

## 10 Managing moods

### Media, politicians, and anxiety over public debate

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The notion of interregnum captures a mood: a sense of change and an anxiety regarding what will come and when. Interregnum is a state of waiting and anticipating, as it, in the Gramscian sense, denotes a period that lies between an old, declining system and an emerging new one. In the words of Wolfgang Streeck, interregnum is ‘a period of tremendous insecurity in which the accustomed chains of cause and effect are no longer in force, and unexpected, dangerous and grotesquely abnormal events may occur at any moment’.<sup>1</sup> In Streeck’s analysis, this illustrates the contemporary crisis of neoliberalism and global capitalism, as evidenced by the world-wide rise of populisms. However, it also serves to depict what Andrew Chadwick calls ‘a time of fundamental change’ and ‘a chaotic transition period’ caused by the increased influence of digital media in how political life is lived and mediated.<sup>2</sup> Digital technologies have profoundly altered how political actors, publics, and media interact. In the context of hybrid media and networked publics, politicians and journalists have been repositioned and now face new challenges.<sup>3</sup> Competing with the amplified influence of social media and PR, journalists have lost much of their power as agenda-setters and gatekeepers. Politicians are both benefiting from and agonising over the multitude of public arenas. While ‘the disrupted public sphere’<sup>4</sup> allows them to bypass journalistic gatekeeping and to address different audiences in distinct and direct ways, the disintegration of a national public sphere challenges any attempt to mobilise a national sense of a ‘we’. With the weakening of mass communication, the media as an institution and a key facility of national imagination is changing, which in turn affects the use and the force of nationalism as a principle of legitimation.<sup>5</sup> Characteristic of an interregnum is the absence of given interpretive frames: the waning of the old order entails not only an epistemological crisis but also an ontological one. If not imagination, what holds a nation together?

In this chapter, the notion of interregnum is invoked to identify a language of concern among Swedish and Finnish politicians and journalists and to interpret it as a response to the disintegration of national public spheres in the wake of globalised, digital media. It is the context of digital disruption, the chapter at hand suggests, that frames the recurrent debates in Sweden and Finland

regarding the problems of public debate and concerns over the tone. Whereas fear as an emotion has an object, anxiety as an affective state does not; rather, it connotes ‘an approach to objects’.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the disrupted public sphere and networked publics, this chapter suggests that politicians and journalists have sought new identities and increasingly positioned themselves as analysts and managers of the nation’s mood.

The 2010s entailed recurrent debates regarding debates, with a special focus on the tone and the attitudes of the participants. In 2016, *Dagens Nyheter* contended that the tone in Swedish politics was harsher than during what is known as ‘hatred for Palme’, referring to the strong feelings aroused by the late Social Democratic Prime Minister Olof Palme.<sup>7</sup> According to political scientist Stig-Björn Ljunggren, there was now a double political polarisation: on the one hand, between extreme positions in the public debate and, on the other hand, between those who enjoyed the harsh tone and those who disliked it and left the debate. He described the following historic change: whereas the conflicts in the Palme era, namely the 1970s and the 1980s, existed between political parties, they now were ‘among people out in reality’, with the parties trying to ‘dampen the atmosphere’.<sup>8</sup> A similar diagnosis of the present public discussion as exceptionally polarised was proposed in Finland, where a think tank reported that over 90 per cent of Finns witnessed an increase of ‘deliberate provocations’ in public debate and 50 per cent disliked the polarisation to the extent of withdrawing from the public debate.<sup>9</sup> In addition, while both Sweden and Finland are countries where trust in democratic institutions is traditionally high, both countries have seen a debate concerning growing media distrust, with the legacy media increasingly being accused of violating social trust through partisanship, political bias, or a polarising media logic. At the same time, after having been a horizon of enhancing democracy, social media has increasingly been discussed in negative terms in relation to polarisation, filter bubbles, echo chambers, hate speech, and disinformation.<sup>10</sup>

Analysing a set of Swedish and Finnish media texts (journalism, opinion pieces, and a documentary), parliamentary debates, and speeches by government members, party leaders, and heads of state from 2014 through 2017, this chapter focuses on three key figurations capturing an anxiety over the public sphere.<sup>11</sup> After discussing the Swedish debate on ‘corridor of opinion’ (*åsiktskorridor*) as a case of media distrust and democratic challenge, the chapter then analyses the Finnish debate on ‘the extremes’ (*ääripäät*) and ‘the sensible folk’ (*tolkun ihmiset*) as threats to the national security. While different as metaphors, the Swedish one pointing to a lack of diversity and the Finnish one calling for a middle ground, all the metaphors capture an anxiety over the national public sphere. They highlight the interdependencies of media and politics, placing media at the centre and calling it out as an agent of power and politics. Responding to a diminishing trust in the media in both countries, the journalistic media has refashioned itself as an arena for curing the ills of polarisation and as an agent of affective pedagogy in the service of national cohesion.

This attitude is summarised by the Swedish notion of improving the quality of public debate by having ‘more adults in the room’ (*fler vuxna i rummet*).

The anxiety over the national public sphere, the chapter finally suggests, is linked to the key importance of trust at the heart of both Swedish and Finnish national imaginaries and of the Nordic model as a transnational identity narrative. The erosion of social and political trust is a threat to both, and the metaphors discussed not only articulate new roles and sources of legitimacy for politicians and journalists in the age of interregnum but also point to attempts to maintain and reinstate trust and to reproduce the national imagination.<sup>12</sup>

### **The corridor of opinion: media power called out**

In December of 2013, Professor of Political Science Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson coined a term that would become a key metaphor in Swedish politics and media: he described the Swedish public debate as a ‘corridor of opinion’ (*åsiktskorridor*) that is narrowing to the extent of marginalising classic social democratic, liberal, and conservative positions as a ‘danger to the public’ (*samhällsfarlig*) or as twisted ideologies. In a blog post describing how election studies scholars treat all voting behaviour as intelligible, he lamented that Swedish public debate instead lacked the intellectual curiosity and desire to understand political opponents; conversely, ‘categorical rejection, often in seconds, of divergent descriptions of reality and deviant opinions is becoming a norm’. He described the contemporary public debate as ‘a corridor of opinion’ in which ‘the sore toes’ are many, and leeway for expressing deviant opinions has diminished.<sup>13</sup> Ekengren Oscarsson noted that annual surveys of Swedish public opinion have clearly shown that voters hold an array of opinions concerning, for example, abortion, asylum seekers, animal rights, gay adoption, death penalty, wolves, or school ceremonies in churches, which are rarely voiced in the public sphere. Arguing for a classic liberal notion of a rational public sphere, he called for ‘a more moderate and respectful’ public debate.

In a context where the support for the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) was steadily growing, while excluded from political collaboration with other parties, the corridor metaphor caught immediate attention. It was adopted by both critics of the Swedish political status quo (those criticising Swedish refugee policies or those advancing religious arguments in public debates) and those questioning the actual existence of a ‘corridor of opinion’.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the Language Council of Sweden included it in its list of neologisms of the year. It was widely circulated and commented on by journalists. The public service Swedish Radio responded quickly by asking, in a prestigious actualities programme, whether a corridor of opinions actually exists and what it entails. The editor-in-chief of *Expressen* announced that his tabloid would start publishing more ‘counter-voices’, introducing the tagline ‘Expressen is wrong!’ to encourage improving the quality of public debate and to celebrate the diversity of opinions.<sup>15</sup> The editor-in-chief of *Dagens Nyheter* also acknowledged that in

the age of hybrid media, established news outlets shoulder an important role in defining the debate climate and ensuring access to information in a country.<sup>16</sup> In his assessment,

trust in the established media requires that we resist the trend to mainly publish that which gets our readers to click the like-button. The marketplace of ideas must be as broad as possible, and also contain what hurts in the society.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas some journalists adopted a notion of ‘opinion elite’ to describe the existence of ‘a corridor’, others refuted the idea, highlighting the power of Twitter to turn ‘ordinary people to rulers’.<sup>18</sup> Debates regarding the ‘corridor of opinion’ have also encouraged several prominent Swedish journalists in press and television to make penitence and engage in public self-criticism.<sup>19</sup>

The metaphor captured and gave expression to media distrust, which in the 2010s became a topic of public discussion both in Sweden and in Finland; in both countries, this was propelled by the rise of populist parties. Whereas overall trust in the media concerning many topics – issues of health care, for instance – remained high in Sweden, mainstream media coverage of immigration and crime was increasingly questioned by populist parties and anti-immigration groups establishing ‘alternative’ or ‘counter-media’ outlets. Media trust in both countries correlated strongly with political ideology: in Sweden, the distrust in the media did not characterise all citizens, but instead, surveys showed that a high percentage of Swedes continued to have trust in radio, television, and daily press. Those with low trust were generally more right-wing, and in Sweden, the Sweden Democrats were overrepresented among those with mistrust.<sup>20</sup> In 2018, according to the Pew Research Center, populist divides in media attitudes were strong in Sweden: 49 per cent of people with populist views stated that they trust the news media, compared with 74 per cent of those without populist views.<sup>21</sup>

The ‘corridor of opinion’ metaphor demonstrated the power of social media to challenge the agenda and news values of professional journalism. However, while offering a tool for calling out ideological bias and politicising news media, thereby shattering the role of professional journalism, the metaphor simultaneously offered support to the old structures of political information. It materialised the inseparability of media and politics, reproducing a sense of the public sphere as one place, as opposed to a complex, unruly, and unstructured network. Calling out the power of journalists and addressing them as gatekeepers, the metaphor reproduced the agenda-setting power, suggesting its continued relevance, placing the old architecture of public discussion in the centre, and reproducing a position not self-evidently owned anymore.

### **The extremes: invoking ‘the sensible folk’ as a civic ideal**

‘Eat shit, racists and fascists!’ ‘Traitors, why don’t you eat shit! You defend rapists, killers, and bestiality!’ Elna Hirvonen’s documentary feature film *Kiehumispiste/*

*Boiling Point* (Elina Hirvonen 2017) depicted Finland in the mid-2010s as a pressure cooker. The film opens with scenes from a demonstration in central Helsinki, where the heavily armed riot police control anti-immigration groups and counterdemonstrators slandering one another. Offered as a diagnosis of the present, the film provided a snapshot of a nation's mood, transitioning between northern and southern Finland, between the city and suburbs of Helsinki and the small towns of Kemi, Tornio, Kajaani, Rovaniemi, Forssa, and Petäjävesi. It depicted activists from various anti-immigration groups (*Suomi ensin!//Finland First!, Rajat kiinni!//Close the Borders!*) protesting outside reception centres and in suburbs with notable immigrant communities. In the film's narration, these groups' battle cries against 'diseases of tolerance' as an 'epidemic' that 'is about to destroy whole nations' clashed with counterdemonstrators' interference and cries of 'Shame on you! Shame on you!'. As a counterpoint to these scenes, with relatively few participants but fierce rhetoric, the film featured footage from *Peli poikki!* (Game Over!) and other mass demonstrations against racism and fascism filling the streets of central Helsinki. Interjected in between the crowd scenes, the film's protagonists – a young male anti-immigration activist, a retired female teacher assisting asylum seekers, and two men debating immigration in a public sauna in Helsinki – provide their perspectives, as talking heads, on what is happening in Finland.

In its narration, *Boiling Point* employed the cinematic technique of montage to create a sense of a nation's mood, mapping different parts of the country and representing recurring confrontations between opposing views and clashing perspectives. Documenting the different reactions to the 2015 migration crisis, the film depicted a drama of accelerating affective intensity, disagreements and passions, fear, disappointment, resentment, and outright rage. Interpreting the conflict as a symptom of social polarisation wherein one disenfranchised group (marginalised Finns) attacked another one (refugees) and wherein the conflict becomes one between different Finnish citizens, it dramatised a national narrative in dissolution. At the same time, it used drone images scanning empty landscapes to suggest a third position: one beyond or outside the intense polarisation.

In identifying the public debate as a social and political problem, the film echoed a broader concern over polarised opinions weakening national coherence. In the Finnish public debate, concern regarding political and social polarisation has been captured by the figure of the extremes (*ääripää*) – in plural, implying two opposing ends – and the related figure of 'the sensible folk' (*tolkun ihmiset*).<sup>22</sup> As a metaphor for political life, the image of the two extremes implies a fugitive point or an outsider's view. When using it, the speaker or writer posits him- or herself as being beyond the political debate, without an opinion, and as someone who has a full grasp of 'the big picture'. This position as an outsider, a moral judge of the tone of the debate, has been highly idealised and positively valued. In the Finnish context, it reads as a figure of the anxiety over polarisation and the dissolution of national consensus that is rooted in both contemporary security politics and history.

The figure of the sensible folk was coined as a political metaphor in early 2016, when President of the Republic Sauli Niinistö shared on Twitter a column published in a small local newspaper which celebrated the idea of the silent majority of Finns as ‘the sensible folk’ who are alienated by ‘the extremes’ in discussions of the refugee crisis.<sup>23</sup> The presidential embrace meant that the notion of ‘the sensible folk’ stuck and became a counter-image to ‘the extremes’. Public service broadcasting news media asked its audience to help the ‘silent sensible majority’ to get more airtime, but the figure also became an object of political struggle and contestation.<sup>24</sup> ‘We Finns are the people of sense and restraint’, said the then Prime Minister Juha Sipilä (Centre Party) in 2015, endorsing the notion as a civic ideal and claiming it as a national virtue. It was employed by the then Minister of Justice Jari Lindström to frame voters of the populist Finns Party not as racist but as ‘ordinary sensible folk’. It was also invoked by MP Pekka Haavisto (Green Party), who made an effort to resignify the term as connoting not passivity but activism and a will to interfere in social wrongs.<sup>25</sup> In the lively public debate, the figure of the ‘sensible folk’ was criticised as a slogan of political cynicism and an attempt to co-opt right-wing populism and anti-immigration sentiment. It was, furthermore, critiqued for evading political responsibility and envisioning ideal citizens as onlookers, rather than participants, in a political struggle.<sup>26</sup> In the discussion, some debaters attempted to go beyond the polarising metaphors: ‘There are not two extremes. There are sensible persons and only one extreme: the criminals.’<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the 2010s, mounting polarisation was discussed as an increasing internal security risk in government reports.<sup>28</sup> In parliamentary debates, the figure of ‘the extremes’ was repeatedly invoked as a threat. ‘It is better that we are all ordinary average Finns rather than polarise and divide ourselves to the extremes’, stated a Social Democratic MP in a discussion of internal security.<sup>29</sup> Political affect was explicitly securitised by President Niinistö, as he, after the Russian overtaking of Crimea and Donbass, regularly described conflicts of opinion as threats to trust and as sites of hybrid warfare. Today, he warned, the war does not start with guns and troops marching but with information, infiltration, and hate-mongering. ‘If we would ward off all this, we would all be members of national defence’, he stated.<sup>30</sup>

In his televised New Year speech of 2016, President Niinistö contended the following: ‘It is my idea that Finland should not meet the spring in the spirit of internal quarrelling and disagreement. I want to remind again that social cohesion is our best resource.’<sup>31</sup> Addressing the parliament a month later, he returned to the topic of public discussion, stating that Finns had over the past months learnt to tell each other off: ‘The men have been told off, the women likewise. The tolerant and the intolerant have been told off, and then as, a conclusion, the police. We have thoroughly told off ourselves.’<sup>32</sup> He again characterised affective discipline as an act of national defence: ‘The challenge of migration cannot be met so that we are internally out of order.’<sup>33</sup> In his New Year speech of 2018, President Niinistö repeated the message, quoting *Seitsemän veljestä/Seven Brothers* (1870) by Aleksis Kivi (2005), the first Finnish

novel and a foundational narrative for national imagination: ‘all will go well, if everyone strives for peace and harmony. But if we look for a fight, there will always be a reason for neckhairs to bristle.’<sup>34</sup>

The danger of polarisation was a recurrent theme in 2018, when Finland commemorated the civil war of 1918. The centenary served as a frame for discussions of where extreme polarisation and hate in the public sphere may lead, thus drawing from and adding to a rich narrative legacy, given the centrality of 1918 for the Finnish national imagination.<sup>35</sup> This was the recurrent topic in the many speeches of both President Niinistö and the then Prime Minister Juha Sipilä. In the words of President Niinistö, ‘The lesson of 1918 is that the most important task for a nation is to take care of its cohesion and stability.’ Beyond serving as a warning, the memory of the civil war served to underline the importance of democracy in managing different and conflicting ideological positions and political goals: ‘Even if there are differences, and while people have divergent backgrounds, convictions and goals, they nevertheless have the right to disagree. And this must be respected, no matter how differently oneself thinks.’<sup>36</sup>

Similar rhetoric was practised by the editor-in-chief of *Ilta-Sanomat*, a major Finnish tabloid, in equating the critics of the notion of ‘the sensible person’ with ‘extremists’, describing ‘hatemongers’ as a security threat and critiquing anti-fascist demonstrations as ‘narcissistic projects’ for the organisers.<sup>37</sup> Addressing her readers in an obliging tone, she adopted the position of ‘the sensible person’ beyond the political disagreements. Invoking the civil war as a disciplinary fiction two years before the centenary, she described an anti-fascist demonstration as an ‘agitation of ordinary people into a polarisation’:

One would hope that each of us would pause for thinking what we do and what we participate in. Do you by any chance, without intending it, throw gas into flames, or do you attempt to scold your rage? Do you press like on writings agitating to polarisation or do you support objectivity? Do you generalise? Do you blame those who are not to be blamed? Do you distort? Do you scream with others or do you scream stop?<sup>38</sup>

While the President’s concern was related to national security, the editor-in-chief fought a moral war: beyond defending ‘the sensible person’ as a civic ideal, she was engaged in framing the critics of the ideal as immoral.

Whereas the Swedish debate on ‘the corridor of opinion’ problematised the power over agenda-setting and questioned the gate-keeping power of the journalists, in Finland, concern over ‘the extremes’ read as concern over too much debate, idealising the position of a distant, if morally invested, onlooker.<sup>39</sup> While ‘the extremes’ as a figure articulated a concern over polarisation, it simultaneously suggested a disbelief in the value of public debate. In the narrative of the extremes, the ‘silent majority’ was imagined as a non-political middle ground, whose thoughts and values the speaker nevertheless allegedly knew. As a model citizen, paradoxically, ‘the sensible person’ invoked an idealistic figure whose major characteristic was its lack of any characteristics. It read as

a figure of consensus, but not political consensus in the sense of supporting negotiations between different interests.<sup>40</sup> In the 2010s, it rather issued a moral obligation and, drawing from history lessons (the legacy of 1918), made a call not to disagree.

### **The adults in the room: affective pedagogy in the media**

Both ‘the corridor of opinion’ and ‘the extremes’ were outspokenly critical figures of speech, and both placed the media and the mediated debate at the centre of political life. Both metaphors plotted politicians and journalists as protagonists of the national imagination, casting them as gatekeepers or guardians of the tone of the debate. The tone became a political slogan in 2017, when Ulf Kristersson, appointed as the chair of the Swedish Moderate Party, made a call for ‘more adults in the room’ to improve the quality of the public discussions.<sup>41</sup> Cautious not to express a desire to police the subjects of the public debate, Kristersson – and other politicians in both Sweden and Finland – emphasised instead a desire to police and discipline the tone.

In the media, the concern over tone transformed into active measures of affective pedagogy. The Finnish documentary feature *Boiling Point* serves as an example, as its release was accompanied with a civic education project, flagged as offering a means to engage in a constructive dialogue, to enhance respect and prevent the incitement of hatred. For this project, the production company Mouka Filmi had prestigious collaborators: the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, the Finnish Red Cross, and Aalto University.<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, the different protagonists in the documentary offered a range of perspectives, complicating any one narrative viewpoint. On the other hand, the film offered, through high-angle drone images, a momentary respite from the cacophony of opinions on the soundtrack. As a pedagogical project, first and foremost, the documentary underlined the importance of respectful dialogue, inviting its viewers to engage in one and even issuing an obligation to do so. The sauna discussions between Tapio Salminen and Oula Silvennoinen were offered (and also hailed in the film’s appreciative reception) as exemplary: two men who have strongly opposing views on immigration but are committed to continuing their dialogue, respecting one another.<sup>43</sup>

In the 2010s, dialogue as an ethical and political form was offered as a recipe for enhanced democracy, but it was also reinvented as a legitimising discourse in the press and in television.<sup>44</sup> As a concrete sign of a ‘disrupted public sphere’ in both Sweden and Finland, public service television struggled to find a format for its debate programmes to meet the demands of their remit to serve democracy. In Finland, the long-term YLE concept of A2-theme nights was terminated in 2017, after fierce public debates regarding its dramaturgical choices and casting: while founded on the idea of multiple voices and a democratic marketplace, the programme had for long been criticised for increasing



rather than alleviating conflicts and polarised opinions. In the fall of 2015, A2 Pakolaisilta (*A2 Refugee Night*) was structured around a strong opposition between ‘us’ (Finns) and ‘them’ (the refugees); in 2016, for A2 TurvattuMuusilta (*A2 Insecurity Night*) the chair of the Finnish Defence League was invited as a discussant in a debate where ‘the extremes’ were supposed to meet each other.<sup>45</sup> In Sweden, the debate programmes *SVT Debatt* and *Opinion Live* were similarly criticised for confrontational setups – for fostering polarisation rather than encouraging dialogue.<sup>46</sup>

Responding to the criticisms, the Swedish Public Broadcasting Company SVT closed its weekly debate programme in 2019, and as a new gesture, it adopted a concept developed by *Die ZeitOnline* for assembling persons with different views on topical, divisive issues. In the process, the media outlet first invites its readers and viewers to sign up for live meetings, answering a series of test questions, and then being coupled through an algorithm with someone holding different opinions and finally meeting in person.<sup>47</sup> ‘When was the last time you met someone who does not think like you’, SVT asked its viewers and was met with enthusiasm.<sup>48</sup> The series *Sverige möts* (*Sweden meets*) was broadcast in the spring of 2020. In Finland, *Die ZeitOnline*’s concept – ironically called Political Tinder – was adopted in the spring of 2019 by *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest national newspaper. With *Suomi puhuu* (*Finland talks*), *Helsingin Sanomat* wanted to ‘bring disagreeing Finns together so that we would better understand each other’.<sup>49</sup> In the managing editor’s words, ‘The opponent is not evil, even if he or she disagrees – welcome to the outside of your bubble!’<sup>50</sup>

Reacting to the weakening of gatekeeping and agenda-setting power, hence, traditional news media has reinvented itself as a manager of the disrupted public sphere. While accused of increasing polarisation due to media logic focusing on confrontations, legacy media has cast itself as offering a remedy to the problem it is deeply implicated in. At the core of this affective national pedagogy is the moral obligation to engage in dialogue and to break one’s ‘bubble’ – the filter bubble being a pejorative metaphor for the company of the like-minded. In 2018, the Finnish Public Broadcasting Company YLE launched its project on *Kuplat* (*Bubbles*), staging encounters between ‘two persons living in different worlds’: a right-wing MP meets an unemployed person, two persons with opposing views on immigration; a person living in Helsinki meets someone living in a remote countryside; a priest meets an atheist; a vegan meets a pig farmer; and a downshifter meets a career-oriented leader.<sup>51</sup>

A similar notion of speaking across a divide informed a series of articles published by *Svenska Dagbladet* in Sweden: playwright and pundit Stina Oscarson was to meet ‘persons who in different ways divide Sweden with their statements and actions’.<sup>52</sup> The ensuing series of dialogues aroused a range of media commentary. Some celebrated it – ‘more people should step outside their filter bubbles’ – whereas others wondered whether ‘the dream of the open dialogue can be fulfilled’, whether there is ‘an exaggerated reliance on dialogue with right-wing extremists’, or whether ‘dialogue activism’ is merely another meta-debate about debate.<sup>53</sup>

## **The public sphere, trust, and the (trans)national imagination**

The 2010s debates about debates were more than metacommentary. At stake in them was a concern over not only the national public sphere or the roles of politicians and journalists in the new hybrid media context of political life but, importantly, trust as a key element in both the Swedish and the Finnish national imaginary and in the transnational narrative of the Nordic model.

While the Nordic model is claimed to have lost its distinctiveness as a consequence of various social policy and labour market reforms, it nevertheless continues to be exceptional in one sense. In the European Social Survey and other studies of public opinion, the Nordic countries are associated with a high level of trust, making them distinctive and comparable to no other region in the world.<sup>54</sup> Despite the narrative battle in Sweden about the country ‘becoming broken’ or ‘systems collapse’, annual surveys showed ‘no signs of weakened social cohesion’.<sup>55</sup> Trust is often described in rational terms, and a 2017 report by the Nordic Council of Ministers called trust the ‘Nordic gold’, summarising its perceived worth.<sup>56</sup> In the narrative of the Nordic model, trust is valued for both its economic and social effects and is described as what connects them: ‘Underpinning this virtuous interaction of security and flexibility is the widespread feeling of trust – among citizens and in public institutions – and a sense of fairness related to the egalitarian ambitions of the welfare state (education, social policy).’<sup>57</sup> On the one hand, trust is described as ‘a lubricant for the economy’, increasing efficiency and economic growth. On the other hand, trust is valued as an ingredient of social capital, increasing individual happiness, simplifying collaboration, promoting political engagement, stimulating democratic development, counteracting corruption, and reducing criminality.<sup>58</sup> While striving for political consensus has often been criticised as an obstacle to social and economic reforms or even a sign of undemocratic corporatism, in the Nordic countries, the ability to survive and stabilise changes and to maintain continuity remains key to national imaginaries and to the narrative about the Nordic model.<sup>59</sup>

All of the metaphors of the ‘corridor of opinion’, ‘the extremes’, and ‘the sensible folk’ operated within the historical legacy of engendering cohesion and inviting consensus. It is the work of the national and, in the context of Nordic countries, transnational imagination to reproduce a sense of being, in some sense, ‘in the same boat’ that is crucial to cohesion and trust.<sup>60</sup> In the context of global, networked media, the discourse of concern among politicians and journalists over the public discussion articulated a concern over the future of imagination and hence what international relations scholars term ‘ontological security’. As narrative analyses of state policies posit, states are as much concerned about their ontological security, ‘the security of a consistent self’, as they are about material, physical security, and the necessity of a narrative is particularly acute in contexts of crisis.<sup>61</sup>

In debating the tone of debates, Swedish and Finnish politicians and journalists responded to the disrupted public sphere by offering constructive solutions, while simultaneously establishing new roles and new grounds of legitimation for themselves. Casting themselves as managers of a nation's mood, they placed themselves in the centre as guardians of social cohesion and as pedagogues of proper affect, thus reimagining the future beyond interregnum not as a new world but rather as an upgrade of the old order. In so doing, they also reproduced the key 'ontological' or 'foundational' narrative of the Nordic model which over the decades has offered stability beyond policy changes, providing a sense of past and a direction for the future.

## Notes

- 1 Streeck 2017, 14.
- 2 Chadwick 2017, 4. See also Hallding et al. 2013; Ohlsson, Oscarsson & Solevid 2016.
- 3 Papacharissi & de Oliveira 2012.
- 4 Bennett & Pfetsch 2018, see also Koivunen 2018.
- 5 Mihelj 2011, 20–21.
- 6 Ahmed 2004, 64–65.
- 7 Eriksson 2016. See also, e.g., Holmqvist 2015.
- 8 Eriksson 2016.
- 9 Pitkänen & Westinen 2016a, 2016b.
- 10 E.g. Jones 2016a, 2016b.
- 11 The analysis is based on keyword searches in the Svenska Dagstidningar database (Swedish daily newspapers) at the Swedish Royal Library as well as online archives of Swedish Television (SVT), Swedish Radio (SR), *Dagens Nyheter*, Svenska Dagbladet, *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS), Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), *Ilta-Sanomat* (IS), *Iltalehti* (IL) as well as searches in Sveriges Riksdag (Swedish Parliament) and Suomen Eduskunta (Parliament of Finland). Furthermore, speeches by Prime Ministers Juha Sipilä and Stefan Löfven as well as President of the Republic Sauli Niinistö have been studied.
- 12 For discussions of trust in Sweden and Finland in the 2010s, see Esaiasson, Martinsson & Sohlberg 2016, Bäck & Kestilä-Kekkonen 2019.
- 13 Ekengren Oscarsson 2013.
- 14 Sandlund 2014.
- 15 Godmorgon, världen! 2014, Mattson 2014.
- 16 Wolodarski 2013.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Madon 2014, Fadakar 2014.
- 19 Neuding 2014, Marteus 2015.
- 20 Truedson 2017, Andersson & Weibull 2018. On Finland, see Reunanen 2019.
- 21 Pew Research Center 2018.
- 22 Hämäläinen 2016, Huhta 2015, Ranta 2016a.
- 23 Paretskoi 2016, Niinistö 2016b.
- 24 Pöntinen 2016.
- 25 Sipilä 2015, Suomen Eduskunta 2016b.
- 26 Raatikainen 2017, Kovalainen 2017, Ranta 2016b.
- 27 Appelsin 2017, Martela 2016.
- 28 Sisäministeriö (Ministry of Interior Affairs) 2017.
- 29 Suomen Eduskunta (Parliament of Finland) 2016a, Sisäministeriö (Ministry of Interior Affairs) 2016, Suomen Eduskunta (Parliament of Finland) 2015, Sipilä 2016.

- 30 Niinistö 2015.  
 31 Niinistö 2016a.  
 32 Niinistö 2016b.  
 33 Ibid.  
 34 Niinistö 2018a.  
 35 For an overview of the meanings of 1918 in Finnish history and memory culture, see Tepora & Roselius 2018.  
 36 Niinistö 2018b, Sipilä 2018. For invoking 1918 as a reference for public debate before the centenary, see e.g. Appelsin 2015.  
 37 Appelsin 2016a, 2016b.  
 38 Appelsin 2015.  
 39 For a historic legacy of the Finnish nation as ‘one mind’, see Pulkkinen 1999. See also Pitkänen & Westinen 2018.  
 40 On consensus, see Rainio-Niemi 2015.  
 41 Laaninen, 2016, Linnaeus 2017, Teodorescu 2017.  
 42 Mouka 2018.  
 43 Lindberg, 2016, Virkkula 2017.  
 44 For a Finnish discussion of the promise of dialogue for democracy, see Männistö & Wilhelmsson (eds.) 2017.  
 45 YLE 2015, 2016, Mattinen 2016, Hellman & Lerkkanen 2017.  
 46 Åhbeck 2017.  
 47 Kiel 2018, Reinhard 2018.  
 48 Atallah 2019, SVT Nyheter 2020, SVT 2020, Burström 2019.  
 49 Hartikainen & Saarikoski 2019, Hartikainen 2019.  
 50 Saarikoski 2019.  
 51 YLE 2018, Upola, Ali-Hokka & Orispää 2018.  
 52 Irenius 2018.  
 53 Madon 2019, Werner 2019, Stakston 2019, Klenell 2019.  
 54 Andreasson 2017, 13–14; see Delhey & Newton 2013.  
 55 Strömbäck 2016, 2017; Solevid 2017. For political debates, see e.g. Ljungholm 2014, Åkesson 2015.  
 56 Andreasson 2017.  
 57 Andersen et al. 2007, 14.  
 58 Andreasson 2017, 11–12. For the notion of social capital, see Putnam 2000.  
 59 For criticisms, see Rainio-Niemi 2015, Palonen & Sunnercrantz in this volume.  
 60 Andersen et al. 2007, 65.  
 61 Subotić 2016, 613–614; see also Koivunen & Vuorelma, forthcoming.

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