

“NORTHERN EUROPE. NEW POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL TRENDS”

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Introduction

The Nordic countries stand out thanks to a unique set of shared attributes: respect for democratic traditions, social inclusion, equality, solidarity, transparency, regard for the natural environment and mutual trust. These countries have consistently been placed at the top of international rankings that assess the rule of law, protection of human rights, wealth, innovation, gender equality, and the quality of public services. Compared to other parts of the world, Northern Europe – defined as Norden: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – is a region of peace and stability. To use the term coined by Karl Deutsch, it is a genuine security community – a community of values shared by governments, institutions, organisations and citizens.

Broadly speaking, Nordic countries also share a common economic model and are similar in terms of social structure. Free market capitalism functions within a comprehensive, universal welfare state, financed by heavy taxes and balanced by collective bargaining with trade unions, NGOs and local communities. The Nordic model relies on the active participation of the state in all significant areas. This solution has deep historical roots and is based on profound parliamentary traditions and egalitarian inclusion of all social classes and groups. As a result, the relationship between the people and the state can be described as close, positive and cooperative.

However, in recent years Northern Europe has also witnessed new, surprising and sometimes controversial processes determined

mainly by external factors. In the last decade of the twentieth century, Nordic countries faced serious economic challenges that undermined the welfare model and brought on serious social consequences. In addition, due to convergence with the EU and the USA, they went through the financial crisis of 2008, which brought particularly severe political and economic repercussions for Iceland. The recent immigration crisis has been answered with restrictive measures and austerity policies, which highlighted the deficiencies of integration schemes which the Nordic countries had been so proud of.

Furthermore, radical populism has gained meaningful political representation in the region. The Danish People's Party, the Finns Party and the Sweden Democrats differ in terms of their historical background, but converge in terms of their socio-economic centrist ideology and socio-cultural authoritarian style; the Progress Party in Norway can be situated in between the populist radical right and more traditional strains of conservatism. All of the above have recently emerged as either the second or third largest party in their respective parliaments, and in Finland and Norway have been invited to form a coalition government.

Considering all these new phenomena, this special issue aims to examine the present shape and meaning of Nordic values and to see whether internal and external factors could significantly influence these values in the future.

The first contribution of this volume evaluates the strengths of the Nordic model of co-operation, which is unique on a global scale. According to Joanna Grzela, mutual trust is what enables Nordic countries to communicate effectively and to achieve common goals in a wide range of areas including social care, economy, ecology, global and regional security, humanitarian aid and relations with international organisations such as the UN, the EU and NATO. The institutionalisation of contacts through international bodies such as the Nordic Council and long-lasting sector initiatives have created close formal and informal bonds between the collaborating countries. The author points out that while the Nordic nations share a common heritage and comparable beliefs and values, their views, priorities and interests do not always align. The geographic location and history of each individual Nordic country is reflected in varying opinions its inhabitants hold on European integration, the role of the Baltic Sea, the Arctic region and security policies. These differences do not seem to impede co-operation – on the contrary, they rather enhance it, in the spirit of pragmatism and reconciliation. The author

concludes that the Nordic model can be applied to local collaboration in other regions of the world – for example, in the Balkans.

Magdalena Tomala discusses the European Union’s relations with Greenland. Until the recent referendum in the United Kingdom, this island has been the only territory to opt out from European integration. Greenland left the EEC in 1985 after it had acquired significant autonomy from Denmark. This withdrawal reduced the European Community’s territory by half, but in other respects did not pose a serious challenge to a united Europe. However, as the author points out, the EU has been increasingly interested in building a closer relationship with Greenland due to its natural resources and general strategic importance. The EU’s slow and bureaucratic approaches are however countered by efficient Asian – most prominently Chinese – diplomacies. The case of Greenland can serve as a lesson for Europeans and a test of the EU’s efficiency in the race for Arctic resources. At the same time – considering current separatist trends emerging across Europe – it may be interesting to treat it as a case study of a territory which had left the Community.

Another issue vital for the region is migration and adequate refugee and asylum policies. Europe is now experiencing one of the most severe humanitarian crises in its post-war history; this situation challenges the entire axiology of European integration. Many European countries are changing their immigration policies in the direction of extended control, limiting financial support and restricting the possibilities of settlement. Sweden is an interesting subject for case studies of European attitudes towards newcomers. In the last few decades it has been perceived as one of the most tolerant and inviting countries on the whole continent, accommodating – proportionally to its population – four times more refugees than Germany and Great Britain combined. This approach, however, was not entirely aligned with social attitudes. Anna Kobierecka elaborates on the multicultural policy of Sweden, particularly in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris. The article demonstrates that perceptions of immigrants in Sweden are changing – the shifting levels of support for political parties and growing numbers of cases of racial and cultural persecution prove that this is indeed the case. The attack on the French magazine and similar extreme events have been a catalyst for in-depth discussion about the successes and failures of multiculturalism, the roots of terrorism and the means to counter it.

In the next contribution, Agata Włodarska-Frykowska assesses the migration processes in contemporary Estonia, a country sharing many characteristics with the Nordic states. The author underlines that the transition and subsequent radical change of migratory patterns had a major impact on social changes in the region. In the case of three Baltic republics – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – the issue of migration is closely connected to the ethnic structure of these countries. The communist period has left its mark: significant Russian minorities live in all three Baltic states. In Estonia, this minority forms almost a third of the overall population. The official status of this group finally met European Union standards in 2008, but in reality its members still face workplace and linguistic discrimination. New migration movements are mostly connected with Estonian membership in the EU and reached their peak in 2006. An observation important in the present context is that the Estonians are not keen on receiving new immigrants or new migration movements; this can be traced back to historical factors and the relatively small size of the country.

The problem of ethnic minorities is also discussed by Agnieszka Szpak. The author examines the concept of human security and the threats to human security in the Arctic, with a special focus on the Sami people – a group that has been neglected and deprived of political agency. With the emergence and development of the concept of human security – which includes environmental protection, the preservation of culture and cultural identity, and granting autonomy and self-governance to indigenous peoples – their status has changed fundamentally.

The editor of this volume, Katarzyna Dośpiał-Borysiak, contributes to the discussion with her article analysing the model of oil and gas management in Norway, which has become one of the most important exporters of hydrocarbons in the world. This undeniable success was possible largely thanks to adopting a very sustainable and consistent approach to managing natural resources. Norway's energy policy is built around the state playing a central role, yet provides attractive options for commercial initiatives and competition. The main aim behind state management of the sector was to preserve resources and wealth not just for the present, but also future generations. In addition, the policy-making, commercial, and regulatory areas of the sector have been separated, and all political forces refrained from interference. Norway has clearly managed to combine the liberalisation of its economy – which

followed global trends – with a strong and proactive state, which is a typically Nordic solution.

Looking at a different set of economic challenges, Agnieszka Legutko verifies whether Icelandic strategies applied to overcome financial breakdown could become a panacea for similar future crises. She discovers that the choices made by the Icelandic government were suitable and progressive, but could only be put into practice in that specific economic and social background. Legutko demonstrates that this dynamic, developed and globalised economy had suffered from the international financial crisis of 2008 because of its high dependence on market fluctuations – typical for small countries – but also because of the deregulation of the banking system following the privatisation of the largest Icelandic banks. Measures taken against the financial crisis that brought Iceland to the edge of bankruptcy were impressive and included placing banks under state control, controlling capital flows and consolidating public finances. These radical moves were followed by social turmoil and a total rearrangement of the Icelandic political scene, but brought about a complete economic recovery.

The final article examines the sports diplomacy of Norway. Michał Kobierecki explores Norwegian public diplomacy and attributes its extraordinary success to finding a suitable niche and prioritising target audiences. For decades, the public image of Norway has been that of an honest peace broker, generous aid donor, and dedicated supporter of democracy. Norwegian diplomats promote the country as a humanitarian superpower and draw attention to living in harmony with nature, social equality and internationalist adventures. Sports diplomacy has been an interesting element of this national branding strategy that influenced the perceptions of Norway in the international community.

This volume is also the first publication by a new research team launched at the Faculty of International and Political Studies, focusing on the Baltic-Nordic area and headed by Katarzyna Dośpiał-Borysiak. The goal of this multi-disciplinary group of scholars, consisting of political scientists, sociologists, linguists, and economists is to offer a new quality of research arising from the wide spectrum of perspectives coming from both Polish and international academic institutions. This volume – the team’s first collective effort – will certainly offer interesting insights into new dynamics in Northern Europe seen from various perspectives and initiate a wider discussion around the stability of political and social structures in the region.