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Crisis, temporality and governmental policy agendas: The cases of Finland and Sweden

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Abstract

Crises transform the temporal orientation of political decision-making. They demand immediate and decisive action and thus convert time into a means of political control. In these circumstances, assessing the long-term consequences of proposed policies with respect to welfare, sustainability or justice also becomes demanding. Yet crisis conditions may also contain of elements that can enable positive postcrisis societal changes. Crises can offer opportunities for new developmental measures and building a better future—something political leaders may capitalise on in their agenda-setting. By analysing the programmes of the post-2014 Finnish and Swedish governments, this paper seeks to make sense of how the current crisis mode has shaped these countries' politics in terms of their temporal horizons. The analysis focuses on three main perspectives or forms of articulation—innovative stabilisation, long-termism and synchronisation—by way of which these governments seek to navigate through crises-afflicted times and offer a desirable future direction for their respective societies. The analysis offers important insights into the (unused) potential of crises to achieve something substantially novel in the Nordic and European political landscape, ultimately advancing the conditions for a future-regarding democratic system.

KEYWORDS

agenda-setting, crisis, Finnish politics, long-termism, Swedish politics, synchronisation, temporality

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INTRODUCTION

Crises profoundly influence the temporal perspectives of politics and decision-making. In an acute emergency, the shortage of temporal resources determines the scope of action, turning time into a means of political control. During the recovery period, the timetable of suggested policy measures assumes centre stage in negotiations between different stakeholders. In this context, the proposed solutions and their underlying principles, be they ethical, pragmatic or contractual, all contain a temporal element: they may imply *continuity*, demand *immediate* change, guarantee *permanent normality*, imply *future-oriented novelty* or require *long-term* investments for the *foreseeable future* (cf. Vogt & Värttö, 2024). For a political analyst, this is important: understanding the temporal underpinnings of crisis (recovery) measures can reveal a great deal about a state's ability to cope with crises, to strengthen the conditions of continuity, stability and renewal, and to direct attention towards the long-term future. Normatively speaking, the prospects of what has recently been termed a 'future-regarding democracy' come into the focus, that is, a form of inclusive democracy that systematically seeks to lengthen the time perspectives of decision-making and account for the interests of future generations (cf. Boston, 2016; MacKenzie et al., 2023).

The aim of the present exposition is to analyse the *temporal* implications and aspirations of recent crisis recovery *governmental agenda-setting* in (North-) European welfare states. The analysis brings forth the frameworks of time-bound opportunities and necessities that the crisis-ridden governments recognise, offer their citizens or base their policy suggestions on. It further highlights the beliefs that political leaders hold with respect to their own possibilities to shape the future under post-crisis conditions (cf. Boin & 't Hart, 2022), as well as the systemic propensities towards long-term decision-making that these political systems possess. Crises tend to have substantial, long-term effects on policymaking; some policy areas lose more than others, and it has proved difficult for these areas to regain their position after the crisis (Knill & Steinebach, 2022). It is important to investigate the extent to which formal political agenda-setting recognises these types of losses and seeks to alleviate them as well as through which time perspectives.

We focus on Finland and Sweden by comparing the government programmes and coalition agreements of those two countries from late 2014—Russia invaded Crimea in the winter of that year—through the summer of 2023. We thus cover the policy agendas of three legislative periods in both cases.[1] Finland and Sweden share hundreds of years of state history and they both represent small, high-trust, consensual, open economies with a large public sector and a tradition of strong governing capacity (e.g., Götz & Marklund, 2015). Both countries also subscribe to a similar societal security approach, often labelled as the comprehensive security model, which aims to

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protect the core values of society from a wide range of military and nonmilitary threats (Larsson & Rhinard, 2020). However, despite these evident similarities, the two countries have surprisingly distinct administrative cultures in terms of crisis management, with Finland demonstrating a higher degree of emergency preparedness as engraved in the country's constitutional framework and historical memory (Rainio-niemi, 2020). Government compositions also differ: all Swedish governments of the analysed period have been minority governments formally supported by one or more parties in the parliament, whereas Finland traditionally relies on large majority coalitions. For the sake of comparison, it is thus possible to identify, a priori, both similarities and differences that may materialise in terms of the understandings and intimations of time in current political (crisis) parlance and action.

Before we turn to our document analysis, we must discuss some central perspectives of time and temporality in current social theory and, through this brief reflection, introduce the more specific conceptual, even methodological, foundations informing our empirical scrutiny, which composes the bulk of this article. We conclude by introducing a few general reflections on the temporal nature of crisis politics and the government's ability to project its power towards the future.

Time, temporality and crisis

In most fields of social inquiry, the various implications of time and the temporal organisation of societies have garnered increasing attention in scholarly debates over the past 30 years or so. The traditional functionalist focus of social theory on structures, orders, organisation and equilibria, displaying only limited sensibility towards time, history, diachrony or processual becoming, has become a matter of yesteryears; analyses that are primarily systemic in nature now also take temporal horizons seriously (cf. Bergmann, 1983; Elchardus, 1988; Martins, 1974). In the field of International Relations, preoccupied with all kinds of 'turns' of research paradigms, scholars have recently even introduced the notion of the 'temporal turn' (Hom, 2018). If one sought to raise one single framework of explanans for this emphasis on time, it might be environmental degradation: it has forced human societies (and the social sciences analysing them) to think both diachronically and synchronically—simultaneously. The notion of the Anthropocene is, indeed, inherently temporal.

The crisis modus prevalent in Europe from the early 2000s has further substantiated this emphasis, in various ways. Comprehensive societal crises tend to unfold in rapid sequences, in a sense compressing time—hence the attribute of 'burning', often attached to events that seem to threaten the very existence of a societal system and require extraordinary political measures to resolve them (cf. Pursiainen, 2017; Rhinard, 2019). Individual and institutional time

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resources become vital, and time turns into a mechanism of power and control as delaying crucial decisions seems impossible for executive leaders; the notion of *government by emergency* aptly captures this (White, 2019). Crises often also call for temporary organisational solutions, which lead to ad-hoc changes of power structures and competences, for example, between national capitals and the EU bodies within the European polity (Ketola et al., 2023), or between governments and parliaments in the national context (Värttö, 2023). Moreover, as political decision-making cannot necessarily keep up with the tempo of events, a temporal gap may emerge between the measures that citizens widely desire and the realisation of them; decisions remain reactive rather than develop into signs of proactivity, sometimes undermining the very legitimacy of decisionmakers. Crises thus tend to be synchronising without any real successful, functional synchronisation (cf. Lundström, 2022). In the recovery phase, synchronisation appears to be easier to achieve and even long-term concerns can return to the political agenda.[2]

In time-related theoretical debates, three lines of thought appear particularly relevant for the present article (cf. Goetz, 2014). From each of these debates, we try to refine a specific analytical angle for our empirical inquiry. The first of these relates to the *speed* and *acceleration* of change and the resulting (in) stability of society, a line of reflexion already present in the globalisation and post-democracy debates from a couple of decades ago (e.g., Laux, 2011). As all exchanges in society seem to occur at ever greater speed—be they ideas, news, capital, goods or labour—people's individual temporal resources become ever more limited. In order to cope with this speed, a constant *demand for dynamic change* assumes an essential and unavoidable role for a society's citizenry and in its politics. Rosa et al. (2017, 54), for example, see *dynamic stabilisation* as the new dominant social maxim for the modern capitalist world. Without the capacity for innovation and novelty, the system falls like a cyclist who ceases to pedal:

> Without expansion, innovation and accumulation, companies close down, jobs are lost, and, by consequence, public revenues decrease and expenditures increase, and the ensuing monetary and fiscal crisis can put political legitimation at risk, too. […] Thus, capitalist economies do not need growth or innovation to achieve some new goal or progressive state, but just in order to keep the status quo and to reproduce their structure. Without it, they lose their economic competitiveness and their social stability.

The demand of continuous dynamism, according to Rosa et al. (2017), inevitably leads to a spiral of escalation and expansion that cannot be (environmentally or cognitively) feasible in the long run; externalities ultimately become an unbearable burden. Consequently, there is an element of inherent

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de-stability or dis-equilibria inbuilt into the system, an element that is conducive to the emergence of various kinds of disasters and disorders, as today's ecological crises clearly demonstrate. One could, at least in theory, interpret the current intimations of dynamic de-stabilisation in the Western countries—disintegration, the absence of social inclusion, serious challenges to democratic ideals—from this perspective.

This rather gloomy depiction provides us with the first analytical angle for interpreting our documentary materials: *the call for stabilisation* (defined, e.g., as new normality) *through dynamic post-crisis transformations*. What we expect to identify in the government declarations, is a strong emphasis on *constant innovation* and innovation-supporting practices, coupled with the truth-like claim that without them the prevailing emergency or crisis is likely to continue for the years to come. A trope such as 'Innovate or perish!' captures the form of articulation that is of interest here.

However, it is evident that a proactive attitude towards dynamic innovations may prove unrealistic under conditions of severe instability and enduring crisis. Transformative political agenda-setting becomes unattainable as the agenda rapidly evolves with new, externally-driven policy issues demanding immediate reaction. In this context, the social or political system's resilience depends on its ability to smoothly reorient its policies in response to the inherently problematic future horizon instigated by crises (Grove & Chandler, 2017, 85). *Adaptability, flexibility and adjustmen*t become the main features of 'crisis proofness'. Instead of calling for new innovations, political leaders would rather be motivated to find the means with which their society can continuously and reactively adapt, and by way of this adaptation (superficially) flourish. The line of argumentation in fact recalls the philosophy of the expanding *resilience* agenda of today's Western societies: the existing system is believed to be truly resilient when individual citizens have the capacity to adapt to its inherent economy-driven demands (Bourbeau & Ryan, 2018; Mckeown & Glenn, 2017).

A second strand of reasoning, relevant in this context, focuses on the time perspectives of political decision-making in various types of institutional contexts. There is an explicit normative (rather than critical) dimension involved: in a complex world, with serious environmental and other global concerns, we ought to be able to render *democratic decisions with a long-term perspective*, with a perspective that goes far beyond the dictates of electoral periods, much further than is typical in current policymaking. The interests of future generations thus need to be considered in a systematic manner, to the degree it is possible, and everyone should be aware of the long-term consequences of his/her individual action, despite the unavoidable cognitive challenges vis-à-vis future-regarding thinking. (e.g., Boston, 2016).

The normative demand of long-termism or future-regarding democracy significantly affects the political constellation of any organised society, while the

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ways in which it can be fulfilled vary greatly, also in the European context. There is some evidence, for example, that multiparty and multilevel political systems involving a great number of stakeholders ultimately tend to be conducive to the appreciation of temporally far-reaching considerations (cf. Jacobs, 2011). Moreover, several authors have emphasised that citizens' active involvement through various deliberative mechanisms *can* lengthen the time perspectives of decisions; to the extent a society is able to utilise such mechanisms, a systematic reflection on people's (imagined) long-term future interests can turn into a new standard (e.g., MacKenzie et al., 2023). Traditions of foresight, impact assessment and crisis preparedness can also be conducive to long-termism, to the extent that they are employed in the context of political agenda-setting.

In our analysis, then, we focus on *the long- vs. short-termism* and *general future-orientation* of the political documents under scrutiny. We ask to what extent, if at any, efforts to think in terms of truly long-term interests (of future generations) inform the official policy prescriptions—for example, through explicit references to 'grandchildren's welfare'? It can be assumed that primarily in efforts to cope with environmental problems (in the context of multiple crises), the principle of long-termism is bound to appear as a central tenet, whereas in a field such as security policy, time perspectives are presumably highly compressed. Moreover, the distinction between political leaders' responsiveness and responsibility may underlie the different temporal approaches here (Goetz, 2014). The former generally implies shorter time perspectives, an absence of future-regarding considerations, as the leaders seek to provide immediate responses to the needs of their supporters. By contrast, thinking in terms of responsibility might indicate temporally longer articulations of the desired course of future development for society.

The third important angle, closely related to the first, is that of *synchronisation* (or non- or de-synchronisation), both nationally and transnationally, understood as *temporal policy convergence*. The current synchronisation debates indeed bear a great deal of resemblance to the (EU-related) policy convergence debates of the 1990s and 2000s, that is, during the heyday of globalisation and optimistic integration debates. A representative definition of policy convergence from that era is provided by Daniel Drezner (2001, 53): 'Convergence is the tendency of policies to grow more alike, in the form of increasing similarity in structures, processes, and performances'. Synchronisation, accordingly, denotes that policy processes and performances materialise by and large simultaneously and/or in an orderly manner and as a result of actors' more or less *intentional* action.

In general, scholarly literature highlights the positive connotations of synchronisation. Laux (2017), for example, demonstrates how the Paris Climate Conference of 2015 represented a successful arena of societal synchronisation, defined in terms of agential multiplicity. A wide range of economic, political, scientific, media and even religious actors collaborated together in the

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conference, managing to deliver a binding international agreement, that is, Agenda 2030. Another example is the EU's success in assembling a multi-billion-euro Recovery and Resilience Facility within only a few months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic: national and European leaders seemed to act under some sort of qualified harmony, even establishing new principles of joint debt sharing (Crespy, Massart, et al., 2024). On the reverse side, Rosa et al. (2017) note that the expansive logic of dynamic stabilisation inevitably leads to tendencies of de-synchronisation. It may seem impossible to solve the problems of the economy and ecology simultaneously; an economic boom tends to evolve into ecological deprivation—in the name of stability.

We are especially interested in two particular aspects of synchronisation in our document analysis. The first concerns the ways in which the depictions of multiple crisis are synchronised, that is, seen under the same temporally limited framework and related to each other. The second relates to the extent to which we can identify calls for simultaneity and harmony, or cooperation and coherence, between the different policy sectors to enable a reasonable crisis recovery. In more concrete terms, to offer an example, calls for cooperation between different policy sectors and a range of stakeholders, even across the national boundaries, would represent this pattern of argumentation.

The three temporal perspectives presented above serve as the basis of our empirical analyses of Finnish and Swedish governmental agendas—and, in fact, our methodological solution (see next section). These conceptual angles, their empirical framing and exemplary tropes that are expected to be found in the document material are summarised in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1 The framework for empirical analysis.

Conceptual angle	Content	Possible exemplary tropes
Stabilisation through innovation or adaptation	Appealing to 'there is no alternative' argument. Adapting to external necessities; and seizing the moment.	Innovate or perish! Adapt and flourish!
Longtermism/future-orientedness	Adopting a long-term perspective. Acknowledging the needs of future generations. Thinking in terms of responsibility.	We should not forget the welfare of our grandchildren!
Efforts of synchronisation	Calls for simultaneity and harmony between different policy sectors, and international cooperation.	All policy areas must unite for…! By joining forces with other actors, we can face the challenges of…!

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Governmental programmes as data

Our data consist of the governmental programmes or declarations of the incoming governments over the past decade in Finland and Sweden—two highly developed, well-governed Western societies, in which one can expect the above-described temporal logics to materialise (if anywhere). More precisely, we analysed three large and detailed Finnish programmes (2015, 2019 and 2023), and three Swedish government declarations, that is, prime ministers' lengthy parliamentary speeches (2014, 2019 and 2022), complemented with two coalition agreements (*Januariavtalet*, 2019 and *Tidöavtalet*, 2022). Europe was already in crisis modus in 2014/2015 when the first documents were being written, but irregular climate emergencies, unexpected migration flows, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have only further aggravated this modus. We expect these documents, and the decade-long comparative setting, to capture something essential of the respective patterns of crisis awareness and their temporal implications, and the concomitant political priorities in each case, and perhaps in Europe more broadly.

Governmental programmes or coalition agreements introduce the government's—representing a significant slice of citizenry – preferable policy options and, depending on the degree of detail, the primary means for achieving these goals. This is particularly important for coalition governments with parties from different segments of the political spectrum (Müller & Strøm, 2008). If the government composition has changed, clarifying the differences between the past and the 'new' present is often a specific element of the programmes.

For many, however, coalition agreements represent mere 'cheap talk' absent legal validity; drafting these accords is a ritual during which party leaders avoid making any substantial commitments (Bergman et al., 2024; Moury, 2011). Coalition agreements may indeed contain vague statements aimed at signalling an issue's salience rather than a promise of implementing a particular policy choice. Yet, empirical evidence suggests that these treaties do shape actual policies: they bind and commit parties to play a role in maintaining the stability of the government, constraining intracabinet ideological conflict. By following the agreement, the government can also signal efficiency and maintain popular support (e.g., Timmermans & Moury, 2006). In the Finnish case, much of the public discussion on politics in fact revolves around the government programme and the failures and successes in its implementation. In Sweden, this appears less evident, but even there, for example, the current *Tidöavtalet* regularly figures in public discussions. In both cases, the (unavoidable) discrepancies between formal agendas and actual policies have offered opposition parties an easy target for critique.

The form, length and publicity of the governmental programmes vary greatly country-wise, depending on the existing legal framework and established

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practices. The Finnish case clearly represents a tradition of details: since the Constitutional reform of 2000, the government has been obliged to submit its programme to the Parliament, after which the Parliament conducts a vote of confidence (Mykkänen & Virtanen, 2020, 204). This has also meant that the Government Programme as an institution has become more and more substantial and important (2020, 204; cf. Johanson et al., 2017). In the Swedish case, with customary minority governments, the role of government programmes has been more limited and the level of detail lower. It is noteworthy, however, that the PM offers an annual *regeringsförklaring* to the Parliament, which complements the original programme. Nonetheless, we have refrained from analysing these annual declarations here and only focus on the first speech of each new prime minister.

Methodologically, the article relies on a type of concept-driven qualitative content analysis (e.g., Schreier, 2012; Selvi, 2019). The primary aim was to identify formulations in the analysed documents that contain specific temporal references, particularly related to the three specific angles introduced above and defined *prior to* the analysis (examples of possible, sought-after formulations given in Table 1 above). To increase the validity of the exercise, both authors *separately* read the documentary material and systematically marked all the relevant temporal allusions. They then refined the most important points to be presented below through joint discussions and the writing process itself; as in all qualitative research, this evidently involved an element of subjective interpretations.

The presentation begins with a brief description of the general crisis awareness in the two countries as displayed in the government documents. This context makes the specific perspectives of the three subsequent sections understandable.

An overview of the programmes

Stefan Löfven's (2014) first cabinet, composed of the Social Democratic and Green parties, assumed power in Sweden in autumn 2014. The cabinet's parliamentary declaration begins with a gloomy depiction of the state of the country, caused by domestic rather than external factors—perhaps a barb towards the ousted coalition of (moderate) right-wing parties. What is striking in this instance is that Prime Minister's rather traditionalist emphasis on societal modernisation is believed to offer a way out of this prevailing and problematic constellation:

> The state of affairs in Sweden is serious. Unemployment has become entrenched at a high level. School performance is plummeting, and major failings are emerging in the welfare system. Gaps are growing and inequality between women and men remains.

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> Sweden is failing to achieve 14 out of 16 national environmental objectives. What we need now is to come together, and to take joint responsibility. What we need now are *reforms for the future to modernise* Sweden. (p. 2, emphasis added)

Reading further, it becomes apparent that time and temporality play a very limited role in this declaration. There is very little reflection about the nature of the (foreseeable) future that the government would wish to attain, apart from this rather vague idea of modernisation. Time hardly functions as a means of social control either—except for the unspecified 'now' that figures here and there in the text. This may be symptomatic of the Swedish case: a sense of the immediate presence appears stronger, overall, in that country's documentation than in that of Finland.

Less than a year later, in spring 2015, the new Finnish government's general portrayal of the state of affairs appeared essentially similar, despite the differing party compositions—Juha Sipilä's cabinet was formed by a centre-right coalition. The government's 'Strategic Programme' begins with a one-page vision for the coming *decade*, with the aim to reach 'an inventive, caring and safe country where we all can feel important'; this perspective of 10 years subsequently guides, in the form of a 'ten-year objective', each of the main chapters of the programme. Immediately on the next page, under the title 'Current Situation', the 'reality' is described with dark tones, implying perhaps the trope 'innovate or perish':

> Despite its many strengths, Finland is in a spiral of decline. Unemployment is high. Economic growth has waned. Our competitiveness has deteriorated and is 10-15 per cent weaker than that of our key competitor countries. Exports are flagging. […] Expertise is not being converted into innovations, innovations are not commercialised. We are losing our expertise-based competitive edge. (p. 6)

The ultimate rhetorical conclusion is that 'we' can indeed cope with challenges, and the Government is and will be in control: 'The Government is capable of providing solutions that will bring reform and shore up faith' (p. 8). It is also noteworthy that, in contrast to the Swedish Declaration, this Finnish programme already accounts for the deteriorated security situation across the Baltic Sea, primarily caused by Russia's bellicosity in Crimea and East Ukraine, as a priority concern. The third paragraph ends with what could be seen as a demand for synchronisation: 'Mutual interdependencies and new threats to security […] require a new type of preparedness and readiness *from the whole of society* (emphasis added)' (p. 8).

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In Stefan Löfven's second cabinet, inaugurated in January 2019 after five months of difficult negotiations, the Social Democrats and Greens continued to share the minister posts but now with the parliamentary support of two right-wing parties, the Centre and Liberals, subverting the traditional two-bloc constellation of Swedish politics—a fact that he enthusiastically notes at the outset of his Declaration. A sense of optimism, rather than that of crisis, informs his presentation. The point of departure, undoubtedly an act of self-praise, is that the country's economy has been developing very well—there is now 'some room for manoeuvre'. This positive situation contrasts, so the argument goes, strongly with the increasing popularity of the anti-democratic far-right parties across the continent, which is in fact *the* primary crisis defined in the Declaration. The opening paragraphs set the tone: 'All around Europe, extreme right-wing movements are spreading. In several countries, forces with an antidemocratic agenda have made it all the way to government. But in Sweden, we stand up for the equal value of all people. We are choosing a different path.' (p. 1)

At the same time, however, the Declaration thoroughly reflects upon the country's domestic security challenges, those related to criminality and migration-induced cultural clashes in particular; several pages (out of 16) are devoted to these issues. Sweden had traditionally pursued a very generous policy towards immigrants, perhaps more generous than any other country in Europe, but with the sudden migration influx of 2015, political tugs-of-war over these policies had intensified, affecting the entire party spectrum. On behalf of his new government, Löfven now pledges, among other things, to employ 10,000 new personnel in the country's police forces and, in a rare temporal reference, to ensure that immigration policy remains tenable: 'Sweden's reception of refugees must be sustainable in the long term.' (p. 19)

In Finland, just a few months later, a new left-centre coalition under social democrat Antti Rinne (replaced by Sanna Marin 6 months later), composed of five parties, negotiated a detailed programme, probably *the* most temporally sensitive of all the analysed documents here. The general mood is cautiously optimistic and oriented towards long-term plans. The programme recognises 'challenges' rather than 'crises' amidst great global and societal changes and even seeks to understand them in a positive light. After having presented a list of these challenges, from climate change to technological development, the opening paragraph concludes: 'This transformation offers great opportunities for the development of our country, but it also creates insecurity and concerns about what lies ahead.' (p. 8)

The long-termism of the programme is closely linked to climate policy objectives, which systematically feature throughout the entire document. For example, the first of the seven main strategic objectives is termed a 'Carbon neutral Finland that protects biodiversity'. Security, by contrast, receives fairly scant attention in the document, although one of its strategic objectives focuses

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on security and the rule of law. The attitude appears almost complacent—surprisingly, given the aggressive turns of Russian foreign policy over the preceding decade: 'Finland is the safest country in the world and we want to stay that way', reads the first sentence outlining the security objective. Neither the COVID-19 pandemic nor a full-scale War in Ukraine was in the cards at this stage.

The social-democrat-led bloc lost the Swedish parliamentary elections of September 2022, but so marginally that the leader of the *Moderates*, Ulf Kristersson, needed the support of *Sverigedemokraterna*, a right-wing populist party, to become the PM of a new right-centre minority coalition government. To make this possible, the parties negotiated the so called *Tidöavtalet*, a 60-page action plan specifying the conditions for *Sverigedemokraternas*' support for the government without formal membership in it—a fascinating political document as we will later see.

The awareness of imminent crisis pervades Kristersson's Declaration before the parliament in October 2022; Russia's had launched its war some eight months earlier. The starting point is that Sweden has become 'a country in the midst of several parallel crises', of which four are the most critical: criminality, culminating in a great number of deadly shootings across the country; economic recession, partly caused by migration and failed asylum policies; and an energy crisis. The fourth issue was the stagnated NATO membership process. 'We must lead Sweden into NATO, become a strong member of the Alliance, and equip our defence for a security environment that has not been this uncertain since the Second World War,' Kristersson declares.

All these crises demand *immediate* action, but the outlined changes of migration policies seem particularly striking, certainly reflecting the policy priorities of the Sweden Democrats. The new stance is strict and 'presentist': 'Sweden shall not in any respect be more generous in its view of asylum than what follows as obligations under EU law or other legally binding international treaties' (Kristersson, 2022, 29). Climate change is not listed among the gravest crises, but the government sets a target for Sweden to become the world's *first* fossil-free welfare state by 2045 at the latest (10 years behind the Finnish target, however).

In Finland, the social-democrat-led government was also ousted after the elections of spring 2023. In the vocabulary of the new right-wing government, which also includes the Finns Party, the Finnish equivalent of Sweden Democrats, economic alarmism seems to overtake all other concerns; the *multitude* of crises figures in the programme surprisingly little, much less than in Kristersson's declaration. In the clumsy English-language translation, the programme begins: 'The Government is seeking to make Finland a strong and committed country that can withstand global storms'.[3] A few paragraphs later it states that an economically strong Finland is/will be 'crisis resilient'. What is also striking is that the required economic transformation needs to begin

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immediately, before it is too late—but the potential negative consequences of nonaction remain unspecified.

Yet long-termism also informs (the rhetoric of) this programme, more than in the case of its Swedish counterpart with a comparable party composition. In the first few pages, it declares, for example, that 'We will guarantee that future generations will be able to enjoy similar services and opportunities' (p. 6) and that 'Finnish society will guarantee its people opportunities for success and prosperity across generations' (p. 8). Foresight as a central knowledge-generating means of policymaking is also specifically mentioned.

Overall, a general inspection of these programmes reveals some distinct commonalities and differences. Both cases display a similar pattern. In the programmes of 2014/2015 and 2022/2023 governments, general crisis awareness is at a high level; this is somewhat more apparent in the Swedish rhetoric than in the Finnish. In the programmes of 2019, a stronger sense of optimism prevails on both sides of the Baltic Sea, flavoured with references to the opportunities the challenging global constellation seems to offer. In this context, long-term target-setting, primarily in terms of climate policies, also appears more pronounced, Finland being the stronger actor here.

Stabilisation through dynamic innovation: 'the best in the world'

As regards our first temporal trope, the logic of 'stabilisation through dynamic innovation', PM Kristersson, 2022 declaration offers a formulation that reflects the expected pattern virtually seamlessly: 'Several of the cornerstones of the Swedish welfare state—internal security, external security, energy supply and social cohesion—must now be repaired and reinforced. *If they fail entirely, the damage will be monumental*. And if that happens, Sweden will no longer be Sweden (p. 3; emphasis added).' In this emphasis on the here-and-now, the linkage to the 'there-is-no-alternative' dogma of neoliberalism is evident. But one could surely also think of this in terms of emergency governance, see it as an effort to exploit the crisis framework for the sake of one's own traditional political agenda (White, 2019). Time clearly turns into an element of social control, of projecting power onto society.

Related to this, both countries' political establishments, irrespective of the coalition composition, seek to give an impression of having a proactive stance towards the rapidly changing world, almost in a self-evident manner. This also indicates that the logic of adaptation figures in the programmes less than one could possibly expect. What epitomises this sense of proactivity particularly well is the need or objective of both countries—Sweden in particular—'to be or become the best in the world', from having 'the best working life in the world' (Rinne/Marin) to being 'the first carbon-free welfare state in the world' (Löfven 2). Löfven's first Declaration puts this point elegantly, cognisant of the fact that

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its fulfilment requires a functioning institutional framework, a great deal of strategic thinking and an ability to renew the existing practices:

> *Sweden's economic strength stems from our ability to be the best*: the fact that we sell outstanding, effective and innovative goods and services on global markets. Entrepreneurship will be facilitated via reduced sick pay costs, regulatory simplification and investment in export promotion. An innovation council led by the Prime Minister will be established. […] A reindustrialisation strategy will be developed. (p. 5, emphasis added)

This logic also pertains to the recent policies of climate change in both countries, though in a milder form. Climate change is not only seen as a problem but a real opportunity for the economy that should be taken advantage of as quickly and intensively as possible—a pattern of argumentation that no doubt informs government agendas elsewhere, too. In Finland, the programme of Petteri Orpo's current government is particularly explicit in this respect. The goal is to transform the country into a frontrunner in 'clean energy' and establish conditions for 'clean growth both nationally and globally'—without raising the costs for citizens and undermining the global competitiveness of Finnish companies. The government also talks of a climate 'handprint' instead of 'footprint', thus emphasising the point of (human or perhaps governmental) proactivity: 'Hands' actively mould the world by investing in technologies and industries that can generate positive impacts on climate, strengthen natural diversity and provide clean and affordable energy (p. 7). That the conflictual logics of environmental sustainability and economic prosperity can indeed be resolved, appears to be an unchallenged conviction:

> Finland will become a leader [in the original: 'frontrunner'] in clean energy while maximising its climate handprint. Finland will create clean economic growth at home and replace pollution-generating solutions around the world through technology exports. Finland will increase its share of investments, jobs and value added related to the clean economy. […] At the same time, the Government will ensure that its decisions or policy measures do not increase everyday costs for citizens or weaken the competitiveness of business and industry. (p. 149)

Unlike earlier Finnish programmes, the Orpo cabinet's agenda also justifies investments in renewable energy sources by the profoundly transformed security environment; the ultimate goal of energy policies is to become independent from Russian sources of energy. 'Finland's energy self-sufficiency will be strengthened in a sustainable way by contributing to the clean energy

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transition.' Indeed, hard military security and softer environmental security can be employed together for advancing innovative stabilisation—and perhaps also adaptation—in Finnish society with a long-term perspective. But this can, of course, also be interpreted as an exemplary formulation of the resilience framework currently propagated across the European Union, with clear temporal implications in terms of societies' *permanent* capacity to cope with all types of crises and adapt to them (e.g., Wolff & Ladi, 2020).

Long-termism and future generations

Turning to the second temporal trope, future-regarding welfare proposals, the two most recent governmental programmes in Finland are virtually saturated with various types of long-term considerations. The programme of Rinne/Marin's cabinet (2019) frequently refers to the interests of future generations, for instance, in relation to pensions, sustainable economic development and the use of natural resources. Intergenerational justice must prevail so that 'every young person has the opportunity to study, participate and realise their dreams'. A broader temporal definition of the preferred course of societal development is also emphasised: 'The Government will pay particular attention to the effects of decisions in the long term. Indicators that describe economic, ecological and social wellbeing will be used as an aid in decision-making preparations, alongside and in support of conventional economic indicators'. (p. 14)

The sense of proactivity is strong in this programme, even if it is not set within a crisis framework. After the general preface, the programme continues by offering the electorate six central pledges in terms of policy reform. Two of these are explicitly long-term—'3. Pledge for long-term policy-making' and '6. Pledge for fair and equal treatment across generations'—and two others also include an element of long-termism—'1. Pledge for continuous learning in government' and '4. Pledge for knowledge-based policy-making'. These types of promises surely appeal to most observers, irrespective of party affiliations, although they can also be seen as overly optimistic, given the short governmental mandate. From a more critical perspective, they also serve the interests of the present: they not only represent acts of future-regarding responsibility but imply responsiveness towards the government's own (left-green) supporters.

In a similar vein, the current Orpo programme aims to build a just society in which citizens' opportunities for success and well-being are secured across generations. The second paragraph already emphasises long-termism in explicit terms: 'We will guarantee that future generations will be able to enjoy similar services and opportunities'. A central aspect of this is the government's economic and fiscal policy geared towards guaranteeing that the burden of Finland's indebtedness does not fall unreasonably on future generations. The government also aims to launch a project called 'Our common, flourishing

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Finland' with the aim of formulating a shared vision of the country *also* for the benefit of future generations. The word 'also' is key here (used both in the Finnish and translated versions), making it possible to question whether the future generations will, in the end, play an equivalent role to those of the present.

> The Government will also look beyond today's challenges. It is vital for Finland to find a vision for the kind of country we want to leave future generations. The Government will launch foresight activities under the title of A Prosperous Finland for Everyone. The goal will be to find a vision for what kind of sustainable country we want to leave for future generations. (p. 8)

References to any sort of long-termism appear to be much more scattered and less systematic in Sweden—and this cannot solely be explained by the different natures of the respective documentation. This may be seen as surprising, because in Sweden's traditional social democratic mindscape, the *folkhemmet* was clearly built and preserved for the sake of not-yet-born generations. However, in Löfven, 2019 Declaration, he makes an interesting point about the interconnectedness between the strength of society – whatever that may mean—and the long-term sustainable development goals that can accommodate the interests of future generations; perhaps there is even an element of inherent synchronisation here: 'Future generations must have access to clean air, healthy oceans and thriving natural environments. The climate transition will permeate policy. Our society must be strong—and our development sustainable'. (p. 2)

From the perspective of long-termism, responsiveness and responsibility, the Tidö Agreement of autumn 2022, which led to the formation of Kristersson's cabinet, offers mixed messages. From the very beginning (p. 2), it establishes long-term cooperation between the signatories as the point of departure, to engender a deal that can help solve Sweden's greatest problems, including criminality, migration, integration, the economy, schooling, health services, energy and climate. But the idea of responsiveness, to sustainably serve primarily the supporters of these parties, is very much on the agenda here, as explicitly stated at the end of that very paragraph: 'Cooperation shall take place under conditions that favour all participating parties' interests'. The planned policy solutions are, in other words, not formulated for the sake of future generations but in order to convince its own current supporters—and particularly those of *Sverigedemokraterna*—of the government's willingness to stand for the 'right' causes.

The difference between the Finnish and Swedish propensity towards explicitly articulated long-termism can, at least to an extent, be explained by the current Finnish foresight model. Although Sweden was an early pioneer in

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government-sponsored foresight policies, Finland has developed a well-institutionalised foresight system (Boston, 2016, 401). The Finnish model comprises the Parliament's Committee for the Future, Government Foresight Group, the Government Foresight Network and the Government's Reports on the Future drafted for each legislative period. The Committee for the Future forms the foundation of this system, and its work has also clearly shaped the government programmes (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020, 171). The committee was established in 1993 to, as its official webpage formulates, 'generate dialogue with the government on major future problems and opportunities' and was made permanent in 2000.

Efforts of synchronisation

It is difficult to determine whether or in which ways crises can explain any recent intimations of synchronisation in European politics; policy coherence between administrative sectors has, after all, been a widely-debated theme for decades. We were, however, able to identify a change of articulation over the analysed 10-year period that seems to point to a logic of crisis-driven synchronisation in the two analysed countries: references to the need to understand society in its entirety, and therefore synchronise the actions of different policy sectors, is clearly more apparent in the most recent governmental documentation than in the programmes of 2014/2015. This can surely be attributed to the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, along with ever more acute climate challenges. Security clearly functions as a synchronising factor: all sectors of society must now jointly prepare for uncertain times in a more systematic manner than earlier. By way of example, in Ulf Kristersson's inaugural speech, energy and security policies are intimately intertwined:

> The aim of our energy policy is for Sweden to shift from an impending electricity deficit to an abundance of fossil-free electricity. Sweden's international competitiveness is built on good access to affordable energy. The climate transition and security policy are now two major additional international factors. Neither Sweden nor Europe can be allowed to be dependent on Russian energy production. (p. 10).

The most 'synchronic' of the documents analysed here is possibly the abovementioned Tidö Agreement. The objective of achieving major changes within society's core policy fields simultaneously and as rapidly as possible permeates the whole document; even the subtitle *Överenskommelse för Sverige*, literally 'coming to an agreement for Sweden', brings to mind some sort of synchronic harmony. The agreement focuses on five core themes or, as they are entitled, 'cooperation projects'—itself a synchronising conception—within which the detailed plans of

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action were to be prepared within not much more than a year, that is, by the budget proposal of 2024: Growth and household finances; Crime, migration and integration; Climate and energy; Health and medical care; and Schools. Of these themes, the one concerning crime, migration and integration—an interesting associative trichotomy, of course—has been subject to fierce critique from the opposition parties and from abroad, as it seems to epitomise a substantial part of the policy objectives usually attached to nonliberal right-wing parties in Europe. The call for stricter policies in this field is strong and immediate, as for example this formulation demonstrates: 'the government shall, as quickly as possible after it has entered office, make a decision […] to limit the humanitarian grounds for protection' (p. 34). It is evident that synchronisation with the European policy level, or with international law, will be a challenge as far as these types of formulations are concerned.

In Finland, the idea of synchronisation between policy sectors undoubtedly strengthened with the Sipilä cabinet of 2015−2019, as it seemed to adhere to the principles of new public governance managerialism more systematically than its predecessors had and because of its requirement for imminent cuts in public spending (Mykkänen & Virtanen, 2020). The government's programme actually begins with a holistic SWOT analysis of and for the entire society, and it continues by presenting a number of major political targets, particularly related to public finances and the requirement for significant policy changes within a limited time span across policy sectors.

The two successive governments analysed here have followed this pattern of synchronising managerialism as introduced by Sipilä's cabinet. Indeed, although the Social Democrats had previously criticised these types of comprehensive strategic programmes, the Rinne/Marin government systematically made use of similar cross-sectoral features, albeit with a stronger emphasis on the role of citizenry and civil society. The promise that was made in the 2019 programme was plain—but surely remained unfulfilled as the COVID crisis engulfed the country a couple of months later (cf. Ketola et al., 2023): 'We need a more cross-sectoral approach to the preparation of matters and decision-making. We will develop ways to engage a broader group of stakeholders in reforming society. A new kind of interaction means both involving people much more strongly in public administration activities and searching for and testing new ways of interacting.' (p. 11)

Despite the new cabinet constellation, the current cabinet led by Petteri Orpo has continued to emphasise cooperation between administrative sectors. The explicit belief is, apparently, that this will best generate a reliable knowledge basis for decision-making, something that was clearly required during the fight against the Corona virus: 'We will base the preparation of policy measures on a cross-administrative approach. This way we can use resources efficiently and leverage knowledge and competence flexibly (p. 8).' The ways in which the available policy-relevant knowledge-basis can enable or prevent the synchronising efforts in any given policymaking context would be a fascinating topic for

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further inquiry. In any event, shared knowledge may be the first requirement for successful synchronisation.

What is particularly important, however, is that for political agenda setting, in both these countries (and certainly also elsewhere), synchronisation has essentially become a *European matter*. The most significant policy efforts to proactively direct the continent's countries towards a manageable and well-defined future have evolved in the EU context, citing the green and digital transformations and the NextGeneration EU. These policy-initiatives can be seen, in their comprehensiveness, as truly synchronising efforts of future-regarding policymaking; the country-specific initiatives pale in comparison, and whatever there are in terms of such initiatives, they are streamlined within those major European policy frameworks. However, the division of labour between the European and national policy levels remains an issue and a much deeper form of integration is not necessarily seen as something desirable. The current Finnish government, for example, is explicit in this respect: 'Finland wants the EU to play big on big issues and small on small issues (p. 188)'.

Finally, in both these countries, the suddenly emerged path to NATO membership application in the spring of 2022 was a highly synchronising process—to the extent that the notions of 'consensus' and 'synchrony' became almost synonymous at the time. In the debates on membership, an important aspect was the national public unanimity that was believed to send a strong message to the outside world and justify the change of course in prime defence solutions. In a sense, the whole society had to stand behind the decision in synchrony, and it was also deemed elementarily important that the two countries acted in unison (e.g., Michalski et al., 2024). The change in security thinking had, however, gradually evolved in both countries since 2014, when the countries contrived to understand security in ever more comprehensive terms and, in the process, synchronise the actions of most key policy sectors.

CONCLUSIONS

The discussion above has demonstrated how the crisis mode of the past decade has shaped the temporal perspectives of governmental agendas in Europe, exemplified by two high-governance-capacity Nordic countries, Finland and Sweden. The analysis focused on three main perspectives or forms of articulation: innovative stabilisation, long-termism and synchronisation. These often overlapping and mutually reinforcing perspectives helped to bring forth the primary logics through which political leaders believe they can advance the crisis recovery of their respective countries and establish new normalities for the sake of the future. The analysis also showed which policy issues are deemed particularly urgent and which of those must be managed cross-sectorally or by relying on the resources of the entire society. The overall narrative that we have presented is, we believe, well representative of recent crisis-driven policymaking

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priorities, not only in these two countries but in Europe more generally; as such, the narrative is possibly this article's most important contribution. A few points implied herein deserve particular emphasis, however.

First, a general crisis framework evidently characterised the governmental programmes in the middle of the 2010s, remained less pronounced towards the end of that decade, and became in many respects dominant after the launch of the full-scale war in Ukraine. However, in well-functioning democracies such as those of Finland and Sweden, crises and emergencies do not necessarily change the general mood of political target setting. Even under a crisis framework, *the governments display a strong belief that they can proactively control the course of developments towards a better future*. There is, in other words, an unchallenged conviction of the benefits of long-term socio-political engineering or continuous small-step managerialism—in terms of innovative stabilisation rather than just adjustment and adaptation. There is also a conviction that even the possibly emerging externalities of proposed policies can eventually be managed and will not become untenable.

Second, crises do tend to generate profound efforts of policy change, both reactive short-term and proactive long-term ones – even though it may remain questionable whether these changes could actually bring about something qualitatively new in terms of overall societal development. Indeed, the type of all-encompassing cross-cutting societal agenda-setting, promoted by, for example, the Swedish Tidö Agreement, may become possible only in the context of crises, at least regarding pressing timetables. *Emergency situations thus seem to render synchronising efforts easier than they would be otherwise*. At the same time, however, political or public reflection with respect to the potential ramifications of these synchronising political agendas is bound to remain rudimentary. Under a crisis constellation, several key policy sectors are easily lumped together into a single shared framework of policymaking, while systematic scrutiny of the long-term implications of this very policy combination can hardly occur. Synchronising in the name of, say, security or economic imperatives can be problematic if it undermines the genuine interests prevailing in other societal sectors, be they education or health or culture. Moreover, according to this logic, *synchronising can counter the ideals of a future-regarding democracy*: the policy sector, the interests of which appear to materialise on short notice and often related to security, easily begins to dominate the overall political constellation and determine its time perspectives.

The third point is equally theoretical. On the surface, the analysed documents were primarily shaped by ideas of general (long-term) responsibility vis-à-vis society's well-being rather than (short-term) responsiveness towards a specific group of citizens. This finding is unsurprising: through its programme, the government necessarily speaks to a larger audience than that of its potential voters. However, *the political agendas of the individual political parties still seem to permeate the programmes, although their rationales are framed in terms of responsibility*. This observation is in line with Crespy, Moreira Ramalho, et al. (2024) who argue that

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in the aftermath of the euro crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witness to the emergence of what they term 'responsive responsibility', that is, the governments seek to include rather than oppose the prevailing demands for responsiveness in their agenda-setting; the ideals of general long-term well-being are translated, in rhetorical terms, into short-term benefits. In this respect, the distinction between responsibility and responsiveness may even be misleading. Perhaps a notion such as an 'imagined collective future will' would be more appropriate for describing the mood among the drafters of the governmental agendas, at least under crisis conditions. All in all, the ways in which different temporal understandings can shape the nature of responsiveness, responsibility and collective imaginations is surely a theme that deserves increasing emphasis in future social science research on official political discourses.

Finally, *in terms of temporality, institutional structures matter*. As we have indicated, we found Finland, at least on the surface, more (systematically) future-oriented than its close neighbour. A detailed tradition of governmental programmes and open dialogue on the future between the government and parliament clearly influence the country's political agenda setting—and the crisis context may have made this impact even stronger. Needless to say, we regard this as a positive feature: future-regarding policymaking is indispensable if a crisis constellation is to be truly transformed to something qualitatively better with respect to the collective or environmental resilience of society. But achieving this also requires clever synchronisation, coupled with a great deal of public reflection, between the different actors in society, constantly enabling new innovations. Indeed, long-term policymaking can, perhaps paradoxically, be a matter of synchronisation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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ENDNOTES

[1] Since the elections of April 2015, Finland has formally had four government coalitions, but only three programmes: (1) the programme of the centre-right government of Juha Sipilä 2015−2019 (Finnish Government, 2015); (2) the programme of the Social-Democrats-led governments of Antti Rinne (June−December 2019) and Sanna Marin (December 2019 to June 2023) (Finnish Government, 2019), and the programme of the right-centre government of Petteri Orpo (June 2023) (Finnish Government, 2023). Sweden, by contrast, has formally had 5 governments since 2014, three social-democratic governments led by Stefan Löfven (the first with the Green Party) and one led by Magdalena Andersson, and since the autumn of 2022 a moderate right-wing government, led by Ulf Kristersson and supported in the parliament by the right-wing 'populist' *Sverigedemokraterna*.

[2] It has even been contemplated whether the time of crises has begun to dominate the ways of understanding our entire *Dasein* and relationship with the future. Jordheim and Wigen (2018), for example, note that the notion of crisis has assumed such a significant position on the Western mental map that it now centrally organises people's social reality, along with the traditional temporal idea of 'progress'. Unlike future-oriented progress, crisis implies 'presentism and a world that is fundamentally out of sync' (p. 426).

[3] In this official English version, 'välittävä' has been incorrectly translated as 'committed'; 'caring' would be better.

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