2 Three driving forces

Structural challenges for Nordic democracies in the 2010s

Henrik Meinander

‘Europa braucht die Nation’ (Europe needs the nation) wrote the German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck, joined by his colleagues, in a debate article in the weekly *Die Zeit* in July 2016 after Brexit became a reality. Inspired by the US social scientist Lawrence Summers’ recent request for ‘responsible nationalism’, by which he meant a combination of a sound economic and welfare policy with constructive cooperation with other nations, the German intellectuals urged the European Union (EU) to return to the monetary system that had existed before the introduction of the euro and limit the power of the European Court of Justice.¹

Similar academic outbursts of frustration were frequently expressed in many European countries in the summer and autumn of 2016. It was not only Brexit and the heavy debt burden of most of the European states that caused their articulated irritation towards the EU. Equally alarming was the massive inflow of refugees from the Middle East and Northern Africa to Europe, which sparked protests from the populist movements in different parts of the continent. It also functioned as a revealing stress test of how liberal and human the Europeans actually were towards people in need. Within a year even the most generous recipient countries, Germany and Sweden, had hardened their immigration regulations and the EU reached an agreement with Turkey in order to stop refugees from entering the EU.

By then, Streeck had also sharpened his critique of the market economy and banking system of the EU with his essay collection *How Will Capitalism End?* (2016), in which he demanded that the nation-states and their democratic governments regain some of the control over their economies they had had before the 1970s.² Naturally, this idea of ‘de-globalizing capitalism’ awoke much criticism. One of the responses to Streeck’s general theory was published in the *London Review of Books* by the original British historian Adam Tooze. He characterised Streeck as a nostalgic and Eurocentric nationalist, who rather unconvincingly accused the banks and finance elites of being the cause of most of the structural problems in EU. The future of capitalism will be decided in Asia, not in Europe, claimed Tooze.³

The views may differ considerably, but in the centre of this debate is how the EU states and other Western countries can afford to maintain their welfare states and representative democracies amidst the stronger competition in the

global market and the geopolitical scene. Politicians are, for understandable reasons, inclined to argue that these challenges can be solved on a national level. How could they otherwise attract votes and gain power? However, among academic scholars this nationally framed perspective on the development of the European welfare states and their democracies has gradually been replaced by more transnational framings and questions. The nation-states are still important units and actors but are increasingly forced to face the challenges of the ongoing globalisation of a world economy and its ever-faster driver, the digital revolution. Is the answer welfare nationalism or a new international political order?⁴

Contextualisation has been a growing trend in research on the development in Nordic countries. A representative example of this has been Mary Hilson's seminal study *The Nordic Model: Scandinavia since 1945* (2008), in which she especially highlights the economy and security issues in a wider European framework. And during the last decade, a large research programme on the historical foundations and future challenges of the Nordic Welfare State (Nord-Wel) has delivered a number of outstanding anthologies with a systematically European and global angle on the matter.⁵

In the 2010s, the awareness of how intertwined political cultures on the national level are with the world economy and geopolitics has almost exploded due to the digital revolution, which again has uncovered and accentuated the turbulence and inefficiency of liberal democracies. Information technology does not determine the direction of societal development. But it is fundamentally quickening the rhythm of the discourses on the public spheres and thereby revealing how these driving forces interact and form Nordic welfare states and democracies.

The Swedish scholar Lennart Schön has, in his historical synthesis of the world economy, spotted a larger pattern behind this change of societal rhythm. The world economy has, since the mid-19th century, gone through two globalisation waves (1850–1914 and 1970–present), and each time they have reached a turning point, due to technological and financial factors, crucial changes have concurrently taken place also in the political culture of nation-states and geopolitical dynamics in the Western hemisphere.⁶

Schön identified in his *An Economic History of Modern Sweden* (2012) four such turning points in the world economy during the last 130 years: in the 1890s, 1930s, 1970s and 2010s. Having already applied Schön's theory in studies on the patterns of democratisation in Finland and Sweden in the 20th century,⁷ I will discuss here how feasible it is for understanding the structural challenges for Nordic democracies in the 2010s. First, I outline the historical development of the Nordic countries, and then I analyse how the world economy, geopolitics, and the traditions and trends in domestic political cultures have formed their democracies in the 2010s.

Patterns of democratisation

The emergence and development of representative democracies in the Nordic countries has predominantly been explained as an outcome of a certain political culture and its deeply rooted institutions, which paved the way for the

implementation of a specific Nordic version of the Western European welfare state. There is clear evidence for this claim. Demands of political rights increased in all parts of Europe at the end of the 19th century. The northern periphery of Europe had until then lagged economically, significantly behind the more industrialised countries of the continent, but despite this, democratic reforms and other civic rights were implemented in the Nordic countries to some degree before they were implemented in other wealthier countries. Simultaneously, the Nordic countries had considerably higher economic growth than in the equally rural countries in the Balkan and Iberian regions.⁸

The American historian Mary Nolan has in her fine synthesis *The Transatlantic Century* explained the Nordic leap as a consequence of certain societal structures: 'A different agrarian culture, a better educational system, better transport opportunities, and Protestantism all contributed to Scandinavian success.' The Protestant Church was a guarantee for a strong central administration and the rule of law, whereas the free peasantry would be the same progressive force in political life as the middle classes in Central Europe.⁹

When the democratic breakthrough took place in Europe after the First World War, the Nordic countries were well prepared for parliamentary processes and compromises, which partly explains why they, at the outbreak of the next world war, were among the very few European countries that had maintained their democratic constitutions. Having escaped a Soviet occupation and thereby maintaining their democracies, the Nordic countries were able to construct their own type of welfare system during the post-war period. Social equality was promoted by offering benefits to all citizens, which secured middle-class support for the system and its acceptance of high progressive income taxation until the present day.¹⁰

However, the success of Nordic democracy and its welfare system has also crucially been dependent on relatively swift economic growth, which transformed the Nordic people between 1890 and 1970 from poor cousins to something of lucky siblings within the European family. Nordic countries have more efficiently implemented recent technological innovations than most other European countries. One reason for this has been their small populations and functional state governance, which has made it easier to adjust their natural and human resources to the new technology.¹¹

Equally important has been their favourable geographical position. On the one hand, the Nordic countries have been close enough to large markets in Central Europe and North America. On the other, they have been sheltered by the seas and in their peripheral geopolitical location. The Danish historian Uffe Østergård claims that the geographic site is the major structural explanation to the economic and political success of what has lately become known as the 'Nordic model'.¹²

Both Finland and Denmark have had mighty neighbours invading them for military reasons. But in most cases, Finns and Danes have gained considerably from their geographical closeness to the Russian and German markets. And in contrast to the Baltic States and other Eastern regions of Central Europe,

Finland and Denmark have at the same time been aloof enough to avoid being heavily squeezed between the great powers in major conflicts in Europe. The geographical site is naturally not the destiny, but it definitely plays a part in the story, even though it is easily understood as too simple an explanation.

The Second World War is a case in point. Finland was dragged into the war in autumn 1939 because the Soviet Union wanted to secure its defence of Leningrad. Denmark and Norway were again occupied by Germany in the spring of 1940 as a preventive measure against the plans of the Western powers to cut off the Swedish export of iron ore to the German war industry. Yet none of these three Nordic countries became major battlefields in the horrific war between the Axis and Allies, whereas both Sweden and Iceland avoided an involvement in the war altogether. In other words, the Nordic countries maintained their infrastructures and civilian populations, which put them in a totally different position than most of the other countries in war-torn Europe.¹³

World market

The beginning of the third globalisation wave is usually dated to the 1970s when the ground structures of the free movement of capital were laid and the outsourcing of Western industrial production to other continents began on a larger scale. After the end of the Cold War and together with the simultaneous liberalisation of the digital technology, the world economy grew swiftly between 1995 and 2008. This time it was no longer the Western hemisphere that was the tractor of world economy but, above all, China and India with their huge populations and growth potentials. The negative side of the coin was a rapidly growing inequality of income, whereas the positive was a considerable rise of the standard of living among the poorest populations of our planet.¹⁴

The Nordic countries coped well in this economic race until 2008 due to the outsourcing of a considerable part of their labour-intensive industry, the ability to adjust to new digital technology and the transformation into service economies. The Norwegian economy went through an even swifter growth thanks to the income from the state-owned energy industry. The worldwide financial crisis of 2008 shook the Nordic economies differently. Iceland was hit by a banking crisis in 2003 and touched bottom in 2006–2008 but has, since 2012, shown bold growth. Norway, Sweden and Denmark maintained their budget surplus and returned to a growth path in 2010. Finland's economy withered for a number of structural reasons until 2016 and the state will therefore struggle with a budget deficit at least until the early 2020s.¹⁵

As a consequence, the recession in the world economy had different political implications for each Nordic country. Due to its oil resources and income, Norway was much less impacted by the financial crisis. Yet the Social Democratic government that had held power for eight years lost the parliamentary elections in 2013 to a centre-right coalition. However, it was not due to budget cuts, but rather it was a typical wish for changes in domestic politics. The winning populist *Fremskrittspartiet* (Progress Party) joined the government for

the first time and continued in it after the 2017 election, which resulted in a tightened immigration policy, much like the one in Denmark had begun to implement a decade earlier.¹⁶

As an EU country with its most important trade markets in the Union, Denmark was more directly affected by the turmoil in world finances and the European sovereign debt crisis in 2008–2011. Although Denmark had maintained its own currency, its financial market and banking system were closely intertwined with the euro-zone. Many expected that the victory of a Red-Green Alliance in the parliamentary elections in 2011 would lead to a rollback of some of the austerity measures initiated by the former government led by the Centre Party, Venstre. This did not happen. The Red-Green government loosened up the stricter immigration policy implemented by the former government in exchange of support from the nationalistic populist party Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party).¹⁷

After the elections four years later (2015), a new centrist minority cabinet took over once again with right-wing support, including from the populist party. Consequently, further restrictions on the immigration and asylum policy were enforced at the same time as the refugee crisis reached its peak within the EU. This anti-immigration policy continued after the 2019 elections. The populist party lost a considerable part of their support to the Social Democrats, who after lengthy negotiations formed a minority government. One reason for this power shift was that the Social Democrats' campaign had backed the stricter immigration requirements. Another was that the climate question got much more attention in election debates and consumed the support of the climate-skeptical populist party.¹⁸

One thing was obvious; the Danish measures in the immigration policy cannot be seen as a reaction to increasing unemployment or other substantial difficulties in the domestic economics. Quite the contrary, the Danish 'flexicurity' with its flexibility in the labour market combined with a strong social security and activating labour market policy now showed its efficiency. Noticeable also is that this employment policy has continued since the 1990s despite regular shifts between Left and Centre governments.¹⁹

Denmark's main export markets are in Germany and Sweden, both of which sailed through the financial crisis of 2008–2015 without any substantial problems and were actually growing throughout the 2010s. A closer look at the Danish export profile reveals that a substantial proportion of exports is high-tech products and refined raw materials for niche markets is less sensitive to economic conjunctures.²⁰ Denmark's economic success in the 2010s is in this sense a good example of what Lennart Schön described as the positive outcome of the 'transformation of development blocks': 'During transformation periods after structural crises, development blocks of major innovations have emerged, particularly in relation to power supply, transport and communications.'²¹

The Swedish reactions to the turmoil in the European financial market in 2008–2015 were also rather moderate. The Swedes, in a 2002 referendum,

voted for staying out of the euro-zone, which meant that the Swedish banking system was only indirectly involved in the measures taken to rescue Greece from financial collapse. As in Norway and Denmark, Sweden had during the 2010s both non-socialist (2006–2010, 2010–2014) and Left-Green governments (2014–2018, 2019–present) that, despite some distinctively diverse election promises, have not made any radical changes in the national economic policy.

One reason for this solidification has been the growing support for the nationalistic populist party *Sverigedemokraterna* (Swedish Democrats), which has had representation in the Swedish parliament since 2010. Due to its ideological roots in the radical-right movement and strong critique of Sweden's generous immigration policy, the other parties refused to make political deals with *Sverigedemokraterna*. In spite of this, since the election in 2014, the party has held a balance of power in the parliament. The two Left-Green minority coalitions have therefore since 2014 been forced to rely on passive support from the socialist *Vänsterpartiet* (Left Party) and some of the other non-socialist parties, which hindered the coalitions from carrying out any substantial social or economic reforms.²²

Yet an equally important reason for this linear policy has been the stable recovery of the Swedish economy after the recession in 2009. As in Denmark, the Swedish export industry has, due to a number of technological rationalisations, efficient attraction of foreign capital, made a substantial move towards more service products and expanded its international markets despite problems in the European economy. An illustrative example of this is the production of Volvo cars. Since a Chinese car manufacturer bought the company in 2010, Volvo has rapidly regained its profitability thanks to the use of robots in production, improved design and global market planning. A car is no longer a mere instrument for movement; it is increasingly an expression of taste and lifestyle.²³

These significant improvements in the technological landscape and societal productivity, which, following Schön's macro-thesis, suggest bold growth for Sweden at least into the 2020s and have clearly moderated the interest for radical change in economic policy. Income tax has remained high in comparison with other countries, but as in other Western market economies, Swedish capital tax has been considerably decreased since the 1990s. The two Left-Green coalitions of the 2010s have neither raised the considerably lowered capital tax nor reintroduced the inheritance tax abolished by the non-socialist cabinet of 2004. The most debated economic question is instead the rapid income increase of the wealthiest strata of the Swedish population.²⁴

Finland's economic path through the 2010s was much more troublesome. The deep dip in the world market in 2008–2009 and the following financial crisis in the EU impacted Finland and led to a number of other structural problems in its economy and competitiveness. The dramatic fall and sell-out of the giant mobile phone section of the Nokia company took place between 2008

and 2013. At the same time, the economically important forest industry went through a major renewal of its products, leading to a cut in export incomes. In addition to this, the significant export to Russia declined due to both falling oil prices and EU sanctions following the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.²⁵

This was certainly not the first time the Finnish economy was rocked much harder by economic conjunctures than the other Nordic countries. During the previous economic recession in Europe in the early 1990s, Finland had faced even graver problems with huge unemployment numbers and considerable cuts in welfare services. Such drastic decisions were not required in the 2010s, although unemployment rates would remain high until 2016, when the economy finally began to grow again. But the price for maintaining the welfare services was a substantial increase of state debt, which put Finland in the same category as Iceland.²⁶

The first bold reactions to these structural problems in the economy came in the parliamentary election in 2011, when the populist party *Perussuomalaiset* (True Finns) received substantial support and sharpened its anti-immigration demands with a strong critique of the participation of Finland in the financial rescue of the Greek economy. The Finnish governments had since the 1970s been large coalitions. The Conservatives and Social Democrats were dominant parties in the cabinet in 2011–2015, but they were unable to push through substantial economic reforms.

This paved the way for a new victory for the populist party in the election in 2015 and its participation in a non-socialist cabinet. Two years later, the governmental position caused a split within the True Finns, in which the old party leadership formed a new party that remained in the government, which was able to carry out some reforms that improved Finnish competitiveness in the world market. These austerity measures rather predictably led to a clear loss for the coalition in the 2019 election and a formation of a Left-Center government, which promised improvements in social welfare despite signs of a recession in the world economy.²⁷

However, the foremost reason for the Finnish growth numbers since 2016 was the recovery of the European economy. In contrast to the other Nordic countries, Finland has so far not been able to fully transform into an economy that maintains stable growth through an advanced technology and a service export industry with profitable niche markets.²⁸

The Finnish economic structures are thus also substantially stiffer than the much smaller Icelandic economy. The financial meltdown in 2003–2007 of the three leading Icelandic banks was a consequence of irresponsible speculation on the global financial markets and awoke large protests against plans of a state-funded rescue programme. The government decided, against all odds, to let the banks fail, which has resulted in an astonishing recovery and a thorough rearrangement of the political map. At the same time, the country has begun paying back its enormous loans early.²⁹

Geopolitics

As pointed out earlier, another often neglected external factor in analyses of the development of political cultures in the Nordic countries have been the turning points on the geopolitical scene and their different chain reactions. The end of the Cold War, the emergence of the European Union and the eastward expansion of the Union together with NATO had self-evident far-reaching consequences for the political dynamics for Northern Europe. Finland with its over 1,300 kilometre-long eastern border with the unstable Russia was in the beginning most influenced by these changes. But as new geopolitical tensions turned up in other parts of the world, each Nordic country would get its specific share of the friction they caused.

As NATO members Denmark and Norway took active part in the United States-led warfare in Afghanistan (2001–present) and Iraq (2003–2007), a number of their soldiers got killed and the military involvement sparked protests in the Danish-Muslim communities and among domestic pacifists. However, apart from Left-wing socialists, would the political party elites and leading media continue to support Danish participation in the wars? When in 2005 a Danish cartoonist drew insulting caricatures of Muhammed and caused large demonstrations against the Danes in different parts of the Muslim world, regrets were expressed, but the deed was defended by many of his compatriots in the name of freedom of speech.³⁰

These experiences and controversies clearly enforced the nationalistic opinion in the Danish immigration debate. It explains also why the Danish nationalist-populist party *Danske Folkparti* succeeded earlier than the other Nordic populist parties to get their anti-immigration demands carried out. In exchange for this, the party has supported the two recent centre minority cabinets. Another consequence of the tightening attitudes towards immigration was that Danish scepticism towards the EU, which is essentially a deep-rooted popular attitude against all kinds of top-down administration, lost something of its edge.

Suddenly, Danish society seemed to be not so threatened by the Germans and Brussels but by Muslims and immigrants from the Middle East. This attitude shift was even more bluntly expressed when the big wave of refugees from the Middle East and Africa swept over Europe in 2015. Like many other EU citizens, Danes demanded that the EU Commission do much more to control the borders and distribute the responsibility for humanitarian aid more equally among its member states.³¹

Very few commentators would point out the obvious contradiction in these often nationalist demands. As is so often the case with challenges of global magnitude, the public discourses in the Nordic countries were unable to view the national consequences of the 2015 refugee crisis as chain reactions of changing geopolitical priorities among the great powers. The failures of US forces in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had convinced the Obama administration of the

necessity of a controlled retreat from the Middle East.³² This strategy, which Obama's successor Trump would in practice follow, gradually led to a number of unpredicted constellations in many parts of the Arabic world: swiftly rising demands for democratic reforms through social media, large public demonstrations, increasing political chaos, new but unstable regimes, and chaotic civil wars in Libya and Syria, which resulted in large refugee waves to Europe.³³

The Swedish reaction to the refugee crisis in 2015 was noticeably different and altered more over time. In contrast to the Danish and Norwegian media, which had given diversified attention to anti-immigration opinions since the early 2010s, would the leading media houses in Sweden defend their government's generous refugee policy and either condemn or neglect the protests against it by the populist party *Sverigedemokraterna*? By the end of 2015, nearly 163,000 refugees had arrived in Sweden, which was many times more than in any other Nordic country or small EU nation.³⁴

One reason for these differences in the public attitudes towards immigration was that Sweden had since the 1950s received a great number of labour immigrants and refugees from different parts of the world who had integrated rather well and already contributed much to their new homeland. This established a positive attitude towards immigration and had become a crucial part of the Swedish self-image, which made it truly difficult to question the political elite and media when the inflow of refugees reached its peak. In late autumn 2015, the Swedish government was forced to introduce similar immigration restrictions as the other Nordic countries. While, the Red-Green government gradually began to implement a more restricted immigration policy, the media coverage of anti-immigration opinions became more nuanced.

However, the reason for this transformation of the Swedish immigration policy was not only the challenges it caused for the local authorities but also the considerable growth of the populist party *Sverigedemokraterna* in the opinion polls from 2015 to 2017. When their popularity neared 20 per cent, the other parties were inclined to somehow recognise their views and even discuss the possibility of forming a government with support from the populist party.³⁵

In this sense, the Swedish discourse would slowly turn in the same direction as in Denmark and Norway, although it was still dominated by the old ideal of clear-cut Left or Right governments. Another sign of the existing differences in the Nordic debate climates is that Norwegian and Danish media still often point out social problems and criminality in immigrant-dense Swedish suburbs as a warning example of a too-generous immigration policy.³⁶

The Finnish reaction to the refugee crisis of 2015 was also quite different. Although Finland has had a consistently smaller immigrant population than the other Nordic countries (2018: 4.5 per cent), anti-immigration attitudes played a considerable role in Finnish politics and were given more space in the media than in Sweden. As a consequence, the populist party *Perussuomalaiset* would, after their second election victory in row, join a non-socialist majority coalition in the spring of 2015.³⁷

Almost as soon as the government had been formed, the flow of refugees reached Finland, which, following the Swedish example, first accommodated them as well as it could but then gradually enforced new restrictions against immigration. But being itself in the government, the Finnish populist party would, contrary to the Swedish populist party, not gain any new supporters during this process, especially since they at the same time had to accept Finnish participation in new EU loans to the bankrupt Greece. As earlier mentioned, in 2017 the more outspoken anti-immigration faction took over the party, which led to a party split and clear backlash in the polls for the two populist parties.

Taken together, it is hardly possible to distinguish a certain model for how the immigration question has been discussed and solved in the Nordic countries. In contrast to this diversity, there are clear signs that the earlier Nordic security policies have begun to converge and affect Swedish and Finnish political cultures. As EU members since 1995, Sweden and Finland have in most questions followed the foreign policy lines drawn by the leading EU countries, which are all also NATO countries. At the same time, they have step by step synchronised their military defences with US forces. In 2014, both countries signed an agreement with NATO, which allows NATO forces to operate from their territories in case of a conflict in Northern Europe.³⁸

This development has also stimulated inter-Nordic defence cooperation and led to concrete consequences after the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the sharpening security atmosphere in the Baltic region. Nevertheless, lacking popular support, NATO membership is not a realistic option for Sweden or Finland in the near future. Many leading politicians have preferred to describe Swedish–Finnish military cooperation more as an alternative than as an integrated part of the expanding synchronisation with the NATO forces, which undoubtedly has caused much confusion in the defence debates in both countries.³⁹

Political cultures

Finally, let us look more closely at how these external factors have interacted with and impacted the political cultures in the five Nordic countries. Even if they belong to the most stable democracies in the world and influenced each other, they have all, over the years, formed their own political cultures distinct from each other.

The American political scientist Pippa Norris, in her broad analyses of how societies and political systems develop, has often pointed out the far-reaching consequences of their institutional foundations and functionality: ‘Cultural change is path-dependent.’⁴⁰ This explains also the institutional stability of the Nordic democracies in the 2010s. Having their roots in two Lutheran kingdoms, in which the loyalty towards the state remained strong, the rule of law was firmly implemented and their civic societies established a steady basis for democratic constitutions, the five Nordic countries were able to develop into

modern welfare societies, which so far have fought social inequality more efficiently than other Western democracies.⁴¹

Even if these welfare reforms have predominantly been carried out by governments with a strong social democratic representation, they have, as Mary Hilson has emphasised, been outcomes of larger compromises with progressive forces within the non-socialist blocks. Furthermore, these compromises have also been strongly formed by the specific conflict dimensions that have existed in domestic politics in each country and which differ quite a bit from each other.⁴²

In a study of current trends in Swedish political life, Johannes Lindvall and his research group have analysed the locked situation in the national parliament since 2014, when the balance of power tipped to the populist party *Sverigedemokraterna*. The dominant conflict dimension in the Swedish representative democracy has, according to them, during the last decades been formed by a clear-cut competition between the Left and the Right party blocks. Neither block is therefore especially skilled or motivated to reach compromises with each other or to embrace support from *Sverigedemokraterna*.

The established parties and liberal media houses have so far shown the newcomer the same kind of distrust the Communists faced at the beginning of the Cold War. Some of its ideological roots are undoubtedly in the Swedish right-radical movement. But as Lindvall's research group points out, the current party stands in both economic and defence issues closer to the Social Democrats than to the conservative *Moderaterna*. The voters are also inclined to see *Sverigedemokraterna* as a non-socialist centre party than as a right-wing or extreme right party.⁴³

Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris arrive at the same conclusion in a large comparative survey of the European populist parties in the 2010s. The Swedish populists *Sverigedemokraterna* are, together with their Danish and Finnish counterparts, classified as 'Populist-Left' parties primarily on the basis of their views on social welfare and economic issues. The Norwegian parallel is for the same reason characterised as a 'Populist-Right' party; its support does not spring from economic insecurity but from a strong sense of threatened cultural values. Conservative and ultra-nationalist values are also shared by the other Nordic populists and, in fact, Inglehart and Norris conclude that European political populism should fundamentally be understood as a cultural backlash: populism's 'support can be explained as a retro reaction by once-predominant sectors of the population to progressive value change'.⁴⁴

This mixture of populist ideas explains much of the uncertainty *Sverigedemokraterna* caused to the Left-Right conflict dimension that had previously been so manageable in Swedish politics. It is also a key to understanding why populist parties in the other Nordic countries have been able to communicate, cooperate and even share power with the older parties in their parliaments and municipalities. In their countries, political cultures have been continuously formed by at least two or three conflict dimensions, which in shifting variations have divided and gathered support across the Left and Right axis.

Finland is the most obvious example of this. Four conflict dimensions have formed Finnish politics since organised parties emerged in the beginning of the 20th century: the class struggle, the language feud, the centre-periphery conflict and the complicated relationship to Russia. In none of these issues have the opinions been divided only on a Left-Right axis. Social Democrats demanded social and economic equality, but so did the strong Fennomanic movement supported by the Agrarian League, later a Centre party. Many Social Democrats and Conservatives were also eager Fennomans; others saw language as a minor question, not least because Swedish was an important tongue in their own social classes. Regional interests have always been crucial for the agrarians, later a Centre party, and the Communists, later the Left Alliance, and even for the Swedish People's Party.

And yet, none of these conflict dimensions have cut through the Left-Right axis as much as the attitudes towards Russia. During the Cold War, the Centre party and the Communist were most in favour of a flexibility towards their mighty neighbour, whereas the Social Democrats together with the Liberals and Conservatives favoured a more cautious line. The safest way to balance this existential dispute has therefore been large coalitions over the political centre line, which have hindered political polarisation that would have benefitted above all the Soviet Union and its systematic attempts to influence and direct Finnish domestic politics.

In such a political climate it has not been out of the question for other parties to cooperate with a populist party. In 1983–1987, the predecessor of the current populist party was in the government and in 2015 it got a new chance to get a taste of power. Both times the consequences have been grave for their popularity. In 2017, the party was split apart, and the moderate faction continued in the government despite minimal support in the opinion polls.⁴⁵

Similar overlapping conflict dimensions have formed and still have a strong impact on Danish and Norwegian political cultures. In both countries the regional question has been in the centre of the debate since the 19th century and is the main reason populist parties, despite their nationalistic overtones, have earned credibility in domestic politics. This regionalism explains also why the attitudes towards the EU are more dubious in Denmark and especially Norway, where the citizens have twice voted against membership. In contrast to the officially militarily non-aligned Finns, who despite their regionalism joined the EU originally for security reasons, Danes and Norwegians have never had such expectations concerning the EU due to their NATO membership.

The Swedish populist party fits this pattern quite well and has its strongest support in Scania, the southern-most part of the country neighbouring Denmark. Although having been a part of Sweden since the 17th century, Scania has maintained its distinct identity and intonation.⁴⁶ Another obvious reason for the relatively strong support for the populist party in Scania is that some of its urban regions have a large population of immigrants. As such, *Sverigedemokraterna* can be seen as a regional protest against the rather centralised political culture in Sweden.

Another often forgotten reason for this centralism is the Swedish election system with the so-called long candidate lists. The party organisations decide in which order their election candidates are listed. The members of the Swedish parliament are thus more obedient to their party leaderships than, for example, the Finnish MPs, who are elected on the basis of the votes they have received personally and therefore have a stronger regional legacy to lean on.

Conclusion

All in all, Nordic political cultures have a number of specific national conflict dimensions, which in their own way have been influenced and formed by external driving forces. But if they are viewed from a larger European perspective, these differences look much less substantial. The Social Democrats play an important role in Nordic politics despite their gradual retreat from a dominant position. Other bigger parties with longer traditions are in the same situation, although each election brings surprises in their support.

In contrast to most other European countries where the dialogue between the established and populist parties still is not very rational, Nordic populist parties have shown attempts to mature into more responsible political forces during the 2010s. However, this trend will ultimately depend on how the Nordic economies can adjust to a number of ongoing changes in the world market, which all seem to support Lennart Schön's theory of the 'transformation of development blocks'. If they succeed in this and continue to deliver growth and welfare, the populist parties will have to emphasise their anti-immigration rhetoric and regional demands as well as cultural conservatism to maintain political support.

The impact of mass migration and geopolitics should not be forgotten. It is a safe guess that the Nordic countries will receive a growing number of immigrants in the next few decades and that this could substantially stimulate their domestic economies. An efficient integration of this new population will nevertheless require increasing measures and many political compromises, in which populist opinions will be represented. And yet, each time geopolitical shifts and international crises occur, such agreements are difficult to maintain when the economies suffer and the sudden influx of refugees demand swifter actions.

Notes

1 Höpner, Scharpf & Streeck 2016.

2 Streeck 2016.

3 Tooze 2017.

4 Piketty 2014, Suszycki 2011.

5 Hilson 2008, Nordic Studies in Historical Welfare State Research homepage.

6 Schön 2010.

7 Schön 2012, 10–11, Meinander 2014, 395–410, Meinander 2018, 25–64.

8 Meinander 2018.

- 9 Nolan 2012, 21, Markkola, Kettunen & Petersen 2011, 102–118.
- 10 Hilson 2008.
- 11 Fellman, Iversen, Sjögren & Thue 2008, Jonsson 2008.
- 12 Østergård 2005, 147–184.
- 13 Meinander 2012b, 49–91.
- 14 Kristensen & Lilja 2011, Piketty 2014, 252–261, Bourguignon 2016.
- 15 Gross national income: Total US dollars/capita 1996–2017, OECD homepage; Net lending/borrowing by sector 2015, *OECD homepage*.
- 16 Bjerkem 2016, 233–243, Regjeringen Sohlberg 2018.
- 17 Weinberg 2018.
- 18 Henley 2019, Nordstrand 2019.
- 19 Schulze-Cleven, Watson & Zysman 2007, 451–475.
- 20 *Denmark OEC: Exports, Imports, Trade Balance* 2017.
- 21 Schön 2012, 10.
- 22 Valresultat 2018.
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