic Group has a 'certain profile' and provides Nordic countries with the opportunity to express more progressive positions on women's rights and sexual reproductive rights (interview, 26 May 2014, Geneva).

Dissension among the EU's ranks in New York and Geneva prompted a sense of 'soul-searching' because 'other states could see that the EU was divided' (interview, 18 April 2023, Geneva). For the Nordic and Baltic states, the divisions within the EU on issues that were assumed to be shared by Nordic and EU communities of practice prompted the activation of the Nordic voice in New York and the NB8 in Geneva, especially on issues where there is deep 'frustration with the EU on gender' (interview, 6 July 2022, Geneva).

But further, some elements of the broader EU multilateral narrative involving the role of non-EU Nordic states Norway and Iceland were also deactivated. By the mid-2010s there was a significant reduction in the number of EU statements with Norwegian and Icelandic alignment, particularly in the high priority issues of gender and human rights (see figure 4). According to one non-EU Nordic diplomat, the EU's process is cumbersome while the Nordic process is 'streamlined' and they 'are already so alike that that there are greater levels of trust' (interview, 4 August 2022, New York).

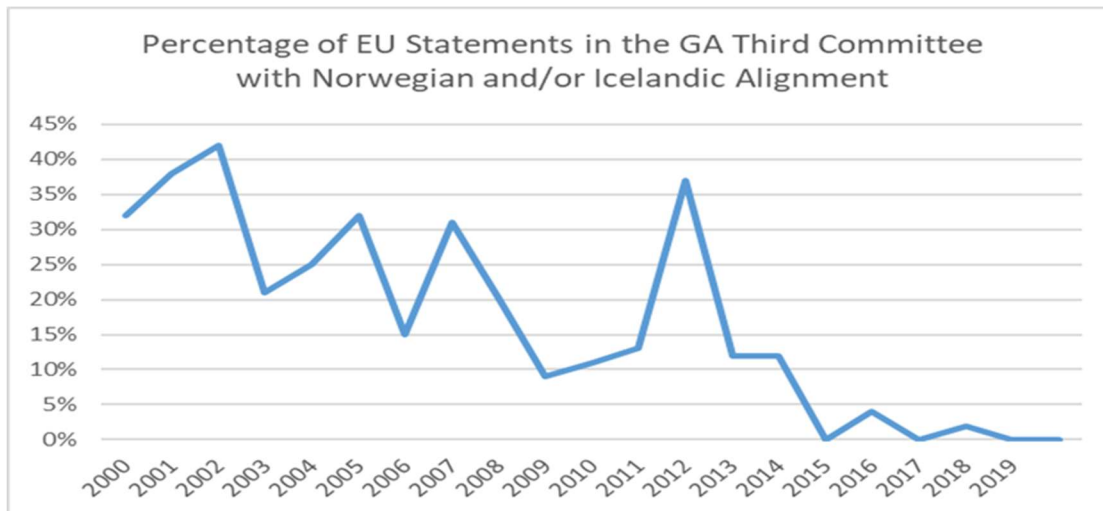


Figure 4 Sources: Author's compilation from the UN Digital Library, Index to Speeches

The initial impetus for the return of the Nordic voice was thus the international and intra-EU challenges to key elements of Nordic identity, principally the strong support for human rights and particularly gender equality, as well as humanitarian issues and sustainable development. The focus of statements at the UN in the mid-2010s was not on traditional security norms or concerns such as the threat from Russia, though after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 these did figure more prominently in NB8 discussions at the UN - and prompted tighter collaboration on security issues in Nordic-Baltic frameworks outside of the UN (Milne 2022). Ontological insecurity thus provides a fuller explanation of the shift in practice, compared to traditional security approaches.

'Identity' appears regularly in the accounts by diplomats of the change in Nordic practices at the UN. Nordic diplomats stress the distinctiveness of the Nordic identity relative to others in the EU CoP. There is a historical narrative of Nordic 'brand' at the UN that has been resurrected (Browning 2007). The distinctiveness of the pre-EU Nordic identity at the UN rested on a mediating role, between East and West during the height of the Cold War and between North and South in development debates. Metzger and Piasecki (1991) found that the Nordic states enjoyed a reputation as honest brokers and committed multilateralists at the UN. The Nordic brand is still strong at the UN, as was repeatedly referenced in interviews as a strength of the group (for example in interviews, 6 July 2022, New York and 14 July 2022, Geneva). As one Nordic diplomat put it, 'The Nordic countries were Nordics before they were part of EU at the UN...The Nordics are building on our tradition of UN engagement' exemplified by former UN Secretaries-General Trygve Lie and Dag Hammarskjöld (interview, 17 May 2023, New York). The Nordic CoP also reflects higher levels of positive identification compared to the EU CoP. It is also notable that the NB8 do not regularly work with other like-minded states at the UN, such as the Netherlands or Switzerland. While there are various groups of friends with which a delegation may coordinate based on shared values and interests, Nordic diplomats routinely describe their Nordic and Baltic counterparts as 'family' or 'extended family' (Interviews, 14 July 2022, Geneva; 8 July 2022, New York).

Furthermore, the return of the Nordic voice is not well explained by rationalist accounts of group activity within the UN. The NB8 are not trying to amass 'votes', crucial to try to win a majority in bodies such as the General Assembly or the Human Rights Council. As Panke notes, 'the more members a group has, the more yes-buttons their members can push and the greater the chances that organization will be successful in the UNGA' (Panke 2013: 287). But with only eight

states in the NB8 and little outreach to other states to form a larger group, amassing votes is patently not motivating the change in practice.

Nordic diplomats evoke the Nordic brand not only as shared values but a particular Nordic ‘touch’ in their diplomacy which distinguishes them from the EU and from other EU member states (interview, 8 July 2022, New York). Nordic diplomats in New York indicate that the Nordics are ‘generally perceived by others as reliable and strong supporters of the agencies and of multilateralism without hidden agendas and ambitions’ (Nordic Heads of Mission to the UN in New York, 2020). Several noted the lack of a (recent) Nordic colonial history outside of Europe as a key component of the Nordic brand within the UN context (interviews, 5 and 14 July 2022, New York). One diplomat argued that the return of the Nordic voice at the UN was welcomed by many African diplomats because ‘EU relations with the global south are not as positive’ (interview, 8 July 2022, New York). A Baltic diplomat indicated that the Nordics have a strong and distinctive identity at the UN which is widely recognized because the Nordics ‘can say things that the EU cannot say’ (interview, 5 July 2022, New York). The Nordics are known for being more ‘forward-leaning and that has not changed despite differences in their EU membership’ (interview, 4 August 2022, New York).

The Nordic identity has been recognized within the EU CoP as well. As early as 2004, other EU members acknowledged that the Nordic group still met as a community of practice alongside EU coordination practices and have a higher degree of like-mindedness (interview, 4 February 2004, New York). More recently, one diplomat noted that ‘the rest of the EU seems to understand that there is a strong regional orientation politically’ (interview, 4 August 2022, New York) and another that ‘the NB8 is a way to have a voice and that adds a progressive European voice to the debate’ (interview, 18 April 2023, Geneva). The recognition and acceptance of the Nordic voice by the broader EU CoP enables the Nordic diplomats to avoid the choice of ‘loyalty’ to the EU’s internally contested multilateralism or the more dramatic alternative of ‘exiting’ the EU to maintain a coherent multilateral identity (Greve 2017). A Nordic diplomat in Geneva noted that ‘NB8 and EU statements are complementary though there is some risk of overlap’ (interview, 6 July 2022, Geneva). Because the Nordic progressive stance on so many topics is known, there is ‘no consultation with the EU’ (interview, 13 July 2022, Geneva); from the Nordic perspective, consultation ‘is not necessary’ because ‘we don’t deviate from what has been agreed in Brussels’ (interview, 8 July 2022, New York), reflective of a continued loyalty to the EU CoP. The desire for a Nordic voice is not to the exclusion of an EU voice. When asked whether Nordic diplomats prefer to have EU or Nordic statements, one diplomat responded ‘Both!’ (interview, 8 July 2022, New York). An EU diplomat was sanguine about the Nordic statements emerging alongside EU statements: ‘Our opponents are more concerned that there are more voices saying what the EU says ... Nordic statements are not seen as disunity’ because of the traditional Nordic profile of supporting the UN and multilateralism (interview, 17 May 2023, New York).

In sum, the return of the Nordic voice at the UN reflects an effort to address the ontological insecurity arising from the crisis of multilateralism affecting the EU and Nordic communities of practice. The broader challenges to multilateralism combined with the contestation of the EU’s multilateral policy prompted activation of the Nordic identity narrative to provide what Subotić (2016: 611) calls a ‘cognitive bridge’ to ensure ‘autobiographical continuity’ during times of crisis, ensuring recognition of the Nordic voice without recourse to exit from the EU community of practice.

CONCLUSION

The rapid expansion of Nordic statements at the UN in New York and Geneva posed an empirical puzzle. We have argued that this puzzle can be explained by understanding that the change in the Nordic community of practice, the choice to issue many more statements reflecting a Nordic or NB8 perspective, was the consequence of ontological insecurity emerging from contestation within the EU, particularly regarding values central to Nordic identity, and challenges to multilateralism and the liberal international order. The Nordic identity as committed multilateralists was threatened by the normative contestation challenging the EU's own multilateral bona fides in its community of practice. In order to maintain the multilateral narrative so valued by Nordic diplomats, they changed their practices. Normative challenges even more than the threats to traditional security motivated the return of the Nordic voice at the UN.

The Nordic community of practice in New York and Geneva is a repository of identity, not simply a reflection of what a group of diplomats want in a negotiation (reflective of interests) or what they believe (Western liberal values), but of who they are. Nordic and Baltic diplomats are seeking to influence debates by presenting progressive positions, but this is not an exercise in trying to amass votes to win debates, as rationalists explain group behaviour at the UN. Alternative explanations for the return of the Nordic voice at the UN thus do not fit as well because they cannot capture the centrality of identity as a motivation.

The return of the Nordic voice at the UN is, fittingly, well explained through the insights contributed by Nordic International Relations in the literatures on communities of practice and ontological security, much of which has been published in *Cooperation and Conflict*. Linking the two literatures could also explain greater activity by other groups in the UN. Other groups of EU member states, with different identities stemming from other communities of practice, have become more visible within UN debates in the past few years. The Visegrad group of diplomats (Hungary, Poland, Czechia and Slovakia) and the Benelux group of diplomats (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg) are known to collaborate at the UN. The number of Benelux statements delivered at the Human Rights Council in Geneva has increased from approximately two per session in 2021 to five or more per session in 2023-24 (interviews 4 May and 22 May 2023, Geneva). In 2023, Baltic diplomats delivered 20 Baltic statements in the UN Security Council related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, an issue that cuts deeply into their own post-Soviet narrative. In 2024, the number of Baltic-only statements had grown to more than 30 at the UN Security Council and General Assembly in New York. The emergence and growing voices of such groups invites further research investigating the extent to which ontological insecurity stemming from the crisis of multilateralism and changing international order (Steele 2024) has prompted changes in diplomatic practices and narratives.

Appendix 1

List of interviews

Delegation of the European Union to the UN in New York (two interviews)
Delegation of the European Union to the UN in Geneva
Permanent Mission of Belgium to the UN in Geneva
Permanent Mission of Denmark to the UN in New York (three interviews)
Permanent Representation of Denmark to the UN in Geneva (two interviews)
Permanent Mission of Estonia to the UN in the New York
Permanent Mission of Finland to the UN in New York
Permanent Representation of Finland to the UN in Geneva
Permanent Mission of Iceland to the UN in New York
Permanent Mission of Latvia to the UN in New York
Permanent Representation of Latvia to the UN in Geneva
Permanent Representation of Lithuania to the UN in Geneva
Permanent Representation of Luxembourg to the UN in Geneva
Permanent Representation of Norway to the UN in Geneva (two interviews)
Permanent Mission of Norway to the UN in New York
Permanent Mission of Sweden to the UN in New York (two interviews)
Permanent Mission of Sweden to the UN in Geneva
Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom to the UN, New York

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