



In Prosperous Sweden... Representations of Sweden in Russian Reviews of Swedish Crime Fiction 2000–2021

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Abstract

Based on a corpus of 203 reviews published in Russian newspapers and periodicals between 2000 and 2021, this article investigates the image of Sweden in the Russian reception of Swedish crime novels. The analysis aims to answer the following research questions: 1) How are Sweden and Swedes described in Russian reviews of Swedish crime fiction in 2000–2021? 2) Is there any indication of the novel reviewed having influenced the critic's perception of Sweden? Swedish crime fiction is a popular genre in Russia, and constitutes as much as 63% of all translated Swedish prose fiction published in Russia between 2010 and 2021, which makes this a highly relevant inquiry. The thematic analysis of the reviews revealed that previously established positive images of Sweden are often used ironically, in contrast to the gruesome crimes described in the novels. Furthermore, several reviews indicate that the novel reviewed had an impact on the critic's view on Sweden. Additionally, some reviews display ideological interpretations, indicating that western values are to blame for the situations described in the novels. Based on the analysis, it seems that Swedish crime fiction does impact the image of Sweden in Russia, which might be problematic given the genre's popularity.

Keywords: Imagology, Swedish crime fiction, translation reception, Russia, newspaper reviews

1 Introduction

Swedish crime fiction has developed in Russia from a marginal yet appreciated genre, to a bestselling phenomenon. As a matter of fact, Swedish crime fiction makes up 55% of all Swedish prose fiction published in Russia 1992–2021, and 63% in the period 2010–2021 (Podlevskikh Carlström 2023a). This tendency is by no means limited to Russia: Swedish crime fiction is today one of Sweden's most important export products (Hedberg 2019). However, apart from generating income, literature is a means to disseminate information about Sweden, and may as such have an impact on the image of Sweden abroad (Hedberg 2019). Thus, it is highly relevant to investigate Russian

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representations of Sweden in newspaper reviews of novels that belong to the most popular genre today.

The present investigation is further motivated by previous analyses of Swedish crime fiction and its peritexts in the Soviet Union and Russia (Podlevskikh Carlström 2022a; Podlevskikh Carlström 2023a). The first study indicates that the Soviet publication of Swedish crime fiction was ideologically motivated, and aimed at corrupting the image of Sweden and creating a representation that better suited the ideology of the State (Podlevskikh Carlström 2022a: 167). A number of recurring strategies were used to achieve this. Firstly, a majority of the editions examined displayed a dual hermeneutical and ideological *paratextual framing* (see section 2), whereby the author of the peritexts both explains aspects of the novel for the reader (hermeneutical), and promotes a certain viewpoint (ideological) (Podlevskikh Carlström 2022a: 145). Secondly, the Soviet peritexts made systematic use of elements from the storyline of the novel in order to demonstrate that any positive conceptions of Sweden and of Western society were incorrect. Thirdly, the creators of the Soviet peritexts seemed determined to convince the Soviet readers that Swedish crime fiction is a true representation of everyday life in Sweden (Podlevskikh Carlström 2022a: 167). The second study—concerned with the period 1992–2021—reveals that in the post-Soviet publication of Swedish crime fiction, ideology has been replaced by marketing, and the use of ideological and hermeneutical fore- and afterwords has ceased (Podlevskikh Carlström 2023a: 338). During this period, the Russian peritexts of the translated novels generally center on the plot and on the author of the novel in question rather than on descriptions of Sweden. However, a few Russian peritexts do represent Sweden as a country with problems that are revealed in crime fiction (Podlevskikh Carlström 2023a: 346). Due to the fact that the Russian paratexts reveal so little about the target culture’s attitudes to and perceptions of the source culture, in the current article I will instead turn to the reception of Swedish crime fiction in Russia and analyze epitexts—reviews—instead of peritexts. Thus, the focus of the analysis is the image of Sweden conveyed in Russian reviews of Swedish crime novels. The analysis will be guided by the following research questions:

1. How is Sweden and Swedes described in Russian reviews of Swedish crime fiction in the period 2000–2021?
2. Is there any indication of the novel reviewed having influenced the critic’s perception of the source culture, Sweden?

This is an analysis in the fields of translation reception and imagology, aiming to reveal not only how translated works from a particular source culture are received, understood and appreciated in the target culture, but also how the source culture in question is represented in reviews written by target culture critics.

2 Theoretical framework

Within translation studies, reception research is closely related to Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), in which translations are seen as facts of the target culture, in contrast to an earlier emphasis on the source text (Tourey 2012: 17–18). Inquiries into translation reception may take place either on the social level, studying how translations are received in a particular community or society, or on the individual level, focusing on how actual readers respond to and assess translated texts (Brems & Ramos Pinto 2013: 143–145). With the purpose of revealing how a specific source culture is represented in target culture reviews of translations, this analysis falls within the first category. Apart from being applied at different levels, translation reception may also be analyzed using various types of material (e.g. bibliographical information, literary criticism, paratexts) and different approaches, such as Cultural Studies, comparative literature, or, as in the case with this article, imagology (Brems & Ramos Pinto 2013: 144).

Imagology, the study of how nations and nationalities are represented, is a research field with its roots in comparative literature (Leerssen 2007). Imagological analyses have traditionally been preoccupied with questions concerning the characterization of races, nations and people in literary texts and travel books, as well as the origins and functions of such descriptions (Beller 2007). Scholars within the field of translation studies have instead focused on how such representations are reflected in translation (Van Doorslaer, Flynn & Leerssen 2016).

In this article, I will not analyze representations of Sweden in actual translations, but rather in newspaper reviews of translations. Reviews belong to the category of paratexts, which means that they have the power to influence how readers will approach and receive a text. The paratext is an important concept in relation to the analysis performed in this article, in which I specifically analyze *epitexts*, a term used to indicate paratexts which are published at a distance from the main text, as opposed to *peritexts*, which are placed in the same volume as the main text (Genette 1997, 4–5; Batchelor 2018: 153–154).

I adhere to Katheryn Batchelor's (2018) definition and framework of paratextuality, rather than that of Gerard Genette (1997). The principal reason for this is Genette's insistence on authorial intention, which suggests that only paratexts authorized by the author or publisher may be included in the category of paratext (Genette 1997: 345). Consequently, reviews, which make up the primary material for this investigation, are not epitexts, according to Genette. Batchelor's definition of the paratext as "a consciously crafted threshold for a text which has the potential to influence the way(s) in which the text is received" is more flexible, and better adapted to research within translation studies (Batchelor 2018: 141–142).

A paratext may have different functions (e.g. commercial, factual, referential, ideological, hermeneutical), based on the type and purpose of the information it contains (Batchelor 2018: 160–161). In the present study, the functions of the paratext are seen as part of the *paratextual framing* of the published novels (Podlevskikh Carlström 2022a: 145). Finally, the analysis performed in this article focuses on what Batchelor (2018: 151) calls the *metadiscursive function* of the paratext. Thus, I do not perceive paratexts in their capacity as thresholds for particular texts, but rather as a corpus of texts which might

provide information about a particular phenomenon, in this case representations—or images—of Sweden in the Russian reception of Swedish literature.

An example of a similar approach to translation reception may be seen in Lina Larsson's dissertation on the German reception of Swedish literature. Without specifically referring to the framework of imagology, Lina Larsson (2012) analyses the way in which previously established "images" of Sweden (to which Larsson refers as "Vorstellungen" [conceptions, representations]) affect how the country is represented in German reviews. Based on a comparative analysis of Swedish and German reviews of the same novels, she draws the conclusion that previously established idealizing, nature-mythical and archaic images dominate in the German reviews, while the Swedish reviews instead focus on negative representations of misery and poverty (Larsson 2012: 163).

An example of how translation reception and imagology may be combined is Jenny Bergenmar's work on Selma Lagerlöf's Spanish reception (Bergenmar 2018). Based on texts and travelogues published in Spanish newspapers and periodicals in the early 20th century, Bergenmar analyzes how images and stereotypes of Sweden and Scandinavia, as well as of North and South, influenced Lagerlöf's reception in Spain. Bergenmar (2018: 184) finds that Lagerlöf's Spanish reception was similar to her French and German reception, due to widespread contact between these literary systems. It is also clear that Lagerlöf's reception must be seen against the background of the then current biologicistic discourse on national character (ibid.: 185). Consequently, Lagerlöf's heritage and origins became important elements in her reception, and Bergenmar concludes that "the author's Spanish reception was influenced by the region Scandinavia and the nation Sweden in general, and by her birthplace Värmland in particular (ibid.: 184–185).

As indicated by Bergenmar's analysis, the context is of great importance when analyzing literary reception, which also makes it relevant to point out that the period of investigation is by no means random. The year 2000 is the year Vladimir Putin was first elected President of Russia, which for many reasons can be seen as the start of a new era for the country.¹ All attempts at democracy in Russia ended with the rise of Putin, a former KGB officer, to power, and since then, Russia has become increasingly authoritarian (Lewis 2020: 2). Since the early 2000s, scholars have been struggling to describe the authoritarian political system that has emerged in Russia, the ideology of which, both inside and outside of Russia, is nowadays referred to as *Putinism* (Lewis 2020: 2–4). Putinism is characterized by, among other things, the mythologization of history, traditional spiritual and moral values, isolationism, anti-Westernism and jingoism (Kolesnikov 2022). This is also what I mean when I refer in this article to Russian ideology.

Anti-western tendencies have intensified since Putin's rise to power, and have to be seen in relation to the Russian conservative discourse, in which the definition of an enemy is an existential question, closely related to the very existence of the Russian state (Lewis 2020: 102). While the US and the West, during the 1990s and early 2010s, were seen as economic competitors rather than enemies, the attitude that the West was an "existential

¹ Vladimir Putin took office as acting president on December 31, 1999, when Boris Yeltsin announced his resignation; however, the presidential elections were held in March 2000. (*Encyclopædia Britannica* n.d.)

enemy” became part of mainstream political discourse in the decade following 2005 (Lewis 2020: 104). The Russian image of Sweden has, according to polls performed both by the Russian Levada Center and the Swedish Institute, been positive and relatively stable, at least until 2020 (Zorkaja 2015; Svenska Institutet 2021). However, several Russian media campaigns targeting Sweden have been carried out in recent years, especially since February 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, reinforcing the need to identify Western countries as enemies. These campaigns have to be understood in relation to the Russian enemy discourse, and are, according to Kristian Garner, created with the purpose of making the Russians stick together against an “external enemy” (SVT.se 2022). In light of the current political climate, the assumption that translated literature may function as a source of information about the source country becomes increasingly relevant.

3 Material and Methods

The selection of primary research data for this analysis is based on the dataset *Swedish Literature in Russian Translation 1946–2021: Prose fiction, poetry and drama* (Podlevskikh Carlström 2023b). The investigation includes reviews of first editions of Swedish crime fiction novels published in Russian translation between 2000 and 2021. In order to locate reviews for the relevant novels, I used the INTEGRUM™ Profi (Artefact) archive of Russian mass media sources. I used search strings consisting of a combination of novel title and author name in separate quotation marks, and conducted the inquiries in the following databases: Moscow News Agencies, Moscow Online Media, Regional Newspapers and Magazines, Regional News Agencies, Regional Online Media, Archives of Moscow Media and Archives of Regional Media.

Reviews and recommendations that use the exact wording of the publishing house book synopsis or of the publisher’s peritext without adding anything of their own fall outside the scope of the analysis. In cases where the same review has been published in several media sources, I have only included the one with the earliest publication date. In cases where a review deals simultaneously with all parts of a book series and is not separated into clear segments, I have only uploaded the review once, indicating it as a double or triple review in the dataset (Podlevskikh Carlström 2024). The dataset includes 214 reviews published between 2004 and 2021, of which 203 were included in the corpus. No reviews were located for the years 2000–2003. The corpus might seem rather small, considering the fact that 199 first editions of Swedish crime fiction were published in Russia between 2000 and 2021. Crime fiction belongs to popular literature and is a genre that generally receives less critical attention (cf. Podlevskikh Carlström 2022b). However, I find the corpus to be large enough to provide general insights into the Russian reception of Swedish crime fiction.

The 203 reviews included in the corpus are written by 64 named critics (84 reviews are unsigned), come from 96 different media sources, and deal with 85 works by 43 authors. For further information on how the reviews are distributed across authors, media sources and critics, see the appendix. For a list of all reviews included in the corpus,

please see worksheet B “Reviews 2000–2021” in the dataset *Swedish Crime Fiction in Russian Translation: Editions, Corpus and Reviews* (Podlevskikh Carlström 2024).

The reviews and recommendations were imported to NVivo, a software for qualitative data analysis, for close reading, coding and analysis. The coding was done in three steps. First, the reviews were read twice while assigning a general code, indicating that a segment is of potential interest. Second, all the coded segments were read, thematic codes were assigned and irrelevant segments were discarded. Some segments were only assigned one code, while others were assigned several. Third, all segments that had been assigned a particular thematic code were read separately, which allowed me to streamline the themes. When coding the reviews, I did not assign codes to sections where the critic summarizes the plot, but rather where the critic interprets the plot or adds their own thoughts, value judgments or assumptions about Sweden. For example, in a review of Karin Alvtegen’s *Saknad (Wanted; Missing)*, the critic explains: “The heroine of the novel, the daughter of very rich parents, is afraid of human society, and *such people have a hard time even in the politically correct and comfortable Sweden of today*” (#10, 2005, emphasis added). While the first part of this sentence is simply summarizing the plot, the italicized part is an assumption made by the critic.

In section 4, Results and discussion, the primary material is referred to using a combination of a review number and the year the novel was published in Russia (e.g. #17, 2008). The review numbers refer to worksheet B “Reviews 2000–2021” of the aforementioned dataset (Podlevskikh Carlström 2024). The first time the title of a Swedish crime fiction novel is mentioned, it is referred to according to the principle “*Swedish title (Russian title; English title)*.” In cases where no published English translation exists, my English translation of the title will be provided within quotation marks, not using italics. Further references to the same novel use only the Swedish title. Finally, all translations from the primary material are mine.

4 Results and discussion

This section presents and discusses what kind of image of Sweden is conveyed in Russian reviews of Swedish crime novels. I will start with the results related to the first research question, specifically how Sweden and Swedes are described in the reviews analyzed. Thereafter, I will turn to the second research question, which deals with the relationship between the critics’ image of Sweden and the novels reviewed. Finally, I will present and discuss examples of reviews that provide the same kind of hermeneutical/ideological paratextual framing as the previously discussed peritexts of Swedish crime fiction published in the Soviet Union.

4.1 Representations of Sweden, Swedes and Swedish regions

In this section I will present the results related to representations of Sweden, Swedes and Swedish regions in the reviews. Sweden is part of Scandinavia and Europe, and in some reviews, Sweden is seen as representing these larger regions. In the same way, character

traits of Europeans and Scandinavians are mentioned in relation to the crime fiction novels reviewed. Therefore, associations with and descriptions of Europe and Scandinavia have also been included in the tables below.

20 reviews contain a total of 42 descriptions of Sweden, Scandinavia or Europe. In Table 1, I have divided them into themes:

Table 1. Descriptions of or associations with Sweden, Scandinavia and Europe

	Number of occurrences	Associations with Sweden	Associations with Scandinavia	Associations with Europe
Prosperity	16	economically advanced (1); well-fed (3); prosperous (8); prosperity (1); comfort (1); rich (1)	prosperity (1)	
Peace and quiet	11	calm (6); paradise (1); provincial (1)	silence (1); quiet (1)	cloudless (1)
Ideology and politics	10	political correctness (1); politically correct (2); tolerance (1); neutral (1); independent (1); democratic (1); justice (1)	social consensus (1)	political correctness (1)
Weather	3	frozen (1)	harsh (1); cold (1)	
Other	1	white-headed (1)		

As illustrated by Table 1, the most common descriptions of Sweden are related to prosperity, and also to peace and quiet. Interestingly, the first two rows exclusively contain positive attributes. However, in 12 reviews these types of words are used in contrast to the often problematic image of Sweden provided by the crime fiction novels reviewed. For example, Sweden is described as follows in a review of Henning Mankell’s *Danslärarens återkomst* (*Vozvraščenie tančmejstera; The Return of the Dancing Master*):

The writer revisits the theme of fascism, offering the reader his own view of the past and present of his country, a country that is well-fed and prosperous, where people come from everywhere and where the causes of fascism do not lie in national humiliation and poverty. (#3, 2004)

Reviewing John-Henri Holmberg’s (ed.) *A Darker Shade of Sweden* (*Temnaja storona Švecii*), another critic has clearly decided that Sweden is not what it used to be:

Independent and democratic, wealthy and prosperous, peaceful and contented—this is what foreigners have always imagined Sweden to be. Over time, however, it has become clear that this splendid picture is only a façade, which has been meticulously polished over the years. As elsewhere in the world, many human vices are widespread and flourish here (#118, 2015).

After reading Stieg Larsson’s *Flickan som lekte med elden* (*Devuška kotoraja igrala s ognem; The Girl who Played with Fire*), one critic concludes that the social services are powerless even in “seemingly prosperous Sweden” (#37, 2010), and after reading Jens Lapidus’ *Snabba cash* (*Šal'nye den'gi; Easy Money*), another critic writes that the novel is about the mafia, “which, it would seem, in peaceful Sweden should not exist at all”

(#23, 2010). Finally, in a review of Alvtegen's *Saknad*, a critic describes the main character and concludes that "such people have a hard time even in the politically correct and comfortable Sweden of today" (#10, 2005).

In three reviews, positive attributes from the themes *Prosperity* and *Peace and quiet* are instead used in contrast to Russia. For example, when reviewing Liza Marklund's *Den röda vargen* (*Krasnaja volčica; The Red Wolf*), one critic finds the descriptions of the Swedish welfare society to be especially interesting. They continue: "This phrase attracts Russian people as a familiar experience, 'something we always wanted to build ourselves, but for some reason we were never able to do so'" (#96, 2012). Similarly, when reviewing Mankell's *Den orolige mannen* (*Neugomonnyj; The Troubled Man*), another critic concludes that "of course, from our point of view, Sweden is still a country of peace and comfort" (#92, 2012). Finally, in a review of Alvtegen's *Svek* (*Predatel'stvo; Betrayal*), one critic finds that despite their economic differences, there are similarities between Sweden and Russia: "And although the realities of life in economically developed Sweden are in many ways different from those in Russia, what brings us together is how we feel and how we react to what is happening to us" (#88, 2012).

In a review of Carl-Johan Vallgren's *Skuggpojken* (*Ten' mal'čika; The Boy in the Shadows*), one critic seems shocked that crime fiction is so popular in "the most prosperous country in the world." They continue: "No matter how you please a man, he still wants some horrors" (#144, 2016). A review of Lapidus' *Snabba cash* also deviates from the pattern, since the critic finds that this type of novel provides Russian readers with some kind of "masochistic pleasure," since it allows you to "to read about 'our' gangsters—from Eastern Europe—in a well-fed and prosperous Sweden" (#23, 2010).

The attributes in the third theme, *Ideology and politics*, are also used either in contrast to the Sweden depicted in the novels (2 reviews), or in contrast to Russia. However, only in one review is the comparison in Sweden's favor. Larsson's *Luftslottet som sprängdes* (*Devuška, kotoraja vzryvala vozdušnye zamki; The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*) is described as a "very Swedish book" which, according to the critic, could neither have been written in Russia nor in the United States (#46, 2010). They draw this conclusion based on Swedish justice, and the fact that everything, in the end, is solved in court (#46, 2010). Other attributes in this category are used in a negative way, focusing on ideological differences between Russia and the West. This concerns words such as *tolerance*, *political correctness* and *social consensus*.

I will now leave the representations of the source culture, Sweden, to instead focus on how Swedes are described in the analyzed reviews.

Table 2. Descriptions of or associations with Swedes, Scandinavians and Europeans

	Number of occurrences	Associations with Swedes	Associations with Scandinavians	Associations with Europeans
Prosperity	1	prosperous (1)		
Traits of character	8	restrained (1); slow (1); slowness (2); decent (1); masochists (1)	thinks too much about sex (1)	decrepit (1)
Ideology, politics	1	tolerant (1)		
Swedish women	2	flexibility (1); strength (1)		
Swedish men	1		secretive/private (1)	

In relation to Swedes, the word *prosperous* is less common than in descriptions of Sweden. Instead, most critics associate Swedes with slowness. The only attribute related to ideology or politics—*tolerant*—comes from a review of Anna Bågstad’s *Ögonvittnet* (*Očevidec*; “The Eye Witness”), in which the critic makes a point of the author being a woman, and thereafter apologizes to all “tolerant Swedes” (#184, 2020). Negative attributes are only used here in two instances, about Scandinavians, who “think too much about sex,” and about Europeans, who are described as *decrepit* in relation to their tolerance towards alternative behavior (#60, 2009; #32, 2010).

The descriptions of parts of Sweden, such as islands and regions, are summarized in Table 3. They follow the same patterns as the descriptions of Sweden and Swedes: positive attributes such as *quiet* and *cozy* are contrasted to the gruesome crimes described in the novels. The town in which Camilla Läckberg’s novels take place, for example, is described as a place of “endless prosperity” in a review of *Predikanten* (*Propovednik*; *The Preacher*) (#16, 2008).

Table 3. Descriptions of or associations with Swedish cities or regions

Theme	Number of occurrences	Associations
Peace and quiet	5	quiet (3), peaceful (1), cozy (1)
Prosperity	1	prosperity (1)
About weather, landscape	1	picturesque (1)

4.2 Swedish crime fiction as a social document

In order to clarify the relationship between the critics’ image of Sweden and the novels reviewed, I have analyzed all reviews that contain general discussions about crime fiction being a genre that reflects various aspects of society, and/or show evidence of a reading that makes assumptions about Sweden based on the novel reviewed. In total, 32 reviews (47 excerpts) have been assigned the code “Swedish crime fiction as a social document.”

For example, when reviewing Alvtegen's *Saknad*, a critic states that they consider it important that crime fiction novels convey information about the source culture: "A detective is a detective, but you always want more, like, something new about the country in which the action takes place" (#8, 2005). Another critic explains, in a review of *Den du inte ser* (*Nevidimyj; Unseen*), that the author Mari Jungstedt "writes novels based on the realities of her country" (#72, 2011). In a review of Lars Kepler's *Hypnotisören* (*Gipnotizer; The Hypnotist*), a critic concludes that Swedish detectives are special, since they "combine the search for a criminal with a broad picture of modern reality and the exposure of 'social ills'" (#22, 2010).

Interestingly, a few critics specifically discuss the fact that Swedish crime fiction may have a negative impact on the image of Sweden. For example, when reviewing Mankell's *Danslärarens återkomst*, a critic explains that the novel in question will shock the Russian reader, who is "accustomed to the image of the prosperous, eternally neutral country of Ingmar Bergman and Olof Palme" (#3, 2004). Similarly, in a review of Erik Axl Sund's (the pseudonym for Jerker Eriksson and Håkan Axlander Sundquist) *Hungerelden* (*Golodnoe plamja; "The Hunger Fire"*), a critic concludes that "after reading it you may get the feeling that all of Sweden is populated by sadists, pedophiles, their victims and those who indifferently condoned it, but even this version of literary Sweden has the right to exist" (#131, 2015). In a review of *Kråkflickan* (*Devuška voronka; The Crow Girl*)—another novel by the same author—a critic seems to be pleased that Swedish crime fiction is influencing the image of Sweden in a negative way:

It is not excluded that many guardians of domestic morality draw current information about Europe from Scandinavian detectives; a good thing this genre is now in favor all over the world. (#117, 2014)

25 of the reviews have been coded as examples of a reading in which assumptions about Sweden are made in connection to the novel reviewed. Of these, nine are rather neutral, and focus on the fact that it is interesting to learn more about Swedish politics, culture and everyday life. For example, four critics appreciate that Larsson's Millennium series provides an insight into aspects such as the Swedish constitution, Swedish state security and the judicial system (43#, 2010; #45, 2010; #46, 2010; #56, 2009). Other aspects critics find interesting to learn about are, for example, life in the Swedish countryside, and the fact that Swedes always address each other using the pronoun "du" (you), which seems rather informal from a Russian point of view (#17, 2008; #72, 2011; #90, 2012).

Only one critic makes a positive assumption about Sweden based on the novel reviewed. This excerpt comes from a review of Larsson's *Flickan som lekte med elden*:

The success of the books is also determined by optimism; although they describe murder, violence, and corruption, decent people working for good and for justice exist, which means there is hope, which means that democracy still exists. (#36, 2010)

In contrast, 15 reviews contain examples of critics making negative assumptions about Sweden based on the novel reviewed. In two cases, the negative assumptions are already signaled in the title of the review. A review of Mankell's *Danslärarens återkomst* is entitled "Myths about a cloud free Europe" (#3, 2004), while a review of Lapidus *Vip*

salen (VIP-zal; “The VIP Room”) has the title “Don’t go to Sweden, children...”² (#136, 2016). In some reviews the cultural and ideological differences between Russia and the West are in focus. For example, in a review of Mankell’s *Kennedys hjärna* (*Mozg Kennedy; Kennedy’s Brain*), a critic concludes: “The book is realistic in only one way—in demonstrating the mess that reigns in the heads of progressively thinking Europeans” (#18, 2009). One critic makes it clear that Lapidus’ *Snabba cash* has impacted their image of Sweden in a negative way: “to be honest, I have questions for the country of victorious socialism, ABBA and IKEA, after reading ‘Easy Money’” (#25, 2010).

When reviewing Larsson’s *Devuška s tatuírovkoj drakona* (*Män som hatar kvinnor; The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*), one critic explains that excursions into the dark side of Swedish political and social life are a strong aspect of Larsson’s prose, and that the novel provides an opportunity to see the pain points of contemporary Europeans (#50, 2009). They then go on to describe the general state of Sweden using an infamous example of a Swedish police chief who, during his career, actively worked on issues related to gender equality and sexual harassment, but in 2010 was charged with several sex offences, including rape. The critic explains that Lindberg—the police chief in question—led a double life, “which according to Stieg Larsson is what many Swedes do” (*ibid.*). The critic concludes: “They are forced to lead [a double life], because the social model that has emerged in Sweden pushes them to do so” (*ibid.*).

Several critics read the novels in question in relation to Swedish family values. For example, in a review of Larsson’s *Män som hatar kvinnor*, a critic concludes that “[n]ow we too are learning about the problems of Swedish families and other Scandinavian social plagues” (#54, 2009). The same topic is raised by another critic in a review of the same novel:

And just as vividly Larsson describes the family mores of modern Swedes, for whom marital fidelity has long since become an anachronism, and tolerance of “misbehavior” coexists peacefully with brutal violence against the weak—women and children. (#59, 2010)

A similar assumption regarding Swedish family values may be found in a review of Kepler’s *Hypnotisören*. The critic clearly explains that, according to them, the novel is a clear example of “what the total ‘tolerance of the other,’ actively indoctrinated into the brains of Western society for the last 15–20 years, leads to” (#22, 2010). They continue:

Another danger faced by a well-fed and free society is the weakening of family ties. Everyone is on his own. Parents dare not enter their 12 or 13-year-old son’s room without knocking. The upbringing of children is left to the school and social services, which strictly supervise whether the parents are not overstepping their parental authority. (#22, 2010)

Interestingly, the critic does not stop at making assumptions; instead they suggest that Russia ought to consider its future based on examples from Swedish crime fiction: “You can’t help but think: The Swedes have already passed along the path we are just embarking on. Shouldn’t we consider the mistakes of others in advance, so as not to make

² The title is a reference to Kornej Čukovskij’s fairy tale poem *Barmaley* (1925), in which children are warned about going to Africa.

the same mistakes ourselves?” (#22, 2010). Thus, it seems that the novels reviewed confirm an image of Sweden as a country of weak family ties and constant (male) abuse against the weak.

Another topic discussed as a typical Swedish problem in the reviews is immigration, and the assumption that “Swedish tolerance towards others” is the cause of Sweden’s problems (#22, 2010). In a review of Lapidus’ *Snabba cash*, a critic states that Sweden is known to invest a lot of money in supporting immigrants, which, according to Swedes, is a “noble deed.” Thereafter they conclude that, at the same time, Sweden “gets problems in the form of drug distribution networks and gangster groups, of which there are about fifty in the country today (some of them even have their own websites on the Internet)” (#23, 2010). Another critic explains that people who think that “peace, quiet and God’s goodness” reign in European capitals will be very surprised to learn that, in reality, “‘prosperous Stockholm’ suffers from racketeering, smuggling, trafficking in drugs and live goods, and the division of spheres of influence between gangster groups” (#24, 2010).

4.3 Hermeneutical/ideological reviews

In this section I will discuss reviews in which the critic provides their own interpretations of the novel reviewed (hermeneutical), while also promoting a certain viewpoint (ideological). Thus, in these cases the review functions in the same way as the previously discussed peritexts of Swedish crime fiction published in the Soviet Union (Podlevskikh Carlström 2022a). The first examples of such reviews occur in 2010, and deal with Johan Theorin’s *Nattfåk* (*Nočnoj štor*; *The Darkest Room*) and Larsson’s *Flickan som lekte med elden* and *Män som hatar kvinnor*. One critic explains that Larsson’s character, Lisbeth Salander, embodies “the ideal of modernity.” They continue: “This is the dream of decrepit [drjaxlejuščie] Europeans about indigo people—a new race with unconventional consciousness and ‘alternative’ (of course!) behavior. This is what is encoded in Larsson’s protagonist, this is the reason for his appeal” (#32, 2010). Here, the critic expresses a negative attitude towards Europeans, and in particular to their tolerance towards alternative behaviors. Another critic also turns to ideological differences when explaining what Larsson actually is writing about:

In essence, Larsson has described the ideal way for the liberal bourgeoisie to exist in the 21st century—one that professes a consumerist ideology and at the same time does not have a guilt complex before the less well-off social units—because money is honestly earned, taxes are paid to society (#29, 2010).

Finally, another of Larsson’s Russian critics devotes considerable space in the review to interpretations:

It may seem that Larsson is simply criticizing the Swedish model of the welfare state, but in fact his aim is larger—namely, democracy as it is understood in Europe. Curiously, Larsson turns democracy from a mode of power to a means of expression. It turns out that the main business of a citizen of democratic Sweden is to fulfill his duties. He can also talk freely. However, with caution. (#50, 2009)

After clarifying Larsson's view of democracy, the critic turns to Larsson's message, which, according to him, is to present modern Europe as a society of increasing inequality. Furthermore, they conclude that Larsson wrote about guardianship: "And the whole system of guardianship is based on the inequality of guardians and guardians. [...] Swedish society in the book is a society of total mutual tutelage—mutual, because one of its key components is surveillance, or rather, it exclusively builds on surveillance" (#50, 2009). The critic ends their interpretation by concluding that Sweden is becoming less democratic: "As we know, there are other models of democracy, such as sovereign or managed democracy. In these cases, a chorus of individuals also exists, but the volume of this chorus can be minimized. Strictly speaking, the Swedish model is also heading in that direction" (#50, 2009).

In a review of Niklas Natt och Dag's historical crime fiction novel *1793 (1793; The Wolf and the Watchman)*, a critic explains that the novel is actually not about the 18th century, but about the horrors of today. Thereafter, they summarize the political ideas which, according to him, preoccupy contemporary Europeans and Americans:

The end of the era of democracy and liberalism (as they label it), about the coming of the 'dark ages.' The main horror is 'populism,' the advent of politicians following the wild instincts of the crowd. Trump, Duterte, Bolsonaro, the 'alternative' European parties... Yes, yes, democrats (the civilized heirs of the Jacobins) see them like this—as inept leaders of an angry mob that rebelled against the 'permanent revolution' of political correctness. And how well everything was going... The breakdown of male-female relations, the chiseling of brains about ecology and healthy lifestyles, the disintegration of religious, cultural and national communities—a new, open world where everyone is the same. No guillotines. And suddenly, a riot. (#154, 2018)

This quote clearly illustrates how the critic separates between us and them. By using quotation marks, they indicate that they do not agree with the Anglo-American ideas they are describing. With lexical means (e.g. the chiseling of brains) they reveal that they consider environmentalism, political correctness and gender equality to be negative Anglo-American tendencies, very different from their Russian point of view.

5 Conclusions

In this article, I have analyzed how Sweden is represented in Russian reviews of Swedish crime fiction novels in the period 2000–2021. I have also searched for indications of the critics' image of Sweden being influenced by the novels reviewed. I will start by summarizing and discussing the first topic.

The most common way in which Sweden is represented in the reviews is by means of previously established positive representations of Sweden. In these representations, Sweden is described with attributes such as "prosperous," "peaceful" and "quiet". However, these commonly positive words are used in an ironical way, in contrast to the dark image of Sweden provided by the crime fiction novels reviewed. These representations are reminiscent of the previously mentioned ideologically motivated Soviet peritexts for Swedish crime novels, in which positive representations of Sweden were used within quotation marks and contrasted with the societal descriptions provided

by the crime fiction novels. I find this to be particularly interesting when compared to the results of Larsson's 2012 analysis of the reception of Swedish literature in Germany, which showed the opposite tendency, i.e. that earlier, more positive images of Sweden overshadowed the dark images of Sweden in the novels.

When it comes to the second topic, the study does indicate that there are grounds for suspecting that crime fiction might impact the Russian reception of Sweden. As a matter of fact, the observation that crime fiction is a genre that provides information about the source culture, or reveals the "truth" about a country, was expressed by several critics. Other reviews instead indicate that the critics have actually read the novels in such a way, that is, drawing negative conclusions about Sweden based on the novels reviewed. One critic even advocates for Russia to stop and think about its own future path, in order not to end up like Sweden. Finally, there are a few ideological/hermeneutical reviews in the corpus, in which the critic interprets the novel from a Russian ideological position, and clearly distances themselves from the Swedish social system depicted in the novel. These reviews present Swedish, and Western, values such as tolerance, openness and democracy in a negative light.

The reason I find this to be problematic is not related to the negative representations as such. Naturally, crimes *do* occur in Sweden, and Sweden does have sociological issues. The problem is, rather, the disproportionately large space these types of negative representations take up. As previously indicated, 63% of all Swedish literature (adult prose fiction) translated into Russian between 2010 and 2021 was crime fiction. Moreover, there are reasons to suspect that the share of crime fiction will increase even further, due to war-related sanctions and self-censorship in publishing, related to the recently expanded Russian gay propaganda law.³ Thus, the representations of Sweden risk becoming one-sided, which is particularly worrying in these times when Russians are also being fed negative information about the West and Western values in state media. Swedish crime fiction—literature for the masses—might lead people who only read this type of literature to draw the conclusion that such representations are true. Thus, Swedish crime fiction needs to be balanced against other types of literature that depict the positive aspects of living in a society based on democracy, tolerance, openness and equality. In order to establish how such literature is received in Russia today, further research on the reception of Swedish literature in Russia is required.

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³ In September 2022, the so-called "Russian gay propaganda law", originally passed in 2013, was expanded to cover all age groups. The law, which was originally established to "protect children from homosexuality," now bans all depictions of homosexuality (Morozova 2022).

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Research material

Please see worksheet B of the published dataset *Swedish Crime Fiction in Russian Translation: Editions, Corpus and Reviews*. (Podlevskikh Carlström 2024) for detailed information about my primary material.

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Appendix

This appendix contains some information on the review corpus. For more details, see Worksheet B in the published dataset *Swedish Crime Fiction in Russian Translation: Editions, Corpus and Reviews* (Podlevskikh Carlström 2024).

Table 1. Reviews per author

	Author/editor	Number of reviews	Number of works reviewed	Share of total reviews
1	Larsson, Stieg	26	3	11.3%
2	Theorin, Johan	13	4	6.4%
3	Läckberg, Camilla	12	7	5.9%
4	Natt-o-dag, Niklas	12	3	5.9%
5	Sund, Erik Axel	12	4	5.9%
6	Jackson, Stina	11	2	5.4%
7	Mankell, Henning	10	6	4.9%
8	Ahnhem, Stefan	9	2	4.4%
9	Kepler, Lars	9	4	4.4%
10	Lagercrantz, David	8	2	3.9%
11	Marklund, Liza	8	5	3.9%
12	Persson, Leif G.W.	8	3	3.9%
13	Alvtegen, Karin	7	2	3.4%
14	Lapidus, Jens	7	2	3.4%
15	Jungstedt, Mari	5	2	2.5%
16	Roslund, Anders and Hellström, Börje	5	2	2.5%
17	Dahl, Arne	4	2	2.0%
18	Adolfsson, Maria	3	2	1.5%
19	Ohlsson, Kristina	3	3	1.5%
20	Bågstad, Anna	2	1	1%
21	Carlsson, Christoffer	2	1	1%
22	Edvardsson, Mattias	2	1	1%
23	Holmberg, John-Henri (ed.)	2	1	1%
24	Kallentoft, Mons	2	2	1%
25	Nesser, Håkan	2	1	1%
26	Sehlberg, Dan	2	1	1%
27	Bartosch, Karin	1	1	0,5%
28	Bley, Michaela	1	1	0,5%
29	De la Motte, Anders	1	1	0,5%
30	Edgren Aldén, Rebecka	1	1	0,5%
31	Ekman, Klas	1	1	0,5%
32	Eriksson, Caroline	1	1	0,5%
33	Frimansson, Inger	1	1	0,5%
34	Grebe, Camilla	1	1	0,5%
35	Jansson, Anna	1	1	0,5%
36	Larsson, Åsa	1	1	0,5%
37	Lindsten, Mariette	1	1	0,5%

38	Ohlsson, Mats	1	1	0,5%
39	Rosenfeldt, Hans and Hjort, Michael	1	1	0,5%
40	Roslund, Anders	1	1	0,5%
41	Sten, Camilla	1	1	0,5%
42	Söderberg, Alexander	1	1	0,5%
43	Vallgren, Carl-Johan	1	1	0,5%
		In total: 203	In total: 85	

Table 2. Number of reviews per critic

	Author of review/recommendation	Number of reviews	Number of authors reviewed
1	No name	84	28
2	Vladislav Tolstov	20	13
3	Lev Danilkin	7	3
4	Marina Kiseleva	7	7
5	Ol'ga Kostjukova	7	6
6	Oksana Sanžarova	4	4
7	Sergej Šulakov	4	4
8	Anastasija Petrakova	3	3
9	Kristina Kuplevackaja	3	3
10	Sergej Kol'cov	3	3
11	Vadim Levental'	3	3
12	Andrej Peresada	2	2
13	Ekaterina Sedyx	2	2
14	Konstantin Mil'čin	2	2
15	Jurij Danilov	2	2
16	Liza Novikova	2	1
17	Aleksander Šatalov	1	1
18	Aleksandr Pletner	1	1
19	Aleksej Ivanov	1	1
20	Anastasija Kozlova	1	1
21	Andrej Podšibjakin	1	1
22	Armida Kišmakova	1	1
23	Boris Brux	1	1
24	Dar'ja Nekrasova	1	1
25	Dar'ja Šatskaja	1	1
26	Dmitrij Mitus	1	1
27	Dmitrij Trunčenkov	1	1
28	Dmitrij Kozyrev	1	1
29	Ekaterina Buz	1	1
30	Ekaterina Detuševa	1	1
31	Elena Petrova	1	1
32	Elena Plaxova	1	1
33	Elena Jakovič	1	1
34	Elena	1	1
35	Evgenij Belželarskij	1	1
36	Elizaveta Krivoščekova	1	1
37	Evgenij Tkačev	1	1

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38	Fedor Djadičev	1	1
39	Ivan Bušman	1	1
40	Galina Jusefovič	1	1
41	Igor' Kuz'mičev	1	1
42	Il'ja Nosyrev	1	1
43	Jurij Krylov	1	1
44	Julija Čertkova	1	1
45	Liza Birger	1	1
46	Kristina Čemodurova	1	1
47	Ljubov' Antonova	1	1
48	Marija Tereščenko	1	1
49	Marina Kudrjašova	1	1
50	Natalija Babintseva	1	1
51	Natal'ja Rtiščeva	1	1
52	Natal'ja Varlamova	1	1
53	Natal'ja Jakušina	1	1
54	Natal'ja Lomykina	1	1
55	Oleg Fočkin	1	1
56	Ol'ga Štraus	1	1
57	Ol'ga Novikova	1	1
58	Rafaël' Gol'dberg	1	1
59	Sergej Minaev	1	1
60	Sof'ja Večtomova	1	1
61	Svjatoslav Tarasenko	1	1
62	Vladimir Berezin	1	1
63	Timur Latypov	1	1
64	Vadim Badretdinov	1	1

Table 3. Number of reviews per media source

	Media source	Number of reviews	Number of critics named	Number of authors reviewed
1	Knižnoe obozrenie	30	4	19
2	Bajkal Inform	19	1	13
3	Afiša / Afiša (afisha.ru)	10	2	6
4	Profil'	8	1	6
5	Stranicy Voronežskoj kul'tury (culturavr.ru)	7	2	6
6	Vladimirskie vedomosti	7	1	7
7	Spletnik.ru	6	0	5
8	Kommerčeskie Vesti (Omsk)	4	1	3
9	Pročtenie (prochtenie.ru)	4	0	4
10	Snob.ru	4	0	3
11	Krasnyj sever (Salexard)	3	1	3
12	Rabočij put' (Smolensk)	3	1	3
13	Russkij Reporter	3	2	3
14	Večernjaja Moskva	3	2	3
15	Vladivostok	3	0	1
16	Antenna Daily (antennadaily.ru)	2	0	1
17	Černogolovskaja gazeta	2	1	2

18	Free Tajm (Sankt-Peterburg)	2	0	2
19	Itogi	2	2	2
20	Kuzbass (Kemerovo)	2	1	2
21	Moskovskaja pravda	2	2	2
22	Sol' - Rossijskaja občestvenno-političeskaja gazeta (Perm')	2	1	2
23	Telenedelja Omsk	2	1	1
24	Wonderzine.com	2	1	2
25	Amurskaja Pravda (ampravda.ru)	1	0	1
26	Business-Class (Perm')	1	1	1
27	Centralizovannaja bibliotečnaja sistema g. Surguta (slib.ru)	1	1	1
28	Chaskor.Ru (Častnyj korrespondent)	1	0	1
29	E1.Ru	1	1	1
30	Den' respubliki (Karačaevo-Čerkessija)	1	1	1
31	Dagestanskaja pravda (dagpravda.ru)	1	0	1
32	Elle- ežemesjačnyj žurnal o mode (elle.ru)	1	1	1
33	Ežednevnye novosti. Podmoskov'e (PDF-versija)	1	1	1
34	Èkspert	1	0	1
35	Eženedel'nyj Žurnal	1	1	1
36	FashionTime.ru	1	0	1
37	FindNews.ru	1	0	1
38	Gazeta (Moskva)	1	1	1
39	goodnews.ru	1	0	1
40	Gorodovoj (Sankt-Peterburg)	1	1	1
41	Gorod 812 (Sankt-Peterburg)	1	1	1
42	GQ.ru	1	1	1
43	IA REGNUM	1	0	1
44	INFOX	1	1	1
45	Idealady (idealady.ru)	1	0	1
46	IXBT.com	1	0	1
47	Izvestija (iz.ru)	1	1	1
48	Južnoural'skaja Panorama (Čeljabinsk)	1	1	1
49	Komsomol'skaja pravda v Vologde	1	1	1
50	Kommersant"-Priloženie	1	1	1
51	Konošskij kur'er	1	1	1
52	Kul'tura (portal-kultura.ru)	1	0	1
53	Korolevskie vorota (Kaliningrad)	1	1	1
54	Look At Me (lookatme.ru)	1	0	1
55	Kul'tura Moskvy (cult.mos.ru)	1	1	1
56	Kul'turologija (kulturologia.ru)	1	0	1
57	MK v Pitere (Sankt-Peterburg)	1	1	1
58	Metro Sankt-Peterburg	1	1	1
59	Metro Moskva	1	1	1
60	Moskovskie novosti	1	1	1
61	Moskovskij Komsomolec (voskresnyj vypusk)	1	1	1
62	Narodnaja gazeta- internet-gazeta Obninska (ngregion.ru)	1	0	1
63	News24 (news24.pro)	1	0	1

64	Novgorodskie vedomosti	1	1	1
65	Novaja Tambovščina (Tambov)	1	1	1
66	Novosti Bol'šoj Moskvy (bm24.ru)	1	0	1
67	Nižnij Novgorod On-lajn (nn.ru)	1	1	1
68	Novosti Peterburga (novostispb.ru)	1	0	1
69	Novyj mir	1	1	1
70	Ogoněk	1	1	1
71	Obo vsem (fancy-journal.com)	1	0	1
72	Portal "Laboratorija novostej"	1	0	1
73	Pro-Books.ru (Sankt-Peterburg)	1	0	1
74	Piterbook (krupaspb.ru)	1	1	1
75	RegionSamara.ru (regionsamara.ru)	1	0	1
76	Rešetorija (reshetoria.ru)	1	0	1
77	RIA Novosti (ria.ru)	1	1	1
78	Rjazanskie vedomosti	1	1	1
79	Rodnaja gazeta	1	1	1
80	Salt Mag (saltmag.ru)	1	0	1
81	Saratov - Stolica Povolž'ja (Saratov)	1	0	1
82	Slovo	1	0	1
83	Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti	1	1	1
84	Slovo Neftjanika (g. Muravlenko)	1	1	1
85	Tajnyj sovetnik (Sankt-Peterburg)	1	0	1
86	The New Times (Novoe Vremja)	1	1	1
87	tltTimes.Ru (Informacionnyj portal Tol'jatti)	1	0	1
88	Tverskie vedomosti	1	1	1
89	Večernee vremja (Sankt-Peterburg)	1	1	1
90	Večernij Čeljabinsk (Čeljabinsk)	1	1	1
91	Vremja i Den'gi (Kazan')	1	1	1
92	Vremja novostej	1	1	1
93	Yoki.Ru	1	0	1
94	Vremja Omskoe	1	0	1
95	Ženskij žurnal MyJane.Ru	1	0	1

Table 4. Number of reviews per year

Year	Number of reviews
2004	4
2005	6
2006	3
2007	3
2008	3
2009	2
2010	42
2011	20
2012	7
2013	6
2014	17
2015	14
2016	9

2017	6
2018	13
2019	19
2020	18
2021	14