

Interview with Margaretha af Ugglas published in La Libre Belgique (9 March 1992)


Caption: On 9 March 1992, in an interview with the conservative daily newspaper La Libre Belgique, Margaretha af Ugglas, Swedish Foreign Minister, reports on her country's application for accession to the European Union.

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The Swedes will be 'loyal' and 'ambitious' Community members

Margaretha af Ugglas, Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs, assesses Stockholm's ambitions and hopes for *La Libre Belgique*

King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola will make an official visit to Sweden at the end of this month.

After hesitating for a long time, Sweden is now a candidate to join the European Community. Membership would have several effects and consequences because Sweden has so far been thought of as 'neutral' and very focused on the Nordic countries, the Baltic and the Third World. As a prelude to the royal visit, *La Libre Belgique* assesses the situation with the Minister for Foreign Affairs in the 'bourgeois' coalition that took office last September.

Strategy

Sweden hopes to join the Community on 1 January 1995. Is it realistic to set such an early deadline?

This is our great ambition. The new Swedish Government has set itself two strategic objectives: to join the European Community and to revive the economy. Our timetable is contingent on the need to revise our Constitution and organise elections in September 1994. ⁽¹⁾ These elements play a role but we also had the distinct impression that the Community was ready for what I would call a small window of opportunity for a limited number of candidates.

Would you get in ahead of states that applied before you?

It was our understanding that at least some member countries are prepared to open up the Community to Austria and Sweden and perhaps also to Finland, before tackling the major problems posed by other candidates. What makes our timetable realistic is the agreement on the European Economic Area: ⁽²⁾ much of the groundwork has already been done. The European Commission is preparing its opinion on our application for accession and it knows that during the EEA negotiations, Sweden was one of the countries that posed the fewest difficulties and made the fewest special demands.

Indeed, we foresee very little difficulty when it comes to negotiating our accession. Our agricultural organisations, for example, have been favourable to Community membership for some time.

What would happen if a majority of Swedes were to come out against accession?

We have invested so much into achieving this goal ... It would be as though a car was hurtling along and someone suddenly hit the brakes. If Sweden were unable to join, we would have to live with that fact, with difficulty and a great sense of disappointment. I hope that the answer will be 'yes.' The Swedish Parliament is very much in favour of membership, except for the former communists, but even some within their parliamentary ranks are saying that it would suicidal to reject the Community.

Disintegration

Will the Nordic countries try to combine their accession applications?

The way in which Finland is handling this issue shows clearly that it hopes to get aboard the same train as Austria and Sweden. It is clearly hoping to have the same timetable as us.

Will the Nordic Council continue to exist?

Of course. The Council has experienced its most notable successes in the social sector. We have a common employment market that provides for the free movement of persons, a common passports policy and other things. In the 1950s we tried to move towards an economic union but it failed. We are lucky that it will now

come about with the Community.

Will the applications of Austria, Sweden, Finland and perhaps Norway mean the end of the European Free Trade Association?

Yes. If we all become Community members that will mean the break-up of EFTA. The European Economic Area treaty will remain, and I imagine there will be bilateral agreements with those countries that will stay in the Association. There is also talk now and again of using EFTA to bring the 'reformed' countries of Central and Eastern Europe closer.

What will the Swedes bring to the Community in political terms?

We will be ambitious members in every way. Those Swedes who will be looking for jobs in Europe will be efficient and hard workers. I think you will find us to be ambitious and faithful to the rules, which is consistent with our nature. We will be good members, ready to lend a hand. You won't have many problems with us.

If the Community is wondering why Sweden should join, I would answer that we will be net contributors to the Community budget and we will help carry the burden of Eastern Europe. We are already involved in ambitious aid programmes for the Baltic countries. We have a programme with Poland. We will also assist the Russian Federation. We will be loyal European partners, a driving force.

Conversely, what do you expect from the Community?

First, that we be involved in decision making and in the future European security arrangements. No one can say where we are going. It is still too early. Clearly the Community will be the driving force in a system and will have an increasing role in the new European architecture. For citizens, we see the possibility of participating in education programmes and the free movement of persons. They will bring to Sweden the benefits of their experience gained abroad. For Swedish companies, the Community appears essential for economic development. The Common Market will bring us growth.

Will Sweden's membership bring about a change in Stockholm's traditional openness to the Baltic?

The revolution in Eastern Europe creates challenges for us. For the next three years we have planned an annual budget of one billion kronor (ed.: approximately 6 billion Belgian francs) for assistance to Baltic countries. We feel a special responsibility.

The concept of Swedish 'neutrality' is being eroded. Now the talk is of 'Sweden's non-involvement in military alliances'. What do these nuances mean? And could the Swedish army one day be part of a European army?

This does not pose an immediate problem, if only because the Community is busy contemplating its future security policy. What will happen to NATO? What will happen to Western European Union? We are saying that the word 'neutrality' is no longer adequate to describe Sweden's position. This is because we want to show clearly that we are willing to join in political cooperation in the Community. Our aim is also to cooperate on security policy. The Community is moving forward in stages and that allows us to respond to developments gradually.

We are not neutral with regard to Europe. We want to provide for our own defence and we have even increased our defence budget by 7.5 billion kronor. We are restructuring our army to make it smaller and smarter. No one can guarantee our defence. It is our own responsibility. This is a time of uncertainty. We are encouraging democratic forces among our large Eastern neighbours but we should also be ready for any adverse developments in that region.

Interview:

Marc Opsomer

(1) The Swedish constitution can only be amended if the same draft amendment is adopted by two successive *Riksdags* (Parliaments) — in this case, that elected on 15 September 1991 and that which will be elected on 18 September 1994. Swedish parties are generally in agreement that Community membership should be approved by a referendum, although this is not required under the Constitution (ed.).

(2) The European Economic Area (EEA) provides for the free movement of persons, goods, services and capital among the twelve members of the Community and the seven members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA — Austria, Finland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and Sweden) (ed.).