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Bernd Henningsen | Sven Jochem [eds.]

The Political Systems of Northern Europe

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1. Introduction

Bernd Henningsen and Sven Jochem

The politics of Northern European countries often spark controversy. For some the politics there have succeeded in creating a special form of coexistence, a "social democratic image of society" (Castles 1978). For others, however, behind this shiny façade lies a web of unfree collectivism, political paternalism and social oppression (Booth 2014). In between, there is a lamentable lack of knowledge about the institutional, political and cultural realities in politics, the media and public discourse. This raises the question of what shades of grey can be drawn between the poles of utopia and dystopia. How can the countries of Northern Europe be characterised in terms of political science? Do they (still) have distinctive features that (clearly) set them apart from the rest of the world? If so, why? Or is talk of the "Nordic model" a clever "sales trick" designed to attract attention in the globalised competition between places?

It is by no means the case that the political systems of the Northern European democracies are not represented in the research literature on this subject: in addition to the classic study by David Arter (2016) and the anthologies edited by Torbjörn Bergman and Kaare Strøm (2013), Oddbjørn Knutsen (2017) and Peter Nedergaard and Anders Wivel (2018), there are comprehensive handbooks on Denmark (Munk Christiansen et al. 2018), Sweden (Pierre 2015), and lastly Norway (Kolltveit and others 2025) covering at least three democracies in Northern Europe.

The list of these works published in English can be supplemented by studies in German. In addition to older overviews by Sven Jochem (2012) and Christian Förster, Josef Schmid and Nicolas Trick (Förster et al. 2014), Bernd Henningsen, Sven Jochem and Siegfried Frech (Henningsen et al. 2015) published an anthology on the Nordic democracies a few years ago. Bernd Henningsen has recently published relevant works, both as a sole author and as an editor; in particular, his handbook on Northern Europe, published by Nomos Verlag in December 2023, combines cultural studies perspectives with contributions on history, politics and economics in Northern Europe in numerous articles (Henningsen 2023).

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In addition to these genuinely political, social and cultural science approaches to politics, society and culture in Northern Europe, historical approaches can also be mentioned. In addition to the three-volume publication on Scandinavian history in English by Cambridge University Press (of which, unfortunately, only the first two volumes are available so far, Helle 2003; Kouri/Olesen 2016), reference should also be made to the large-scale research project on European constitutional history in German led by Peter Brandt, which covers the political development of all Northern European countries and autonomous regions since the beginning of the 19th century (Brandt et al. 2006; Daum 2020; Benz et al. 2020). Relevant publications on Northern European history that are less extensive in scope are available in both German and English (e.g. Schröter 2021; Norstrom 2023).

Then there is literature that focuses on specialised cultural studies perspectives. In addition to the work edited by Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth (1997), these include studies by Kazimierz Musiał (2002) and more recent contributions on Northern European *branding*, which primarily deconstruct the cultural constructions of Nordic modernity and democracy (Byrkjeflot et al. 2021; Henningsen 2021; Kurunmäki/Strang 2016; Marjanen et al. 2021). There are also studies that analyse Northern Europe from a more economic perspective (e.g. Koivunen/Ojala/Holmén 2021). Reference should be made to specialised journals and research networks, such as the *NORDEUROPAforum* at Humboldt University in Berlin or the Nordics.info portal based at Aarhus University.

Compared to other regions in the world, however, systematic literature on political systems is limited. Furthermore, the genuinely political science perspective is often underdeveloped. In this respect, this publication closes several gaps in information and research.

Firstly, it systematically and comparatively documents current trends in Northern European politics, highlighting similarities and differences between countries and regions and discussing explanations for them. The period under review begins with the historical turning point of 1990 and extends to the present day. Nevertheless, the thematic focus of the individual contributions is on the last 15 years (i.e. the period from approximately 2010 to the present).

Secondly, methodological and conceptual nationalism is questioned in the analyses of political processes. Bergman and Strøm (2013) criticise the approach of viewing domestic political processes solely from the perspective of the nation state, as if the respective political systems were free from external

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influences. Here, it is particularly important—but not exclusively, as is evident in the example of security policy—to consider the Northern European countries' embeddedness in the European multi-level system.

Thirdly, we explicitly focus on the whole of Northern Europe, because a systematic analysis must take into account not only the area's five classic nation states but also its autonomous regions. We consider it particularly advisable to make the integration of the Sámi into the respective political systems a separate topic in the book. It is precisely this aspect that is regularly ignored in research literature.

The structure of the book is largely self-explanatory, but a few comments are necessary. The five chapters on the respective political systems, including those in autonomous regions, are preceded by three comparative chapters. In Chapter 2, Bernd Henningsen discusses the cultural dimension of Northern Europe from a political and cultural studies perspective. In Chapter 3 Johan Strang hones historical awareness of the genesis of Northern European democracies. Finally, in Chapter 4, Sven Jochem discusses comparative studies that highlight distinctive features of Northern European democracies in comparison to other democracies. In Chapter 10, Torvald Fach and Per Selle analyse an ethnic minority that is often overlooked in research literature: the Sámi, the indigenous population fighting for autonomy and political self-determination. In Chapter 11, the editors identify areas where further research is needed. We have given the authors relatively free rein in the design of their chapters so that they can emphasise country-specific issues.



Additional Material

The contributions in this book often refer to freely accessible sources of information on the internet. An overview of the most common of these freely accessible sources is provided on the publisher's website, available at https://www.nomos-shop.de/en/p/the-political-systems-of-northern-europe-978-3-7560-4186-2 in the 'Additional material' tab).



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2. Changes of national identities in Northern Europe[1]

Bernd Henningsen



Overview

This chapter analyses the political cultural of Northern Europe beyond common stereotypes, highlighting the diversity of its historical influences, democratic traditions and current challenges, such as migration policy and right-wing populism. The supposedly homogeneous "North" is exposed as a constructed image.

The persistence with which idyllic images of an exceptional European North are propagated in public discourse and, not infrequently, in academia is astonishing. These discourses on the North span centuries; they are as old as the ancient notion of the existence of a region "beyond the north wind", of "Hyperborea", a mythical paradise in the North. In our time, they are characterised by a world of social harmony and security; a kindergarten and school paradise in Finland, feminist foreign and gender policies, and even the Swedish Bullerbü and Danish hygge. On the other hand, there is contempt—often in American election campaigns—for what is seen as the "Scandinavian welfare state model" with its perceived comprehensive social security and generally high taxes. What is not recognised is that, by international standards, corporate taxation and taxation on capital gains in the region are low, thus favouring large companies, and that the aforementioned, much-vaunted welfare state no longer exists today. External judgement of the Scandinavian welfare state reveals ignorance about the region's social, cultural and political reality, as well as about its political institutions. These external images have been reflected back to the North.

Foreign perceptions and their contradictions

Imagined exceptionalism always impresses others: in 2013, The *Economist* presented a headline: "The Nordic countries. The next supermodel", without

1 In this article, I draw on earlier works, in particular Henningsen, Bernd (2021): Die Welt des Nordens. Zwischen Ragnarök und Wohlfahrtsutopie: Eine kulturhistorische Dekonstruktion. Berlin: Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag.

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a question mark, illustrated with a bearded, long-haired Viking wearing a helmet with enormous horns; the subheading read: "Politicians from both right and left could learn from the Nordic countries" (The Economist 2013). This message is a notorious one; it is repeated and readily shared by commentators in the North, reinforcing the belief in Scandinavian exceptionalism—for example in the marketing of Norway as a country of peace (the Nobel Peace Prize awarded in Oslo is the hook), and the participation of the Nordic countries in UN peace missions reinforces this conviction (cf. Archer/Joenniemi 2003). A pervasive topic of indignation within the Nordic region is Sweden's perceived self-righteous conviction of moral superiority, as evidenced by then Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt's postulate in the 2014 election campaign that Sweden is a "moral superpower" (cf. Gmeiner 2016). Recently, Denmark's xenophobic immigration policy has been praised as exemplary even in liberal circles in Germany (on Denmark's social democratic policy, cf. Nedergaard 2018; up-to-date: Kuchenbuch 2025).

From outside, not least from Germany, Scandinavia is often perceived as a homogeneous region. Factors contributing to this homogeneity include the similarity of the languages, Protestantism and ethnicity—there is rarely any mention of cultural and political diversity, let alone a history of conflict and destruction; it is also common for people to confuse the countries. According to this external image, we are dealing with well-ordered societies in which people treat each other nicely; violence, corruption and other forms of deculturation do not regularly feature in the narratives and, when they do, they are perceived with astonishment in fictional abstractions (*Nordic Noir*).

However, even in historical times, the European North was characterised by political, economic and cultural diversity, as evidenced not least by centuries of internal Nordic wars. The idea that we are dealing with *one* Nordic culture is a political and cultural construct that developed from the late 18th century and persisted throughout the 19th century into the blood-and-soil ideology of the 20th century (see Blunck 1937).

When questioning the social roots of a unified mindset from the past—as was the case during the early formation of nation states—there is reason to be sceptical, as the respective populations maintained strong emotional ties to what could be called "Swedish", "Danish", "Norwegian", "Icelandic" or "Finnish" before these attributions existed or were able to exist in the modern sense. A supranational "Nordic identity" is difficult or impossible to prove; it remains a cultural construct from the era of nation-building. Apart from

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the unifying bond of Catholicism with its universal claim to salvation, there was no common idea before the Reformation—the rivalries between and within the two empires were simply too great. The "Swedification" of Sweden, i.e. the spread of ideas about fatherland, patriotism and nationalism, was a consolidating process that gained momentum at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries—and which contrasted with the burgeoning idea of Scandinavianism/Nordicism (Sannes 1959; Hvidt 1994).

Lutheranism and civil society

It is religious traditions that form the basis of the political culture of all Nordic countries. This manifested itself not least in the unity of church and state, with history providing just *one* lasting example of a Nordic commonality: With the Reformation, a "revolution from above", Protestantism became a unifying religious and, even more so, cultural commonality among the countries—if there was one element of Nordic unity in modern times that provided political, social and cultural stability, it was Protestantism, which remained so firmly anchored precisely because there was no Counter-Reformation (Henningsen 2021, p. 250ff.), and in the Thirty Years' War, the Scandinavian countries became standard-bearers of the Lutheran faith. With the Reformation, the state took on essential social and civilisational tasks (social welfare, literacy, education); the state church (called the "People's Church" in Denmark from 1849), to which practically all citizens belonged, became the overarching manifestation of symbolic unity.

The fact that the unity of church and state was dissolved in Sweden in 2000 and in Norway in 2017 (only Denmark did not follow suit) illustrates the loss of a Nordic concept of unity in this sector as well (Finland is historically a special case with two national churches, the Lutheran and the Orthodox; the Bishop of Iceland is the head of the "Icelandic National Church"). The Scandinavian welfare state, on which there is broad consensus in the social sciences, has its roots in the Christian (Protestant) tradition and in the early practice of egalitarian thinking; the teachings of democratised socialism were added in later decades (Petersen 2016, 2017). The poor's right to assistance from the community (in today's language: "social assistance") already shaped social coexistence at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, long before it became a public issue through the agitation of the early socialists. Unlike in Germany, social security has been understood as a universal,

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equal right in the Scandinavian welfare state since the first half of the 20th century; it is a civil right that applies to everyone, regardless of status and type of employment (Henningsen 1989). In this respect, the much-vaunted Scandinavian concept of equality is based more on Reformed Christianity than on socialism. The thesis is that the Scandinavian social democracies that developed the welfare state were a kind of secular Lutheran movement, that democratic socialism was a form of secularised Lutheranism (Østergård 2003, 2011; Kahl 2006; Hansen et al. 2010).[2]

The cultural institutions (such as the church, universities and schools) that are important for understanding civil societies replicated ethical and moral behaviours that are encountered in politics and public life. The genesis of state responsibility for social welfare, as well as for teaching and education, is also linked to the history of the church, because with the Reformation in the 16th century, all church property was confiscated and responsibility for caring for the poor was transferred to the state. The early literacy of Nordic societies can also be traced back to state involvement. Since then, the church in the North has never again had a political role, let alone any responsibility in this regard. Its cultural significance was all the more pronounced: Protestant parsonages became cultural cradles for philosophy, literature and music, which had an impact on the political mobilisation of societies.

The debate about the roots of the Scandinavian welfare state as a mutation of Christian charity or a product of 19th-century social–ethical and socialist thinking has been going on for about two decades in all three Scandinavian countries (Henningsen 1977; Knudsen 2000). Ultimately, these are discussions about self-image in the wake of the deregulation of the markets since the last decades of the 20th century, accompanied, especially in Sweden, by a major financial and banking crisis in the 1990s. The welfare state is mutating from a universal collective system of comprehensive social insurance to one characterised by greater individuality, privatisation, competition and personal responsibility, including a shift in the financing regime from a pay-as-you-go to a funded system (e.g. for old-age pensions).

Demographic changes and the demographic shift caused by immigration (least pronounced in Iceland) also play a role here: Not only has the religious

2 There is a small Danish brochure from 1911, written in a social democratic context and inspired by a similar movement in England, which advocates a turn towards Christianity in the labour movement: Fernando Linderberg: Socialismen og Præsteskabet; it ends with a programme for the founding of a "Social Reform Society".

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homogeneity of Scandinavian societies been weakened by secularisation (religious indifference) and the influx of non-Protestant individuals, but a new perception of religion can also be diagnosed, motivated by the immigration of Islam and spreading xenophobia, even Islamophobia.

The public and authorities

The discussion about the distinctive features of the political culture of Northern Europe certainly includes the frequently cited, traditionally practised concept of public discourse and freedom of expression. This can be traced back to Sweden's Freedom of the Press Act, which has been in force for over 250 years and lays down the principle of public access for all acts of state administration; the institution of the ombudsman belongs to this sphere of civil liberties, which has become a model for many countries (Matscher 1994). The principle of public access to official records is an essential aspect of a kind of immunisation of the state against mistrust by its citizens and is marked by a document that stands at the beginning of this early and unprecedented history of civil liberties; it has evolved from a Swedish speciality to become part of the identity of the North as a whole. It is part of everyday experience that the cohesion of Northern European societies is largely characterised by mutual trust, in particular by citizens' trust in government action and administration. The handling of personal data and general access to third-party data (income and taxes) is characterised by a form of generosity that always surprises those unfamiliar with it. As an example, we need only refer to the latest survey on the trust of Danish citizens in public digital applications: in 2024, 81% of Danes stated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the way public authorities handle data; 4% disagreed and 1% strongly disagreed (Danmarks Statistik 2022). However, it should not be overlooked that the Scandinavian authorities clearly trust their citizens. The internationally hotly debated "different" approach to restrictions in Sweden during the 2020–2022 coronavirus pandemic also has to do with the fact that the authorities assume that citizens will act responsibly in dangerous situations (more on this below).

Trust within society and trust in the authorities have a 250-year history, rooted in the law passed by the Swedish Parliament in 1765/66, which enshrined the right to criticise the authorities (cf. Carlsson 2017). This was preceded by a treatise by Peter Forsskål (1732–1763) published in Stockholm in 1759, which begins with the sentence:

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